



'Warm, poignant...
I laughed and cried.'
Holly Ringland

'Big-hearted, super
sexy and inclusive.'
Michelle Low

WEST SIDE HONEY



CLAIRE CHRISTIAN

ABOUT THE BOOK

Cleo has a few things going on. Two beautiful kids and a less beautiful ex-husband, a share house arrangement with her long-term bestie Jude (complete with a third child, also beautiful) and an underperforming florist business. Actually, the shop could be beautiful too, it's just that

Cleo hasn't got time to think about it.

Her new week-on week-off custody schedule is about to change all that.

She can put her own needs first for once—take a dance class, fix up the shop, even think about dating. Not that she's looking for anything serious, but she's open to exploring what she wants.

Which, it turns out, is a lot. Maybe too much?

But how can you work out what you really, really want unless you try a bit of everything?



**WEST
SIDE
HONEY
CLAIRE
CHRISTIAN**



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For Jacq
who makes me brave.

For Rudi
who makes her brave.

If you grow through what you go through, you'll be blooming all along.

God, you're so fucking strong!

'Garden of Growth' Charly Oakley

1

I swirl the ice cubes in my gin and tonic and stare at my chipped blue nail polish. *I'll have time to get them done this week.*

This thought makes two things happen in quick succession.

1. I feel a micro pulse of excitement;
2. My internal organs crunch together so violently that it triggers a surge of nausea.

‘What I like about this,’ Jude says, pushing her wide-rimmed tortoiseshell glasses up her nose and pointing at the TV, ‘is there are now going to be young women all over the world pegging their boyfriends.’ She raises her glass to the TV. ‘And look, that can only do immense good if you ask me.’

I haven’t been paying attention to the TV, I’m too preoccupied with tomorrow. The fact that everything changes tomorrow. The new custody arrangement, Sunday to Sunday, starts tomorrow. I have to somehow live whole weeks without my babies, starting tomorrow, and I have to see him tomorrow.

And tomorrow is now only...I glance at the time on my phone...two and a half hours away. Tomorrow is too close.

‘I feel like this generation are more up for it, though,’ Jude says. Her angular bleach-blond bob slices the air as she talks.

‘What? Butt play?’ I ask, appreciating the momentary distraction.

‘Yeah, they’re all awakened and hateful of binaries and raising middle fingers to injustice as they leave the womb.’ Jude makes an approving sort of noise. ‘The other day I was standing at the lights with Perry and I said, “Dude, we have to wait for the green man,” and he looked at me and said, “Mama, how do you know it’s a man?”’

I laugh. ‘He’s so brilliant.’

‘He’s going to kick my arse forever, you realise, don’t you?’

‘Oh, I am fully aware.’ Of course my best friend’s kid turns out to be this passionate, binary-defying political human.

Jude grins curiously at me. ‘Did you ever fuck Doug?’

‘Doug barely fucked *me*.’ I lean my head back on the couch and take a breath, trying to ease the uneasiness. Her face shifts to match mine and she looks closer, probably waiting for me to say more.

I don’t. I hope she’ll know this means I don’t want to talk about it.

‘I hate him so much,’ Jude says, and stands up. In what feels like slow

motion, I watch as her heel catches in her satin pyjama pants and she elaborately jump-steps into a basket of dolls, trucks and miscellaneous plastic crap that clatters loudly all over the floorboards.

She spins to face me: we stare at each other in horror. Mabel, Jude's bulldog, is startled awake and barks, and we both shush her. My teeth clench as I shift to the edge of the couch, ears pricked to find out if the primary-coloured cacophony has woken any of the kids. *If Andy wakes up...* I don't let myself finish the thought because the idea of having to get him back down after the two-hour battle we already had tonight makes my throat constrict.

'Sorry,' Jude whispers, and we sit in alert silence for a few moments longer.

When I'm sure we're safe I slide down onto the floor to pick up the toys.

'Do you think he's teething?' Jude asks. She's holding a naked doll frankensteined with a grinning T-rex head.

'I think it's his molars, which...I just feel sick thinking about Doug dealing with it this week.'

'*Dealing with it?* You mean parenting his children?' Jude shakes her head with a grunt. I have seen this exact head movement and heard this exact tone a lot in the last eighteen months.

Eighteen months.

I can't quite fathom it—that only eighteen months ago I was pregnant with Andy, listening to Doug slurring: *I don't want any 'f this.*

Allowing this memory in cues the rest of it to flood in, too. The angry tirade about how I'd tricked him into all of it. Our whole life. The bit where he said he'd never wanted to get married, or buy our house, or have our daughter, Frankie. I see him pointing at my pregnant belly, spitting that he especially didn't want this baby. Then I hear him yelling, *My life is fucked and it's all your fault*, with such spiteful clarity that it's like he's standing in the room right now. These highlights have been on a loop in my mind since that night. Thinking about all of it makes my heart hurt—a dull ache that seems to live there permanently now.

'If it gets too much for him he'll call you.'

'He'll call his mum,' I say.

'And Mary is not an idiot, so she'll deal with it. She loves your babies. Hell, *he* loves your babies...in his own stupid way.'

I feel cold. Or hot? I feel sweaty. Clammy. I exhale loudly. I know Jude is right and that everything will be okay. *But what if it's not?* Sometimes I wish

she'd let me just be worried for a while before rationalising it all.

Not that I'd ever tell her that. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have gotten through any of it. She has held my hand, both metaphorically and literally, through it all. She was there in the room looking me in the eye mid-contraction and yelling, *Cleo, you are a goddamn fucking warrior* as I birthed Andy. There at my house, cleaning and feeding me as I navigated single-parent life with a newborn and a toddler. There through my divorce and the sale of our house. And when she saw me drowning in the thick of it all, she offered the lifeboat of her home. Moving me and my kids in with her and her son and keeping a close eye on me.

If I think about it too much it makes me cry, the way she's loved me back to life. Or at least this version of my life. And she has done it with sheer determination because that's who she is. Jude is a force. And me? I'm happy to get swept up and pulled along by it. It's always been that way. She is the fire to my ice. Jude is my person. We fell into such a fast friendship that it made us both question how we'd ever lived without the other.

The woman I was back when we met, twelve years ago, feels so far away from the woman I am now. I was twenty-four, living in London, working in a pub to save so I could travel, and loving every second of it. I had a world map pinned to my cupboard door that I'd place small golden heart stickers when I'd been somewhere new. My goal was to visit every continent, every country. I guess it still is. Maybe. One day. I suppose that dream is still in here, just dormant. Like it got packed in a box and put in the back of the shed, where the map itself is now.

I often think about whatever universal power was at play that made the pub I worked in Jude's local. The easy destiny of it all. Doing tequila shots and pints of snakebite, daring each other to snog hot patrons, stumbling up the high street stuffing our faces with fried chicken. Then we'd cram ourselves into one of our beds and giggle about how grown-up we felt, speaking true and honest dreams about who we wanted to become.

I went to London assuming I'd meet the great love of my life—and I did. I just wasn't expecting that my soulmate would be someone I'd have absolutely zero romantic affection for.

'Doug has to learn to sort it out,' Jude says, pulling on a tatty red wig. She looks at me lovingly.

'I know.' I pick up Perry's ladybird antennae headband and put it on. 'I know,' I say again, more for my own benefit than Jude's.

‘Which means you’re going to have to learn to let him.’

‘I guess.’ I feel myself pout. ‘This week is going to suck.’

‘Excuse me? This week is a new beginning.’ Jude picks up a bubble gun and shoots bubbles over my head.

I shake my head and pop three of the bubbles one after the other. ‘I can’t even imagine what it’s going to be like.’

2

No sleep. My brain has been non-stop whirring with all the possible ways that Doug could mess things up this week. The things he could forget, the hard-won routines he could undo...and his temper. *His fucking temper.* Frankie once asked, ‘Mummy, why is Daddy so angry all the time?’ and I couldn’t answer. Because he was. He is.

I line up their bags at the door and place a handwritten list of their schedule and all the other things he doesn’t know, that he should know, on top of the bags. I doubt he’ll read it, but the sliver of possibility that he might makes me feel better. I look at my watch: nine-fifteen. He said he’d be here at nine. He hasn’t messaged. *Should I message him? No. Leave it.*

I hate this. I hate the way he makes me feel. On edge. Wired. Queasy; pacing up and down the hallway. My skin prickles any time a car drives past. Then the screen door clangs and my stomach lurches.

‘Hello?’ Doug’s voice, bellowing. ‘All right, mate?’

He picks Andy up, lifting him above his head. His long hair hides his face. I stare at him and am baffled by how strange the sight of him is to me now. *How did I ever want to have sex with him?*

He puts Andy back on the couch and kneels to hug Frankie.

‘Dad, look what Deda got me.’ She holds up the doll that my dad bought her.

‘Woah, that’s cool,’ Doug says, and finally glances at me. ‘Hey.’

‘Hey,’ I say, my back straightening with carefully faked calm.

‘This all their stuff?’ He points to the pile. His eyes are red, and his voice rough. Either he’s literally just woken up and come here or he hasn’t been to bed yet.

‘Big night?’ I say. I can’t help it.

‘What? Nah.’ He looks at me with his standard blend of bewilderment and loathing. I’ve gotten so used to it now that I can’t remember him ever looking at me any other way. ‘Why you being like that?’

I shrug. *I don’t want to do this.* ‘Everything’s in there. That’s a list of the times of their routine’—I point to the note—‘in case you wanted that. Andy still has a nap at about one, so if you can work around that, it’ll make your life easier.’

‘I have looked after them before.’

‘Yeah, I know, just—’

‘Hey, I couldn’t remember which nappies he uses. Give us your pack and I’ll replace them for next week, yeah?’ It’s not really a request.

I stalk back up the hallway for the nappies. Pause at the bedroom door to take a deep breath.

He didn’t say a word about being late. He didn’t even say please.

My chest tightens—the familiar Doug-inspired vice—and I seethe, pummelled by all the feelings and thoughts of dealing with Doug. Relief that he hasn’t backed out. Fury at his sense of entitlement over my time, over me. Confusion followed by revulsion about ever having loved him. Gratitude that he seems to be genuinely giving this a go.

There’s a part of me that wants to believe in his propensity for change. I’ve got to, for Andy and Frankie’s sake. But then I feel stupid for having any kind of hope for him because I should know better, because I know him. I want nothing more than to unleash every ounce of my pent-up rage and fury on him, to march back into the lounge room and tell him this is a terrible idea, and I was wrong, we shouldn’t change anything, as I push him out the door and slam it in his face.

But...

I can’t. I have to play the long game. Bide my time. The calmer I am—the more I push things down, or at least to the side—the better I can work him, at least to some degree, to get what I want and what the kids need. If he thinks he’s in charge, that he still has some kind of sway in my life, then everything is just easier. Calmer. And that’s all I want. *Calm.*

I shove the rage down as I hand him the nappies and we stare at each other.

The space between us feels so alive with history, so many things unsaid, and too many things said that probably shouldn’t have been. We hadn’t been in a good place for years before the night he dropped his bomb and left. He was depressed, a high-functioning addict with zero desire to change, and I had loved him desperately since I was twenty-five. At least, I loved the man I thought he could be and the life I thought we’d grow into.

But the only growing we did was apart. Doug is much the same man now as he was when he was twenty-five. When I fell pregnant with Frankie—on our wedding night or thereabouts—he resented that things changed so drastically, so quickly. That he was no longer my singular focus. He hated that. He started to hate *me* for that. The enormous size of his hatred is now rivalled only by how much he hates himself.

Andy was born a week after the drunken outburst. I texted Doug from the hospital in an oxytocin haze: *Look at our son*, and he came to the hospital, his tail between his legs. As I watched him holding Andy it was like someone had flicked the lights on. I saw who he was. What he was doing to us. What I was allowing him to do to me. It was over. It had to be.

Doug has never apologised. He spent the first six months of Andy's life in a boozy haze, taking Frankie for a few hours on a Sunday as he sobered up. Maybe sobered up. But he slowly started to get his shit together, and he would have Frankie overnight sometimes; Andy, too, once he was weaned from breastfeeding. I could deal with one night.

In the last school holidays he asked to take them for a week, as he was going away with his parents to their holiday house. I agreed because I knew his mum would be there, but I hated every second of it. Couldn't relax. Stayed glued to my phone the whole time.

Then a few weeks ago he said he wanted to change our arrangement, make it official. Claimed he'd really got his shit together and wanted to try week-on week-off. Wanted me to take him seriously.

A three-month trial was as far as I'd go. He agreed. And here we are.

I want this to be over now, so I kneel down, 'Okay, babies, give me a hug.' Frankie and Andy both fold into one arm each and I kiss them over and over, breathing them in. 'Have a great week.' As the word *week* leaves my mouth there is a ripping in my chest. 'I love you.' The tears prickle, but I will them to stay away.

'Love you, Mummy.' Frankie squishes my face in her hands. 'You have a good week too, you hear me,' she says, and I laugh. Andy hands me a red truck, which I figure is his way of making the same loving gesture.

I look up at Doug. 'Just message if you need anything,' I say, a little too pleading.

'Yeah, I'm not a fuckin' idiot.'

'Daddy!' Frankie slaps his leg.

'Sorry, mate, I know,' he says, picking up all the bags and ushering the kids out of the door.

I can't watch this next bit, so I walk down to my bedroom, sit on the bed, and start to cry. Relief, worry, heartache and what-now all swirl around inside and plop down my cheeks in big fat tears.

*
'I swear to god, I will actually kill him.' Jude is standing in the doorway with a face full of concern and fury.

‘It’s not him. It’s me,’ I say.

‘What’s you?’ Jude asks.

‘A whole *week*.’

‘A whole bloody week, my girl.’ She sits next to me on the bed.

‘It hurts,’ I mutter, and I watch Jude’s eyes well with tears, too, though she stays quiet. ‘I’m worried and sad and terrified.’

‘I know.’

‘It’s good for them to spend time with him. He was a shit husband, but he’s a good dad. He’s a good dad, isn’t he?’ I sit up, wiping my nose with the sleeve of my cardigan.

‘He is a perfectly acceptable dad,’ Jude smiles slowly and carefully.

‘Fuck, Jude, I just don’t want him to mess them up.’

‘I don’t think he will. Not intentionally. And they have you, and you are like, *too competent*. They’re getting over-parented here and under-parented there, so they’ll just end up normal in the end,’ she offers seriously.

This makes me laugh despite myself, ‘Well, good.’

‘I mean, let’s use Merinda and Paulie as the bar for shit parents and look how well I turned out.’ Jude has a complicated relationship with her mum, Merinda, and a non-existent relationship with her biological dad, Paulie. Merinda was a single mum with a wild assortment of boyfriends, booze and late-night jobs that left Jude on her own for much of her childhood with a dream that she’d one day be adopted and eventually have a ‘normal’ mum.

‘But you’re so great,’ I nudge her.

‘Exactly. So, they’re going to be okay.’

‘How was Ash?’ I ask, having just heard her ex come and do their Sunday pick-up.

‘Passive-aggressive and stupidly attractive.’

‘So, peak Ash?’ I ask with a smile, and Jude nods.

‘She does my head in with how entitled and...’ she struggles to find the right word. ‘And...arrogant. *She* is the reason everything is like this. *Her* actions. And then she swans in and cracks the shits about the calendar, and I just want to scream, *This is all your fucking fault!* right in her perfectly square face.’

‘Why don’t you?’

‘It’d just make everything awkward and shit for Perry, so I end up keeping my mouth shut and feeling like crap.’

‘Yup.’

‘Fuck her, and fuck her calendar,’ Jude exhales, frustrated.

‘For being so good?’

‘Yes. For being so bloody good. *Gah!*’

We both laugh and then everything goes silent for a moment, both of us feeling the weight of our own heartache. But Jude hates to wallow, so she’s up on her feet with a flourish and a loud sigh. ‘That’s enough self-pity. Let’s do something.’

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t care. Something...’

‘Something like...get takeaway and watch *Housewives* on the couch?’

‘No,’ Jude says shaking her head emphatically.

I raise my eyebrows.

‘Yes,’ she concedes, laughing and holding out her hands to lift me up off the bed. ‘God. We’re so *boooring*.’ We file out of my bedroom and into the kitchen. ‘Next weekend we’re going out, though. You hear me?’

‘Fine,’ I roll my puffy red eyes and sigh. Right now, I can’t think about anything other than eating my feelings till I’m too stuffed to move.

3

‘West Side Honey, this is Cleo.’ I answer the phone with eyes raised to the heavens, grateful for an early-morning order.

‘Have you thought about your life insurance?’ the phone asks in a thick accent, and I hang up, deflated, just as the front doorbell jangles.

My one and only employee, Farida, sashays inside. ‘I got you a coffee and a thing with raspberries because it looked like a vulva but I don’t know what it is, a friand maybe, and also you need to look at my T-shirt.’ Farida dumps everything on the front counter and opens her blazer, bright red, to reveal a T-shirt, white with thick black hand-drawn letters that read: *Fuck the Dumb Shit*. She beams.

‘Your mum’s going to love that,’ I smirk.

Farida laughs her loud, throaty cackle. ‘Isn’t she just?’ She peeks out the back and clocks the new blooms I’d gotten after an early-morning trip to the flower market. My favourite wildflowers, textured blooms in earthy shades with pops of pink and purple sit in buckets amidst big bunches of lush green foliage. My senses are dazzled by the perfect artistry of nature and the possibility of creating with something already so beautiful.

‘So, you’ve gone a bit dramatic with the natives today, I see,’ she says.

‘I have an idea.’

‘You always have an idea,’ Farida laughs.

She has worked for me for the four years that I have owned the shop. She started part time when she was nineteen, helping on weekends while she did her accountancy degree, and she’s never left. I tell her all the time that she should be working somewhere she’ll earn ten times what I can pay her, but Farida always scoffs and talks about her artist soul. What she means is her drag-king act, Malcolm McCane, which she performs most weekends. ‘I’m happy for people to think that it’s after Malcolm X but it’s actually after *Malcolm in the Middle* because I had my first orgasm thinking about the kid who played Malcolm,’ Farida told me one afternoon.

‘I’ve been thinking about what you said,’ I mumble through the raspberry vulva in my mouth. Farida raises her perfectly drawn eyebrows. ‘About profit,’ I add.

‘About making some?’ Farida jokes, and I feel my insides clench with the truth of it. ‘This is an important thing as a small business owner, Cleo,’ Farida smirks. She logs in to the computer to check our online orders, as I’m

mostly terrified of anything to do with technology.

‘About our need to diversify and think outside the box,’ I explain. ‘I’m thinking about the bouquets we offer, and if dried bouquets might work?’ It’s a statement, but I say it like a question. Farida *oohs* loudly so I continue. ‘Because people get hung up on the fact that flowers die, so what if we take care of that for them?’

‘And the marketing copy writes itself.’ She puts on her peppiest advertising voice: ‘They’re already dead, so you *should* bother.’ She pokes me and pulls up the white knee-high socks that sit above her glittering blue sneakers.

‘I’ll run that by Jude,’ I smile, picturing Jude’s reaction in her fancy advertising-firm, bigwig-art-director office listening to this pitch.

‘She’ll totally poo-poo it. She hates all my ideas.’ Farida laughs, and then looks at me seriously. ‘I think if you think it’s a good idea, we should totally do it.’

‘Yeah? I’m not sure about it.’ Which, if I’m honest, is the main problem my flailing business experiences, because I never feel sure about anything. I second-, third- and fourth-guess all my ideas and end up doing nothing. Plus, I hate having to market myself, hate the thought of trying to sell what I do, particularly on social media. No matter how many times Jude has offered to help, I always fob her off because it all just feels a bit wrong. I want my work to speak for itself, and for that to be enough. So I’ve got used to just scraping by, even though I can’t stand it. This hole just feels too big to get out of now, so nothing changes.

‘What are you looking at?’ I ask Farida, who is staring at her phone every few minutes and giggling.

‘Chef Darcy.’

‘Shit. Your date. How was your date?’

‘Yeah, really good...She is nothing but green flags, which feels strangely like a red flag, so I’m unpacking that in the group chat.’ Farida glances at me before turning back to her phone.

‘What?’

‘Please tell me you know what a red flag is, yes?’ I nod, and she makes a relieved sound. ‘Green flags are the opposite: the good signs. The things of note. Which are different to your non-negotiables.’

‘Oh, god, this feels like the time you tried to teach me that TikTok dance and I had to go to the chiropractor.’

‘You were very good at it, though.’ Farida mimics my stiff-arm movements and I whack her with the yellow rose in my hand. ‘You need to be thinking about this stuff for when you finally start dating again.’

‘Which is never,’ I tell her.

‘I’m worried about your vagina.’

‘My vagina is fine. I took your advice and bought the clit-sucking vibrator thing, so we’re all good.’

Farida squeals, ‘You did? Brilliant. It’s a religious experience, isn’t it? Come on, what are your green flags, Cleo?’

‘I don’t know,’ I pause, thinking. ‘That they’re not racist.’

‘No, that’s a non-negotiable,’ she says.

‘They’re not a narcissistic psycho,’ I say.

‘Also a non-negotiable.’

‘Well, what’s a green flag then? Give me an example.’

‘Okay, so one of mine is, they can talk about sex and bodies with ease.’ She presents her body to me with a comical flourish.

‘So, confidence?’

‘Yes. But that is a green flag in my world because there’s already a fuck-ton of shame, so I need to be with someone who thinks farts are funny, while at the same time articulating what gets their genitals off.’

‘This is extremely specific, but yes, I get it. Tell me more...’

‘I’d never thought of this as being one before but the other day I was talking about something and the Chef said, “I don’t understand.” And I just thought that was the most confident thing ever.’

I stare at Farida, a little awed by how on top of her shit she is, and how curious she is about how people work. She is constantly teaching me things and making me question what I really think or feel about things. I wonder about what she’ll be like in a decade. How different her problems will be from mine now.

‘And then after we talked, she went and watched a bunch of videos and read articles and then on our next date she brought up what she’d learnt. Confidence to say she didn’t understand instead of pretending, *then* showing an active interest in what I’m interested in and loving talking about things as much as I do. Green, green, green flags, baby. So, now I’m obviously in love and I’m going to ask her to move in and adopt a rescue cat.’

I laugh; she waits for me to share. ‘Well, I guess...’ I stop. *Stuck*. She waits a polite amount of time for me to come up with something, looking at

me with a fused look of encouragement and concern. ‘Um...’ I mutter.

‘Okay, so, tell me one of the things that pisses you off most about Doug,’ she says.

I snort. The answer to this question is right there: ‘His ego. Zero accountability,’ I gabble and Farida nods with a half-laugh.

‘So, two of your green flags would be someone who is self-reflective and self-aware, and someone who freely apologises when they’re wrong.’

‘Oofft,’ I groan loudly at the thought of someone being like this. ‘Okay, I get it,’ I nod, and she ceremoniously taps me on each shoulder with her phone like she’s knighting me.

I glance at my phone: three missed calls and a voice message from Doug. Seeing his name on my screen throws my body into recoil, like my cells want to climb out through my skin to escape. *He’s going to say he can’t do it, he’s going to want me to pick them up, he’s going to back out of the plan, take it all back, I think. Then: Something’s wrong. Something is really wrong.*

Farida notices my face, ‘What?’ she asks, and I shake my head as I push play on the voicemail.

Where are you? I’ve tried calling three times. I accidentally deleted the food list you sent me, so I’m standing in Coles like a complete fuckwit cause I need the brand of yoghurt for And—ahh, fuck it. Cleo? Just message me the yoghurt, okay?

I shake my head as I listen, the rage thick in my chest. I take a deep breath, trying to thin it out. ‘It’s fine,’ I mumble. ‘Just Doug being Doug.’ Farida makes a dramatic dry-heaving sound.

My green flags are simple. They’re all the things that Doug is not.

4

‘Good hygiene,’ Jude says, lying on one end of our couch that night.

‘I think that would be a non-negotiable,’ I tell her from the other side, my back propped up by the ridiculous number of multicoloured cushions we own. I’m sure Jude buys a new cushion every time she’s stressed. Which, with her job, is a lot.

‘Right.’

‘I’ve been thinking about it and I think it’s like a house.’ I pause, hearing my theory spoken out loud for the first time. ‘Like, there has to be walls and doors and running water, right?’

‘Unless you live in a yurt,’ Jude says.

‘Even then there’s walls, a roof, a door. Non-negotiables.’

‘Did you know that some yurt-using cultures have a person whose job it is to keep their fires burning because it’s always so bloody cold?’ Jude pauses. ‘I often think about that when I’m stressed at work: imagine if your job was as simple as...*keep the fires going.*’

We each take a sip of tea, stealing a second to yearn for that kind of simplicity.

‘Okay, so if your non-negotiables are your housing structure, what are your green flags? The decoration?’ Jude muses loudly. ‘The velvet lounge that took you forever to find because you got locked on to the notion that it had to be the exact shade of pink you saw on Pinterest?’

We both lovingly pat the perfect pink couch she bought as a symbol of her newfound independence when she and Ash separated. Ash would hate this couch, which is why Jude spent so much money on it that she’s never actually told me the price because she’s too embarrassed. Of course I love the couch.

‘I think it’s the things you need and want that make living better,’ I say.

‘Like...a bigger linen closet?’

‘Yes. So that’s like wanting to be with someone who loves animals, because, while it may not be a necessity, it’s pretty bloody indicative of what they’re like, yes?’

‘Oh yes, don’t trust anyone who doesn’t like animals. That’s a major red flag.’ She stops and stares at the gallery wall ahead of her, thinking. ‘Tell me yours again.’

‘Well, I’m still thinking about it, but Farida helped me. So far I have...’ I

pull out my phone and look at the list I quickly typed into Notes.

‘Accountability: someone who does what they say they’re going to do.’

‘Sexy.’

‘Someone who asks questions about you and shows interest in the things you’re interested in.’

‘Love that.’

‘When they ask you how you are, they genuinely listen to the answer and reply with a real answer. Good conversation. Someone who can hold a conversation.’ I look up and smile at her, feeling a little exposed. Saying them out loud makes me realise how straightforward they seem.

Jude’s phone starts ringing, and she picks it up and rolls her eyes. ‘It better be fucking brilliant, Benji, I swear.’ She mimics rage, but laughs at whatever Benji says back to her. She gets up with a cackle and mouths the word *sorry* to me. Jude loves her job, and she’s brilliant at it. But she is always working, always thinking about work. In her weeks when she doesn’t have Perry, she is rarely home by 10 p.m., and even in the weeks she does have him she will work after he goes to bed. If she has a pitch coming up she’ll go into a vortex of long days on coffee and energy drinks. I don’t know how she does it.

I scroll on my phone while the TV blares in the background. My first week without the babies has been shit. Without our routine I have no idea what to do with myself, and I find this almost comical since one of the things I hate most about being a mum is how entirely monotonous it can be. Saying and doing the same things over and over, then doing them again. It erodes the bits of myself I used to be so sure about.

I usually crave the silent hours when they’re asleep so I can be on my own, in my own thoughts, even just for a second. But now I have nothing *but* time to myself and my own thoughts, and I’m miserable. The loneliness, the overwhelm of memories, the self-scalding over mistakes. I feel claustrophobic in this house, on this couch, in this body, in this brain. I have no idea what to do about it—so I do nothing.

And Doug has barely messaged me all week. I’ve always made a point to send him updates or photos, show him how the kids are doing, just so he feels included. This week when I’ve texted him to check in, he’s sent one-word answers or not replied at all. It absolutely infuriates me.

As if on cue my phone lights up: *You forgot Frankie’s library bag. You need to drop it off.* Then a second message: *Tonight.*

What to reply?

I can't, cockhead. Or Sort it out for yourself or Not my problem. Or— this'd be good—*I can't right now as I'm indulging in an orgy with green-flag-flying emotionally intelligent men who value my orgasm.* I picture his face twisting with discomfort, but that delights me for barely a second before the biggest part of me becomes truly perturbed by the thought of pissing him off. The anxiety of the inevitable fallout feels very real. I know I shouldn't let him get away with how he talks to me, or cave to his expectations, but I can't be bothered dealing with him. The message on repeat in my head is *Keep the peace, it's easier*, even though it makes me feel sick most of the time.

'What?' Jude says when she comes back in.

'Frankie left her library bag here and she needs it tomorrow.'

'So, he can come and get it in the morning,' Jude says plopping back on the couch.

'You know she'll be freaking out,' I tell her, picturing exactly how stressed Frankie will be.

'So, are you going to go round there?' she asks, and I nod. 'I'll go if you can't be fucked dealing with him,' she says. Jude has zero reservations about putting Doug in his place. They've had a few altercations since the break-up and it's just easier for everyone if they don't see each other.

'No. It's okay.' I text him back: *I'll come now. I'll put it on the letterbox.*

'I can come with you,' Jude says. 'I can take a dump on his car windscreen while we're there.'

We've spent happy hours planning vindictive revenge plots since the separation, and Jude has always loved this idea. 'The image of him coming out to his ute in the morning and seeing it covered in shit...it just makes me happy,' she says. 'And him having to think, is this human faeces or something else. That moment. That is golden.'

Jude's still laughing as my phone dings with Doug's reply. I read it out loud, mimicking his tone, 'What? You can't come in?'

'Just say, *No I can't, you massive arsehole.*'

No. Be there in fifteen, I send. The typing dots come up. Then disappear, then come up again, but he doesn't reply.

'We can do hard things,' Jude says. She's smiling encouragement as I change out of my pyjamas, find the library bag and grab my car keys.

I see him as I come around the corner, he's leaning on the brick letterbox. I take a deep breath and steady myself. *Give me the goddamn strength,* I

think as I pull up and lower the window.

‘Hey,’ I mumble. My hands grip the steering wheel.

He doesn’t move. ‘How are you?’

‘Tired,’ I say. ‘It’s been a big day.’

‘You wanna come in?’

‘No, I don’t. I want to go to bed.’

‘We could go to bed. Together. We used to be good at that, at least.’ He raises his eyebrows.

The sound that comes barrelling out of my mouth is more growl than sigh. I thrust the lilac library bag out the window and spit, ‘Here. Take it.’

‘Fine. Just tryna be civil.’ He takes a step towards the car and reaches in quickly to take the bag.

‘Are you pissed?’ I ask. *I can’t help it.*

‘Not even. I’ve had like, one—’ He stops himself and stares at me.

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself saying anything else. ‘How are they?’

‘They’re fuckin awesome.’

‘Can you answer my calls at night so I can say goodnight, please?’

‘I dunno, it’s pretty hectic here at night,’ he says, and I just stare at him. *Is he serious?* I am fully aware of how hectic it gets at night. I have singlehandedly navigated hectic nights for the last five years and suddenly he has them for three days and he expects, what? Applause, or sympathy? For doing what he should have been doing the whole time?

‘So, if I’m near my phone, yeah,’ he says.

‘Great. Thanks,’ I say it slowly, with precise articulation.

‘I think maybe you need to relax, Cleo. Your rules and that. The kids are fine.’

I need...*what?*

How fucking *dare* he?

All the things I want to say are bubbling, fizzing in my chest, but I don’t say anything. Instead, I stamp down so hard on the accelerator I wonder how I don’t punch a hole in the floor.

‘*Relax?!?*’ I shriek to myself. ‘Fuuuuuuccccck! You mutant cockhead ballbag shitface fucking...*relax?* How can I ever relax when you are their father? And you do nothing. You’ve done nothing. Ever. You’re a weasel, Doug, a disgusting weasel and I am so—’ I cry hot, frustrated tears. I smash my hands into the steering wheel as loud, chest-heaving sobs escape my

mouth. I hate this, I hate him so much.

Until, eventually, I catch my breath and I sigh, exhausted. Something needs to change.

5

It's a toss-up. You could blame the bottle of wine we drank before we left the house tonight or the bottle we just drank with dinner. Either way, we are now sitting in a dumpling restaurant laughing so hard that Jude has had to stand up, clamping her thighs together forcefully so she doesn't wet herself. We have spent the last hour signing Doug up to every kind of mailing list we could think of. He is set to receive email notifications about therapy, cosmetic surgery and Scientology: if a website has a mailing list, he is subscribed to it. It feels childish, ridiculous, weirdly gratifying.

'The idea of mildly inconveniencing him makes me so happy,' I laugh, tears in my eyes, as Jude regains her composure. She organised tonight as a celebration of the new week-on-week-off arrangement: 'A toast to change,' she'd said.

I can't remember the last time I went out.

*

We leave the restaurant and walk around the corner to the pub where we used to go when we were in our twenties. I recognise the woman on the door straight away; her nickname back then was House, because she was built like a brick shithouse. She still is. I have no idea what her actual name is.

'Ladies,' House smirks, looking us up and down. 'It's been a while.' Jude turns on her uncompromising charm and flirts with House like her life depends on it. Tonight, it kind of feels like it does. House tells Jude the gig is sold out, but agrees to let us in if Jude promises to buy her a beer later, which of course, she does, even though she has zero intention of buying House a beer later.

'You're totally going to fuck House again,' I say as we stand at the packed bar waiting to order. Jude had very drunken sex with her one night many years ago.

'The image of her standing there with her butt-flap long johns on under her jeans is burnt into my mind's eye.' She shakes her head. 'I think you only need to experience that once in a lifetime.'

'I forgot about that,' I say—then register the band name stencilled on the drum kit: The Brothers Nice. My mouth flies open and I turn to Jude. 'No way!'

Jude nods, delighted, and I whoop loudly and order us beers and tequila shots. Tonight is now definitely worthy of celebration.

When we were younger, and single, we practically stalked this band. A

bluesy rock outfit of four ridiculously attractive men with beards and suspenders. Harmonica, swinging double bass, slide guitar. We'd dance our guts out, fantasise about fucking the singer and hoot with laughter at the wild sexual energy on the dancefloor. Every time we went to a Brothers Nice gig we got laid.

Then the band broke up, worked on other projects, started families. Now, Jude yells into my ear, 'They're back together for a bunch of nostalgia gigs. I only saw it by fluke at some ungodly hour on Thursday when I was drinking my thousandth coffee and madly putting my last-minute touches to that bloody nightmare pitch...which I got, by the way,' she gloats proudly.

'Of course you bloody did! This is the best.'

'Your face is the best.' Jude throws back her shot and slams the glass down on the bar in one swift movement.

The band starts with a banjo track, and when the charismatic frontman's gruff vocals start to twang the whole room erupts, cheering loudly. The energy is exactly the same as it was a decade ago; everyone just looks a little more life-weary than they did. Us included, I guess.

We find the perfect spot in the centre of the dancefloor and sing loudly with the crowd, swivelling our hips in the way that the Brothers Nice demand. I haven't heard some of these songs in years, but turns out I know the lyrics as if I've played them every day.

I always marvel at my brain in moments like this. Not once have I ever remembered my past-self deciding to get petrol in the morning rather than on the way home. And every time, as I swear into the steering wheel at the inconvenience, I'm stunned by past-me's confidence in future-me to be that organised. But lyrics to every CD I ever owned? Sure.

We take turns heading to the bar, buying beer after beer, clinking bottles and cheering with the crowd. The lead singer caresses the microphone like he is seducing it. He wails, 'I'm a dirty, lonely dog', and the whole room is thrusting with the slow smack of the drums. I am drunk and sweaty and the power of nostalgia is intoxicating, helping me forget anything beyond this dancefloor.

The handsome men sing about letting go, getting used to being alone, leaving their problems where they lie, and tonight the lyrics take on new meaning for me. When they sing about setting themselves free I am confronted by my past, present and possible future selves all at once—and all three of these women want to get laid.

I turn to the man behind me, a dark-haired, stubbly, strong-handed individual who spun me around a few times earlier, and, as though the divine was speaking right through me, I beckon him closer. He smiles as he approaches and I grab his left hand and check that there's no ring. 'You married?' I yell, just to be sure.

He laughs. 'No.'

I smirk. 'Girlfriend? Boyfriend?'

'No, and no. Why?'

I haven't let go of his hand. I take a step closer to whisper in his ear, 'Cause I've been thinking about it, and I've decided we should make out.' This is a move I mastered in my early twenties and haven't used in well over a decade.

The guy laughs again. Loudly. 'Did you say *make out*?'

I nod, still dancing to the music and he wraps his hands around my waist and kisses me quickly. It's a good kiss. My first since Doug. I thought it would feel more...consequential. For the next few songs, I dance with Jude, sing loudly and pash the brunette. As the final song plays, I whisper into Jude's ear, 'Will you hate me if I go home with him?'

She laughs. 'Are you sure that's what you want?'

I squint very seriously at Jude's mouth and nod slowly. She looks the brunette up and down, studying him equally seriously. He smiles awkwardly; Jude gives me a drunk thumbs-up. 'Be safe.'

I place my hands on the brunette's chest and push him towards the door.

My dancefloor pash is named Anwar, and he orders a car as we make out on the street, our bodies pressed into each other. His huge hands press into the small of my back as I kiss him, so I don't need to talk to him. Anwar pulls away from the kiss and runs a flat palm up my chest and neck, holding my neck in his hand and pulling my face towards him. I take this as a good sign of things to come. He looks at me and shakes his head, grinning wildly.

'What?' I ask, feigning coyness.

'You are sexy as,' Anwar says, and I laugh loudly.

This is going to be hot.

He lives in a one-bedroom unit. It's new. Grey walls and black appliances. There's nothing on his fridge—not a single magnet. I think this is weird. It's so tidy it unsettles me.

'This is so neat—'

'Yeah, I have a thing about mess,' he says, which makes me think about

the ordered chaos of our place on any given day.

‘Do you want a drink, or...?’ He opens the fridge and looks at me, and I shake my head. I don’t want the forced intimacy of awkward conversation. I don’t want to talk. So, as Anwar closes the fridge door, I push him up against it and kiss his mouth.

He grabs my face with both his hands, his fingers splayed through my hair at the nape of my neck, and I stumble backwards until we bump into the wall; I lean against it as he kisses under my ear, then slow, deliberate kisses down my neck that make my breath come fast.

‘You’re so fucking sexy, Chloe,’ he whispers.

Chloe? Okay. I’m happy to be Chloe tonight. Chloe is bold. Chloe gets what she wants. Chloe has sex with men she just met like she did in her twenties, and she definitely doesn’t have kids or a sketchy ex-husband or a failing business. She isn’t thinking about the fact this is the first person she’s had sex with since said husband. She isn’t insecure about her flat boobs or scarred stomach and how they don’t look remotely the way they used to. No: Chloe knows she is sexy.

Anwar starts kissing down my chest, following the cleavage line of my top. His hands run up my sides, as fingers lightly dance across my breasts. *Relax, Cleo. Relax. Get out of your head.* I take a deep breath. He lifts my top over my head and throws it on the floor.

Then he pulls away and stares at me. His eyes scanning my body, taking me in. He smiles, pleased.

Part of me loves this reaction; part of me hates being so smugly observed. I grab his face and kiss him. The kiss is hot, tongues deep, then drawing back, then searching again. His fingers are inside my bra, delicately brushing my nipples, before pulling the cup aside. He takes a nipple in his mouth and... my body moans.

Not me—I’m only half in my body. Flickering in and out. The pleasure is real, but the thoughts are buzzing. His hand reaches around my back, trying to undo my bra. His mouth moves to my other nipple, still fiddling with the clasp, so I reach around and snap it open one-handed and he pulls back, looking at me, shaking his head.

‘It’s tricky,’ I joke.

Anwar quickly places his hands on my arse and lifts me up. I squeal and giggle and wrap my legs around his waist so he can carry me into his bedroom, and we land on the bed. I pull at his shirt, and he slips it off quickly

while I'm working on his belt and the button on his jeans. He stands up, pushes them down and steps out of them, and he's naked. No time to take him in—he's kneeling on the bed, running his hands up my thighs to grab my knickers and whip them off, placing kisses all along my inner thigh, and I think: *This man is precise* and simultaneously *Oh god it feels good*. I can't remember the last time Doug went down on me. Before I had Frankie, for sure; maybe even before we got married, although...*For god's sake stop thinking, Cleo. What would Chloe do? Think of Chloe.*

But I can't think of Chloe because I'm worrying about my paunch and my pubic hair and what he thinks of my body. And this makes me think that I shouldn't care about any of these things because clearly he's not focused on what I think are flaws because he is trying very hard, and it feels so good, but there is no way I'm going to cum with this tirade of thoughts holding my orgasm hostage.

I grab at his hair, giving him the universal signal to move on, which he gets immediately. He kneels up and leans over me, grabs a condom out of the drawer next to the bed and rolls it smoothly on while I kiss his neck. He moans loudly and kisses me rough on the mouth; goes to push into me but struggles with the angle until I reach down between my legs and help him; we both moan as he starts to thrust.

It feels good, but my thoughts stray to the way he makes his bed, the number of pillows on it, the tattoo on his shoulder—I think it's a faded dragon—and I stare at it and wonder why he chose that, and—

'Fuck,' Anwar groans, his face scrunching.

'I want to be on top,' I say quickly. I need to take some control; get back in my body.

I sit up and Anwar lies back with his hands behind his head. *Enjoying the show, mate?*

I rock my hips, trying drunkenly to find a rhythm I like. I use my hands on Anwar's chest for leverage, loving the way this feels.

'If you keep doing that I'm gonna—' he doesn't even finish the sentence before he very clearly cums.

Bugger. I smile, lean forward and kiss him.

'Fuck, Chloe...' he pants.

I roll off and we lie next to each other, breathing quick.

'Do you want anything? I could help...whatever you...the orgasm gap?' he asks.

‘No, I’m okay.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah,’ I say, meaning it.

‘This is not how I thought tonight was going to go, hey?’ Anwar mumbles, his eyes squinting as he looks at me.

‘Me neither,’ I say, feeling drowsy and drunk. *Very, very drunk.*

6

I tap lightly on Jude's bedroom door. I hear her mumble something, so I go in, and we stare at each other, surveying the damage. I am holding a takeaway tray from the coffee shop round the corner, which I hand to Jude as I shift the dead weight of Mabel's big snoring body and get under the covers and burrow my pounding head under a pillow. A few moments later Jude nudges me and hands over painkillers, water and electrolytes. A bed picnic fit for a queen. Or at least two thirty-something single mothers who are severely out of late-night boozing practice.

Jude opens one of the brown paper bags I've brought and peers inside. 'Do you know how grateful I am for you right now?' She pulls out a cherry danish and takes a bite.

'Well, I figured you'd be feeling exactly like I do,' I say.

'You mean like someone has opened my skull with an angle grinder? Is that how you feel?'

I nod and she offers me a bite of her danish, which I fend off with a gruff moan. It's like I can feel my brain inside my skull, and it's really, really angry with me.

'Hot barista was there,' I mumble. Jude's eyes widen as she sips her coffee. The café does the best coffee, and the staff are unreasonably attractive, especially one barista who I always flirt with. A young tattooed androgynous babe who makes me blush with his intensity.

'Did you tell him you want an all-access pass to his genitals?' Jude laughs through her nose and speaks with a mouthful of food, then she fixes me with a stare. 'So?'

'Oh, god, I don't know what came over me.'

'Um, I do. Brothers Nice witchery and tequila is what came over you. But what I want to know is, did *he* cum all over you?'

My face scrunches with disgust. 'No, he did not. But we did have sex and then I passed out, and I snuck out this morning while he was snoring.'

'Classic move. Well done,' Jude nods. 'Was it any good?'

'Kind of.'

'Kind of?' She shakes her head. 'Nope, none of that. Give.'

'It was fine. It was good. It was...'

'It was...?'

'I don't know how I feel about it yet,' I say, and we sit in silence drinking

our coffees. 'Or I'm feeling too much about it.' I pop two of the pills out of the packet.

'Tell me.'

'It felt good to have someone think I'm...well, sexy,' I say, embarrassed.

'You are soooo sexy,' she cheerleads.

I ignore her. 'But it felt a bit weird because I think I expected it to go a certain way. Or I got too in my head.' I pause, and she stares at me in that way that means I should keep talking.

'I haven't had sex with anyone except myself since I had Andy, so I was...out of it...and I was probably too drunk to...' My insides feel like they're squirming. 'Look, I just feel embarrassed.' I cover my head with the pillow again.

'You have nothing to be embarrassed about. You did a thing. And it was fine. It's not a big deal.'

'Doug and I got into a routine, and we'd just do what we knew worked, and then we didn't even do that. So I feel good...but also shit.'

'Both of those things can be true,' Jude says, finishing her danish, and then pointing at my cup, her eyes wide. 'What is that?'

'What?' I twist the cup to see a note from hot barista. *Lookin cute today.*

'Oh my god, adorable,' Jude squeals. 'You have to reply.'

'No way. That's embarrassing.'

Jude grabs her phone and scrolls wildly through the café's feed, on a mission. She finds a couple of photos, showing them to me, but none of the photos are tagged.

'He probably writes this on every tired-looking mum's cup as a way to get tips.'

'Who cares if he does?' Then she makes another excited noise. 'I mean, who cares if *they* do.' She shows me hot barista's profile.

It reads: *Maverick (They/Them) Wordsmith. Finding poetry in the mundane. There's art in everything...even your latte.*

We scroll Maverick's whole profile. 'Look at this one,' Jude says, opening a photo of them in a suspenders-neckerchief combination that hits me right in my desire places. 'Fucking hell,' I mumble. 'This tattoo,' I say as we both leer at Maverick's black and grey tattoo, which consumes the whole of their chest, of two hands holding on to each other and a whole heap of wild blooms. We stare at each other.

'Message them now,' Jude says urgently.

‘Should I?’ I bite into my own pastry, it feels like sandpaper in my mouth, but the instant burst of sugar makes me feel more confident. I grab my phone.

Then I stare at the empty message box for too long, unsure what to write.

‘I know,’ Jude says. She takes it out of my hands and types, *Your coffee cup love letter has made my morning.*

‘Really?’ I squirm, then hit send.

‘So, does all this mean you’re open to dating?’

I clench my jaw. Then I nod, very slowly.

Jude double-takes. ‘Really?’

I nod again.

‘Really *really*?’

‘Yes. Maybe. I think. I mean, I’ve got this extra time now to maybe... something casual or...I don’t know,’ I mutter. ‘I’ll do it if you do it.’

Jude shakes her head. ‘I’m already doing it. My way. You’re going to want, like, dates and romance.’ Her mouth turns down in distaste.

I smirk. ‘And you want?’

‘To get laid occasionally. I do not have the time or energy or desire to focus on anyone else’s shit apart from mine and Perry’s.’ She nods her head for emphasis. ‘And yours and your kids’. But that’s it.’

‘Maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. Maybe dating is a terrible idea. Maybe I should just enjoy this time for myself.’

‘It could be fun.’

‘It could be awful.’

‘Quick, get your phone. We’re making you a profile. We’re doing it now before you chicken out.’

‘What? Now? No. I’m not—’

My phone dings with a reply from Maverick. *Only your morning? Shit. I better up my love letter game.*

‘Cleo!’ Jude squeals a little too loudly, shooting a pain directly into my hangover.

‘We’re doing it.’ She’s got her stern eyebrows on.

‘No, I don’t know which apps to download or how it works or...’ I reluctantly pick my phone up. ‘This is going to be a disas—’

I don’t even get the rest of the word out because Jude’s making a throaty hissing sound and scowling at me. ‘I will not abide this negativity. It’s going to be great.’ She looks at me and sighs. ‘Do you want me—’

‘Yes,’ I reply quickly. I hand her my phone.

7

The lounge room buzzes: raucous laughter, piles of clean laundry being folded and the Poison album that we'd always play in our twenties before we went out on full volume. Photos have been chosen, sentences are being scowled at, and breaks are being regularly taken for air guitar and cheese.

'You can't say I have a killer rack,' I protest, as Jude teases and hides my phone screen.

'No, but I can show them. That's why I picked this one.' Jude scrolls to the photo she's chosen of me in a low-cut top with a wine glass in hand. I'm not looking at the camera and I'm laughing.

'That photo is older than both our children,' I say. 'It's like porno cleavage.'

Jude looks wicked. 'Exactly.'

'Are you sure you haven't made me sound too advertisey?'

'What do you mean? The fact I've written, *Cleo, just do it?*' she jokes, and I shake my head, knowing that whatever Jude has written will be excellent.

Finally, when she's ready, she hands me my phone back. It reads:

Cleo. 37. Florist.

I like: beautiful things, gin, sun on my skin, sand on my feet, plants. Mum of two brilliant babes. Ideal partner believes music is integral in EVERY moment in life, and it's always better live.

'You like?' Jude asks.

'Yes. You just—' I stop, feeling weirdly emotional and grateful. 'You just get me, don't you?'

'Yeah. I adore you. Now hit upload.'

I hit upload. *Shit.*

Hours pass quickly as we scroll through profiles, quickly working out what exactly my relationship walls, doors and velvet lounges are, and what constitutes a swipe left. So far that list is:

- Eyebrow ring
- Anyone under six feet
- Anyone who says they're apolitical because that feels lazy
- Anyone holding a fish.

'Okay babe, here you go, I found you one.' Jude puts on an Aussie-bloke accent: '*A lot of women on here say they want commitment. Well, as an*

Aussie I'm committed to going down under on you and not coming up for breath again until you're out of yours. Smiley-face emoji.' Jude laughs. I scowl, crinkling my nose. 'Wait, that's not the best bit. Ready? *No smokers. Thanks. Love-heart emoji.'*

I howl with laughter. 'What? *Come on ladies, I have standards.'*

We keep scrolling, and then stop to stare at the screen of a shirtless man lying in bed, his face cut out of the frame, with a perfectly positioned sheet over his dick.

Jude peers. 'Where is his body hair?'

More left swipes before I stop again.

'Is that a turtle he's holding? Okay, here we go. *Hello. I'll start by saying I love food. I can eat. I love it. Desserts are my favourite. Did you know you can get dessert pizzas? You can have dessert for break fast and bacon and eggs for dinner, there's nothing wrong with it.'*

'Well, that's true. Yes—' Jude says, but I hold up a finger to indicate there's more.

'*I used to play a lot of sports but about two years ago I had a horrific knee injury playing the sport I love the most. Now I just play golf. I've had the same job for fifteen years. I love animals.'* I stare at Jude, mouth agape.

'That's it?'

'Yes. A-plus for effort, Pete.'

'Pete is chatty, that's good.'

We laugh, we scroll, occasionally I swipe right. Or Jude makes me swipe right. Whenever I do, I hear myself make a low, guttural sound that seems to reflect the churn of conflicting feelings in my stomach.

'Why would you joke about not being an axe murderer?' I say.

'Or post a photo of yourself with a gun?' Jude snorts. 'God, men are lazy. Apart from this guy in his full mediaeval chain-link suit of armour, boldly accessorised with sword and shield.' She pauses, looking at his profile. 'Oh, he's wearing it in every photo.'

'I mean...it's good to have a hobby?'

I stop on a photo of a handsome guy who's laughing in his profile picture. He has very straight teeth. No visible piercings. No fish. Politically left. *Promising.* Then I read his profile.

'This is Seth.' I show Jude the photo.

'Hello, Seth.'

'Seth says, *Saying you believe in magic but don't believe in God is a bit*

like saying you don't have sex with dogs, except Labradors.' I'm confused. 'What does that even mean?'

Jude snorts. 'That's a really odd way to say he's jerking off at one of those creepy cult churches, I think. You know, I could make a lot of money running copywriting workshops for men on here.'

'Jude, that's actually a brilliant idea,' I say. My phone dings. *Shit.* I've got a match. 'What do I say?'

'I don't know, how about *hello?*'

'No, that's boring. I need a question. You're better at this stuff than me. Come on, Jude.'

'Okay, what does his profile say?'

I hand her the phone and she reads.

Will is thirty-three, he has a good, bearded face and nice eyes. His profile says: *Into: Genuinely smiling. Travelling. Skiing. Cheese eating. Wine drinking. Being silly. Spontaneous adventuring and candles. Actually. I am a candle-maker. Not into: Dishonesty.*

'Okay,' Jude frowns, 'say something like, *I'm doing four of your favourite things tonight.*'

'See? Yes. Perfect.' I type her suggestion word for word and then I wait, my heart thudding.

My phone dings, and I squeal. 'He replied. He said, *Please tell me you're texting and skiing.*'

'That's funny. Good.'

I look at Jude and we start laughing, with a giddy kind of excitement, and this is where I stay for the next few hours, until the kids get home and order is restored.

8

I call out hello as I walk into Mum and Dad's place, but it appears the house is empty. My defences are particularly low today, so I am instantly overwhelmed by the comfort of being in my childhood home. I'm tired. This week has been tough, the kids and I have struggled to settle back into our routine, which by the sound of it was totally abandoned at Doug's. They were grumpy and overtired when they got back and it's just continued throughout the week. Frankie has been really testing my boundaries. A couple of times this week she began sentences with: *But at Daddy's...* which triggers such a visceral reaction in my body it almost renders me catatonic.

'You know how there's different rules in different places we go?' I said to her the other night when we were snuggled up close in my bed. 'Like how you're not allowed to put your feet on Yiayia's couch, but you can put your feet on our couch at home?'

'Yeah,' she said, her green eyes blinking wide.

'Well, Daddy is going to have his own rules and they're going to be different to mine, and you're going to have to be okay with that.'

'But it's hard.'

'Yeah, I know. It is hard. It's really hard on Mummy too, cause I miss you so much when you're gone. You know that don't you?'

'Yeah. I miss you too. Daddy doesn't let me sleep in his bed.'

'See, there you go, that's just another rule.'

'Why are there so many rules, Mummy?'

'I dunno, my girl. I do not know.' I kissed her forehead and snuggled her close.

The other thing is how slow business has been. I am stressed about money, stressed about making change and stressed about the prospect of failing. My strategy for dealing with any of it in the past has been to avoid it, and any time Farida brings it up I tell her it will all be okay and that I'll look at it later. But I never do, and we keep plodding on. But last week without the kids at home, it actually gave me time and energy to look at things properly and realise how dire they are, and so today Farida and I sat down and went through everything.

'Farida, this is bad, yes?' I said, sitting at the table in the back of the shop as Farida walked me through the books.

'I mean, babe, it's not great, but I think it's salvageable. Like, look at

your marketing plan.'

'What marketing plan?' I said, genuinely thinking I'd missed something.

'Exactly.' Farida's sharply drawn eyebrows looked almost frightening, although her eyes were pleading.

'I just need a couple of days to...' I started, before I had to excuse myself to go and sit on the toilet and cry.

I dump my bags on a chair in the lounge room and shout out again, but there's no response. Mum and the kids definitely aren't here. Which is weird. My mum does the school and kindy run for me every Wednesday so I can stay later at the shop or run errands, then she cooks us all dinner. I'm so deeply appreciative of everything my parents do for me and the kids, but tonight I just don't have the energy for her passive-aggressive criticisms and my dad's worried looks. I exhale loudly, unsure what to do now, when I hear the familiar sound of my dad's voice—singing his own made-up words a semitone flat to whatever is playing on the radio—coming from the back deck. I step outside. Dad is standing at his barbecue with a glass of wine turning *ćevapi* with cheerful precision.

'Heeeey!' he shouts, thrilled. He looks this way any time he sees me or the kids. I love my dad. We've always been close, but in the last few years our relationship has evolved into something else, a genuine friendship. I feel buoyed by his presence, and his advice is always playing on loop in my head. His calm, wise view of the world, especially where Doug and my business are concerned, has saved me from drowning too many times to count. But I feel like this may even be too big for him to swing positively.

'Where is everyone?' I ask.

'Walking the dog,' he replies through his thick Croatian accent as I kiss his cheek and he sweeps me into a hug.

'How were they this afternoon?' I take a swig from his wine glass.

'Perfection.' He swats me with the tea towel slung over his shoulder and beams. 'How were you today?'

'Perfection,' I say, and he chuckles, even though he'll know this isn't the truth. The words that come next will be, *How are you really?* Because that's the only answer he will accept, so I continue, 'I'm tired, Dad. The shop is worrying me...' I see his face change. 'But it's all okay.'

'So why are you worried? You want me to look at the books?'

'No, Dad. It's fine, really. I mean it's been quiet, but I've got a couple of ideas.'

‘You know you can sell the shop if you need to.’

‘What?’

‘I just mean it’s an option. A card you can play.’ He says this without looking up from the grill.

‘I don’t want to sell the shop. I love the shop. The shop is good,’ I mumble, exasperated, then instantly worry that he sees something I don’t.

When Doug and I settled our house we just covered the mortgage. He kept the camper van we’d bought and I kept the shop. The shop is mine.

‘Do you think I should sell the shop?’

‘Do you think you should sell the shop?’ he says.

I sigh loudly. ‘No. I don’t want to.’

‘Then we find a way to make it work.’ He closes the lid on the barbecue and sits down across the table from me

‘What else?’ he says. He takes back his glass and refills it.

‘I’m thinking maybe about dating. Jude thinks it’s a good idea.’ I know this will change the subject.

‘Hmm...’ He touches his fingers to his chin, like my very own thinking-man statue. ‘You’re an injured tiger. You took a big hit a couple of seasons ago, hey?’ he says eventually. I smirk, I love his football analogies. ‘But you’re determined to come back. So, you’ve been doing your rehab and getting your strength back and doing all the right things, stretching and whatever—all the doctors and people telling you what to do, you follow the rules. But now you realise the key ingredient, huh?’ He pauses expectantly.

‘And what’s that?’ I ask.

‘Only you can know when you’re ready to play again.’ He pulls a cigar from his pocket, lights it and inhales deep. He uses it to punctuate his thoughts as he speaks. ‘And now you do things differently because of your injury. It’s different now. Not the same you. But does that make you any less mighty?!’ He slams his hand on the table, embodying the exclamation mark as I pinch another sip from his glass. ‘Does it?’

‘No, it does not,’ I mutter reluctantly.

‘You’re not on the field yet, baby! But you’re ready to play.’

The door opens and the kids come running out, squealing when they see me, and leap into my arms.

‘Did you wear your hair like that to work today? Cleo Franciska!’

‘Hi, Mum.’ I roll my eyes at her matching athletic wear and pearl earrings. Dad and I share a glance. Nitpicking is how Mum shows love; that,

and buying me bed linen.

‘I’m just wondering. You have such beautiful hair but it’s always in that bloody high-up thing,’ Mum says.

Dad raises his eyebrows and stares me right in the eyes. He’s challenging me. Like he’s saying, *Run out on the field then, kid.*

‘I like it,’ I say, as my heart speeds up a little.

‘But you have such beautiful hair.’

‘Mum,’ I say. My tone makes it clear that I’m not even going to entertain the conversation tonight. Dad winks at me as he stands up and heads back to the grill.

‘Okay. I have to get the salad finished. Jakov, how long?’

‘Two minutes.’

‘Jakov! That’s not enough time. Why didn’t you...’ She flicks her hands in the air, flustered, and he grabs her hand and pulls him in towards her. She whacks him away but she’s not serious. He nuzzles into her neck, dancing her around in a circle. ‘Two minutes is plenty of time, baby!’

The two of them laugh loudly as they hug, which makes me smile with my whole body. Tonight, it also makes my heart ache.

Mum breaks their hug first. She walks back inside, and Dad looks at me.

‘I think you’re gonna win the premiership, huh?’

I muster a smile and a nod. I don’t feel like I’m capable of winning anything.

9

I get to day care pick-up and when Andy sees me I feel a surge of love that fills my body to the brim. He squeals with delight as he flings himself around my legs, giggling loud.

I ask his teachers how it went last week with Doug, and they tell me it was fine, which makes me feel both relieved and uneasy. Like I shouldn't get my hopes up, and that I need to brace for the inevitable chaos. Then I have the unexpected thought that maybe I don't need to brace; maybe I've been bracing for long enough and I can actually relax now. Maybe it will be okay.

I pull up at Frankie and Perry's school, get Andy out of his car seat and send a polite smile towards the live, laugh, love mums, which they return with fake small fingertip waves. I've never got along with them; I try to avoid them. But I find this feigned courteous approach preferable to Jude's tactic, which is to hover a step away from telling them to eat a bag of dicks.

Frankie comes sprinting from a distance and my heart swells. Despite its challenges I love the shop, I love going to work, I love my job. Being a florist is my dream. But I feel like I'm constantly pulled in two directions because whenever I am not with my kids I miss them in a way that I feel physically.

'Bubba, how was your day?' I smile.

'I got an award,' she says as her tiny hand thrusts a small piece of cardboard in the air for me to see.

'You did?' I take it and read her teacher's perfect handwriting, *For being an excellent helper*. 'Babes, this is so cool. What should we do to celebrate?'

Frankie's eyes light up and she thinks carefully. 'Donuts.'

I can hear the wailing from the street when I get out of the car. *What the hell is going on?* Jude stayed home with Perry, who wasn't very well this morning. Then I hear Jude's exasperated yell, and I quickly get the kids out of the car.

'Perry! I will tell you when you can come out. Now shut the door.' It slams and shakes the wall as I step into the kitchen. Jude is hunched over the sink, sobbing, with the water running fast. My stomach drops. Her pain is my pain.

I turn the TV on and tell Frankie and Andy to sit and wait for me.

I step towards Jude. 'God. What happened?'

I grab her shoulders as she turns, her face damp with tears, her eyes red. 'It's Mabel.'

My chest tightens as I brace myself to hear the worst. 'It's fine. I'm fine.' She rushes to reassure me. 'She bit me.' Jude turns back to the sink and keeps running her finger under the water.

'What?'

'No...Yes. *Fuck*. She got into my bin and tore up a used pad, and she had a whole bit of it in her mouth and she wouldn't drop it. So I chased her around the house like a fucking idiot because I was freaking out that she was going to choke, and that's just not a conversation I'm willing to have with McHandsome Vet Face.'

I smile thinking of the handsome Scottish vet who we social-media-stalked a little too enthusiastically one night, and Jude didn't realise she'd sent a bunch of comments on his photos with eggplant emojis directly to him and *not* me. He replied with a series of question marks and Jude imploded with embarrassment. The next time she took Mabel to the vet she made me come with her and he said he was flattered, but that professional boundaries were important. We were both mortified but also a bit turned on by a man who could articulate what boundaries are.

'And so I grabbed her and had to reef the pad out of her mouth, and she wasn't happy about it, and so I got bit. Unintentionally, it's only small, but I'm bleeding.'

'Show me.'

The bite is tiny. 'It's okay,' I say.

'Yeah, I know. I'll be fine. But isn't it a thing if dogs taste human blood you have to put them down?' She looks at me with the big, long-lashed hazel eyes that Perry has too.

'I don't know, is it?' I stare at her.

'I think it is. And she's overdosed on it today. So, then I started thinking about having to put Mabel down and having to tell you and the kids and...'
She starts crying again.

'Oh, babe, I think we'll be fine.' I'm getting teary too. I am an empathetic crier, especially when it comes to Jude. I didn't used to be, but then I grew two humans inside my body and my hormones evolved into emotionally supercharged, turmoil-inducing beasts.

'And Perry?' Perry's still wailing loudly behind his bedroom door.

'Just being Perry. He didn't get his own way, and then he wouldn't do as I asked when the shit hit the fan with the dog, so I yelled, and he yelled, and I sent him to his room for being rude.'

‘Aunty Jude?’ Frankie says meekly from the lounge room. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yeah, babe, I’m okay.’ Jude smiles at her. ‘Just feeling some big feelings.’

‘And that’s okay, right?’ I say to Frankie.

She nods and gives Jude a thumbs-up, as a piece of paper pushed by tiny fingers slides out from under Perry’s bedroom door and flies across the tiles. I read the loopy letters scrawled furiously on it.

‘It says *I hate you all*, then in brackets *not Frankie*.’ I start laughing, and then Jude does too, and then we’re both clutching the kitchen bench for support to get air.

‘DON’T LAUGH AT ME!’ Perry roars from under the bedroom door and this makes us laugh more.

When we finally calm down and we can breathe again, I look at Jude. ‘Go take a moment. I’ll do dinner.’ I hand her the bag with the last donut in it.

‘Fish is in the oven, you just need to do veggies,’ Jude says, the relief on her face clear as she turns on her heel and walks towards her bedroom. ‘I can’t deal with him yet,’ she says.

‘Then don’t.’ I bend into the fridge to get the carrots and broccoli.

‘Yes!’ Jude throws her hands in the air like she’s praising me.

Once the kids are fed, bathed and asleep, I sit on the edge of my bed, place my feet firmly on the ground and stare at the wall. I breathe in for a count of five and out for a count of five, which is my quick-fire way to ground myself when the wild starts to build in my body. I turn the diffuser on and it pumps peppermint mist into the air. I lie back on the bed with my feet still on the floor and look at my phone. Start to scroll mindlessly through photos of perfectly dressed children, celebrities I like and—my new obsession—handsome tattooed men who as far as I can tell do nothing but be handsome and tattooed, and occasionally try to sell beard oil or retro pomade.

I check the West Side Honey account and there’s a couple of likes for the post I shared this morning. I have ideas for the shop, but the marketing side makes me so uncomfortable I really struggle to see them through. I don’t want to be the face of the shop. I want my work to speak for itself. Jude has repeatedly offered to help me, but she is impossibly busy with her own work and I don’t want to bother her and anyway, I feel like I have to do it myself. Still...maybe I need to ask her what she thinks again. I really want to see the business grow, and I really think it can.

I hate-follow a bunch of other florists whose work isn't even that good but who have way more followers than I do.

I'm going to have to push myself out of my comfort zone.

This thought makes me sigh loudly. I shouldn't have lain down because now I have, I realise how exhausted I am and there's still so much I have to do tonight. I have to hang out a load of washing, make school lunches and work out what the hell I'm going to wear on my date tomorrow and whether I have to iron it.

A date. My first date. *Holy shit.*

I sit up. Try to exhale the tiredness before it takes me over completely.

10

‘Summer or winter?’ Will the candle-maker asks.

Our app conversation was polite and funny, and he seemed smart. Farida suggested lunch as a good low-stakes re-entry into dating, and Jude cautioned me against texting for too long before meeting them, in case there was no chemistry. Now, four days after matching, I find myself on a mid-week lunch date trying to appease the two women I adore and ignore my gut feeling that this will be a disaster.

‘It’s just a sandwich, Cleo, not an arranged marriage, please calm down,’ Farida said this morning when I showed her my sweaty palms.

Will is handsome and big: big beard, big blue eyes, big shoulders and really, really tall. He has a beachside vibe about him that I like, and he’s confident. He has zero trouble keeping the conversation going, which I appreciate.

He started a *this or that* game as soon as we sat down, and we’ve disagreed on every answer so far.

‘Summer. I love the beach. I love being hot,’ I say with a smirk, drinking from my coffee mug.

‘Cause you are,’ Will says, matter of fact. He has close-shaved blond hair and strong calves. I noticed them when he got up to order and I can’t stop looking down at them.

‘Very smooth,’ I laugh, embarrassed.

‘I know, right? I’m winter. Doing my work in summer is a bloody nightmare.’

‘How did you get into candles?’ I ask.

‘I’m an electrician by trade.’ He smiles, waiting for me to get the joke. ‘Electricity, candles? Some people think that’s funny.’

‘Oh, right, yeah.’ He’s cute.

A slow-motion reel runs in my mind: a shirtless, sweaty Will running cable along a roof. I giggle more. ‘Anyway I have a sister, we’re really close, and she wanted to do this workshop, a candle-making course, and no one would go with her, so I said I would. And I bloody loved it.’

‘Yeah, great.’

‘She only ever made the one. I started doing it on weekends and working out how to make them last the longest, and the best smells, and it’s a whole bloody rabbit hole when you get into it. I got really obsessed. I was giving

them to everyone, all my mates' girlfriends and mums and that. And they'd be like, these are awesome. So, I started the business, just as a small thing, and then started doing markets and stuff and went full time this year.'

'That's so great,' I smile. 'You obviously love it?'

'Yeah, I do. You with your shop? You love it?'

'Yeah. It can be stressful, but I really do.'

We smile at each other. I don't think there's a vibe, I don't think he's interested in me. *But are you interested in him?* I hear both Farida and Jude chime in my head and it makes me take a breath. *I don't even know.* 'TV or book?' I ask.

'TV,' he smirks. 'And of course, you're book.' I nod. 'Shit, am I just coming across like a rough-as dickhead now?' He ducks his head to drink from his mug.

'No. Not at all.' I look at his hands. He has massive hands. *I think he's attractive, but is he someone I'd want to hang out with again? How do you even know? Do I like him because he's nice? Is that a good enough reason? What am I even looking for?*

'Call or text?' he asks.

'Text,' I say.

Will shakes his head, scoffing. 'What? No, call! Call is way better. I like a chat.'

'I can tell. I like the words—I like writing things down,' I smile.

'I just get self-conscious cause I know my grammar and that is shithouse, but I can chat to anyone. Okay, your turn.'

'Okay. Touch or taste?' I say watching his face, twisting the pendant on my necklace daring him to look at my chest, to see if he flirts back.

He takes a sip of his drink, 'Taste,' he says, looking me in the eye.

'Touch,' I say. 'Your turn.'

'Coconut or lemongrass?'

He's definitely not flirting back. Okay. Or maybe I'm just terrible at reading the signs. 'Lemongrass.'

'Hmm, interesting.' He reaches for his bag, which is slung over the chair, and pulls out a candle, placing it proudly on the table. 'What about when they're together?'

'Oh,' I mumble, and he gestures for me to pick up the candle. 'It smells great.'

'Yeah, it's a good combo, right?' he nods excitedly, turning back to his

bag, pulling out another candle and putting it on the table. 'Wait till you smell this one.'

I walk back to the shop with my three candles, Will's business card, and a spoken agreement to stock his candles in the shop, but not to other dates.

I think I just got conned into a deal instead of a date, I message Jude. I give her the shorthand version of lunch.

Oh my god. The audacity of men. This is brilliant, she replies, followed by numerous eggplant and candle emojis.

I walk through the front door and Farida looks at the candles I'm carrying. 'So it was good?' she says excitedly.

'It was kind of good and then weird, and I think we now stock these?'

'What?' Farida takes them out of my hands and smells them one at a time. 'These are really good.'

'I know. It made me think, what if we stock art and pottery and jewellery and gifts from local artists?'

Her face opens wide, 'Oh my god, Cleo, why aren't we doing that already?'

'I don't know. I think I just didn't have enough time, but... now maybe I do.' I feel genuinely excited.

'I love this,' Farida nods. 'And the date?'

'He was lovely, but he said he didn't really get anything but a friendship vibe.'

'Good job, candle-man: upfront and honest,' Farida beams. 'You okay, though? Did you think there was a vibe?'

'I didn't think there was, but is it dumb that my feelings are hurt that he didn't think there was a vibe?'

'Completely normal. Rejection sucks. Now you tell your brain to fuck right off, you're totally dateable, okay?'

'Okay, yes, you're right.'

'Can we celebrate the fact you at least went on a date and it wasn't a shitshow?'

I take a deep breath in, and smile. Farida is right about all of it.

I spend the afternoon flicking between artists' social media accounts and dating apps, getting excited by all the new possibilities. Farida tells me to put my big-person pants on and just send the artists, and potential matches, a message, while I, of course, fret about whether that's rude, or too full-on. But eventually I do both.

The first two artists I message reply with a yes, which gives me a boost. One of my matches chats without making sexual innuendo within the first few moments. So now I'm feeling positively buzzed about what other new things may be possible for me now.

11

‘Thanks so much, Cleo, these are so beautiful. Every week I think to myself, she can’t possibly outdo herself but then...’ Glen, one of my regulars, looks at the blooms I just handed over and shakes his head. ‘They’re more spectacular every week.’ He smiles awkwardly. The thin tuft of dark brown hair he hasn’t admitted he’s losing yet is wispy under the fan.

‘Thanks, Glen, that’s so lovely,’ I smile as I process his payment and check the clock. *I’ve got to leave in ten minutes to pick up the kids.*

‘Well, same time next week.’ Glen pops on his bike helmet and shuffles out of the shop as Farida comes out from the back, waving extravagantly.

She speaks through her teeth so he can’t hear: ‘He wants to stick his dick right in you.’ She waves at Glen, who waves back, oblivious.

I shake my head. ‘He’s too short for me.’

‘I don’t get your height thing.’

‘I don’t know, I like tall men. I suppose I like feeling small. Maybe it’s a primal thing?’ I say with a shrug, and Farida shakes her head.

‘Maybe it’s an unrealistic patriarchal beauty standard that dictates what masculinity and femininity are, and that you like feeling small because it validates the mandated desire that smallness is beautiful.’

‘I, um...’

‘It’s like when women won’t swipe on men with photos of fish in their profiles,’ she says, pointing her pen in my direction.

‘I don’t swipe—’ I begin, and she cuts me off.

‘No! Cleo! It’s just another unrealistic standard to be upheld. There are very few occasions we as a culture allow men to take photos, and they have to be attached to success and masculinity. Drunk. Fish. The boys. Gym. It’s not like they can celebrate with a selfie when they’re feeling most like themselves, because we make fun of those men for liking themselves *too* much.’ She pauses, watching my wide-eyed expression. ‘We’ve made stoic the norm, and then we mock men who behave exactly as they’ve been told to.’

I am speechless. ‘I...I’ve never thought about it. Oh my god, Farida.’

‘But you have thought about boning Glen, though?’ Farida smirks.

‘I have not thought about it at all.’

I walk to the back of the shop to start gathering the things that I’ve strewn all over the benches throughout the day. ‘Plus, I don’t want anyone who buys

their mum flowers every Friday afternoon to put their dick anywhere near me.'

'I think it's sweet.'

'It is sweet. I love Glen. I love that we are Glen's florist of choice, but Glen wouldn't—' I pause. I can't believe I let myself get drawn into this conversation.

'What? *Fuck*? Glen wouldn't fuck?' Farida hoots. 'You're wrong. Glen would totally fuck. I reckon he's some commanding primal daddy in the bedroom.' Farida picks up my keys from under a bundle of raffia and hands them to me.

'I have no idea what you just said,' I say spinning on my heel haphazardly, eyes darting around every surface, *Where is my phone?*

'You need to get laid, Cleo,' Farida says.

'I'll have you know that—'

A thundering crunch, a crash of shattering glass and snapping wood from the front of the shop. I watch Farida's face distort in shock before I turn my head and my eyes lock with the car bonnet that just destroyed my front window.

Holy shit.

'*Fucking fuck,*' Farida shouts at the exact moment I think this.

My body is stunned into stillness as I try to process how there is now a car inside my shop.

'Cleo! You okay?' Farida's voice is muffled, but I hear her and I manage to nod as she rushes outside.

I stare at the car. The empty car. *The car is empty.* I feel relieved that no one is hurt at the exact same time as feeling desperately confused. *Why is there no one in the car?* I hear Farida yelling. I can feel my heart pounding violently in my chest and I breathe out loudly. Puffed. I've been holding my breath the whole time. Once I finally let air into my lungs my body launches forward into the shop, wincing at the sound of crushed glass under my sandals.

'Jesus. I don't know how...' A startled young man stands near the car, staring wide-eyed.

'Your handbrake isn't on, mate, that's how,' Farida says, peering through the driver's-side window. 'And now I have to call the cops.'

'Yeah. Shit. I'm so sorry. I'm so...I feel...Um. Do you have to call the —',

‘Unfortunately, yes. Ugh.’

‘Farida?’

‘Insurance, Cleo!’ Farida yells, exasperated, and pulls her phone out of her pocket.

‘I think...’ The colour starts to drain from the kid’s face and I watch him wobble.

‘You okay? Maybe just take a seat.’ I help him sit down on the low retaining wall next to the shop. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Miles,’ he mumbles. There is absolutely no colour in his face now and I think he might faint.

‘Cool. Miles, I’m Cleo. I think you need to take some deep breaths, okay?’

‘They’re on their way,’ Farida says, walking over.

‘Okay. Shit,’ I mumble, and we stare at each other, then at the shop, at the car, the destruction, then back to each other. We repeat this over and over again, shaking our heads, trying to make it make sense.

‘Nice sticker, fuckhead,’ Farida eventually spits and I look at Miles’s rear window for the first time: *NO FAT CHICKS. TRUCKS WILL SCRAPE.*

‘Farida—’

‘I don’t feel—’ Miles throws up on the ground between his own feet.

I look at the vomit on the floor and suddenly become aware of how nauseous I feel, which is slightly abated when I look at Farida’s face: a mix of rage and repulsion.

‘I think I should call my dad,’ Miles mumbles.

I look at him, grateful for the guidance as I realise that’s what I should do too.

An hour later Miles and I sit next to each other on the brick wall, both of us staring as our dads sort it out. Miles’s dad’s slicked-back black hair matches the Range Rover he parked across two parks in front of the bakery next door.

‘I don’t wanna hear it,’ was all he muttered to Miles before turning to me. ‘This your shop?’ I nodded meekly, overwhelmed by the sledgehammer force of his energy.

The police have been and gone. They took a few notes but there wasn’t much they could do. They did a breathalyser, and Miles wasn’t over the limit. He’d just forgotten to put his handbrake on when he went into the servo across the road to pay for his petrol, and his car rolled slowly out across two

lanes and into my front window. No one was hurt. It's quite miraculous, really.

Mum went to get the kids and Dad came straight to the shop to help me. The second I saw him getting out of his car I burst into tears. I'd been holding it together. I was calm. I was navigating this crisis well. But the second Dad appeared I too reverted to my adolescent self, the shock slapping me and the fear sidling up right behind it. *What if this means I can't keep the shop? What if this is the thing that finishes it for me?* This thought makes the tears that I just reined in spring up again, and I feel my hands start to shake.

'He's gonna kill me,' Miles mutters. 'I've only had my licence for two weeks.'

'That sucks,' I say, as Farida mumbles something about entitled, boater-wearing schoolboys.

A tow truck arrives and a bald man with a red face gets out of the truck and starts strapping ties to Miles's car. He's directly in front of us, but neither of us moves; it's like the wall we're sitting on is the safest place on earth.

'Do you think it'll be a write-off?' Miles asks.

'Don't know. Do you think my shop will?'

'He'll pay for it. He's not gonna...he won't fuck you over.' Miles looks properly at me for the first time, and I notice that his eyes are red, and they've welled with tears. 'Promise.'

Something inside me twinges with sympathy for him. 'I'm sure your car will be fine.'

Later, inside the shop, I stare in a dazed way at the hole in the wall as Farida buzzes around sweeping and packing up.

'You okay, kid?' Dad says, squeezing my shoulder.

'I think—'

'I've called my friend and he's going to send one of his boys to board up the window for tonight, and then we'll get to work on it tomorrow.'

'Okay.'

'You're going to have to call insurance and sort that out tonight.'

'Okay,' I nod, barely taking in anything he's saying, because I'm trying to remember who the fuck I'm even insured by.

'I can call if you want me to?'

'No. No. I can. Dad, it's fine. Okay?' I say, sounding more confident than I feel, hoping he'll buy it.

'You going to be able to cover the repairs until we get it sorted?' he asks,

running his hand over his chin, which I know he does when he's stressed and which only makes me feel more anxious. My throat constricts. *Fuck. I can't. I don't have the money.* 'Ahh,' I groan, my mind whirring. 'I'll um...' I hate this. My heart races and the nerves in my hands prickle and they start to get clammy.

'How about I cover it and then you pay me back?'

'Dad, it'd be a—'

He cuts me off. 'Cleo Franciska, I want you to really think if this is what you want.'

'The loan?' I ask.

He exhales a puff of air through tight lips. 'The shop.'

My heart hurts. I want to tell him it is. I want to tell him I'll sort it out. I want to tell him how much it hurts that he doesn't believe in me, that he doesn't think I'm capable and that I could come up with a plan if I just had a second to think. *I just need a second to think.* But I don't. I don't say anything. I just nod and mutter, 'Okay.'

12

It's Sunday. I am home alone, and I am drunk. Jude is away for work. I'm powerless to avoid the waves of guilt and terror that pummel at my core insisting I am a failure. The shop, leaving Doug, being on my own, the kids and this stupid custody arrangement. *I'm going to fuck them up forever. I'm a terrible mother. Not patient enough. Too needy. Too controlling. Not enough boundaries. I think they need more boundaries. Why did I have kids with Doug? He's such a dickhead. Why did I fall in love with a dickhead? Am I a dickhead too? I must be. It can't be all his fault. What if I made him the way he is? I ruined my marriage and I'm going to ruin my kids.*

He said very little when he picked them up today and so I said very little, and he was in the house for less than five minutes. And then the quiet. This deafening quiet that makes the internal monologue a violent boom. I drink the last of a bottle of wine, pick up my phone and stare at the photos of men standing in open-collared shirts with floral boutonnieres, or seat-belted selfies taken in cars, or boys with barramundis, and I think about Farida's theory and feel like I'm in on a *Matrix*-level secret. I swipe right on the most handsome fisherman and some men who are five foot eight and I swipe left on any suitor who talks about their dick or who uses badly drawn euphemisms for cunnilingus or no punctuation. And I feel like a good feminist—Farida would be proud of me.

But when I get to Drew's profile I stop. Drew is thirty-six. That's it. He's written nothing about himself, which would usually make me swipe left but I don't because Drew is hot. A full head of ginger hair swept back effortlessly, with a thick moustache and a great smile. His photos are all of him smiling wide, looking happy. In one photo he's laughing while holding a cute dog, there's one of him sitting by a fire holding a beer, him shirtless and holding his own tattooed body horizontal off the ground, the muscles in his arms bulging with the weight of his body while the ones in his stomach are taut and defined. The final photo is of him standing on the hands of another equally attractive man. He must be in the circus or something. An artist. I swipe right and it's a match, which surprises me. I'd usually wait for him to message me first, but tonight I do: *Pretend I've written some brilliant conversation starting sentence, okay?* I type thinking how stoked Jude would be with this intro.

Drew replies straight away.

*Haha. Only if you pretend my reply is awesome.
Will do. I like your photos.*

*Thanks. I like your photos. A lot.
Why, thank you.*

*So, Cleo, I don't normally do this, but I'm bored so why not...are
you free now by any chance? Want to grab a drink?*

I am startled but intrigued. I'm in my pyjamas and there's definitely cookie crumbs on my face and I haven't washed my hair in a week. But I like his decisiveness, especially about wanting to meet me. I like the idea that I can go out if I want to.

Okay. Sure. I need an hour. Where shall we meet?

How's Percival's?

Perfect.

So, 8:30p.m.?

Shit. Shit. Shit, I think. This is stupid. I'm being stupid. And I get up off the couch and get straight into the shower.

Fuck it.

Drew is dumb. But Drew is so unbelievably attractive to me that I've decided to persevere.

We try to find common ground, but our conversation is mostly shaky. He says, 'You're really pretty, Cleo,' and talks a lot about fasting and the time he lived in his car for a year and showered at the gym, and he hasn't asked me any questions at all. Not a single green flag so far. When I say something about being a big leftie at heart, he takes issue with this.

'I think that's a sign of weakness. I'm surprised you'd conform to any kind of political ideal at all,' he says.

'I'm sorry, what?' I say, genuinely confused. 'I just think that things should be equal and fair for as many people as possible,' I say, my eyebrows furrowed, watching Drew's face.

'The whole system is rigged, though, isn't it? We've been given free thought for a reason.'

'Sure.'

'So, we should use it,' he says, taking a swig from his beer.

I'm annoyed by this, but I don't know what to say. I think of Jude, what Jude would do right now. She'd probably call him a dickhead and leave. But I am not Jude, so I stay.

'I believe in equality. For everyone. That's what I meant. That's what's

important to me.'

'But our humanity makes us equal, don't you think?'

'Well, yes, but also you know that's not how the world works, right?' I say, quite proud of myself for not letting this go, just as a barman arrives to tell us the bar is closing.

'I only live up the road, do you want to have another drink?' Drew says, quickly adding, 'Nothing suss.'

I finish my drink. And again think, *fuck it*. 'Yeah. Yes. Sure. One more.'

I'm horny. He's hot. I don't want to be in my house on my own. I've never had sex with someone who has a body like Drew's. *Why not*. I like that he likes me. I like how that makes me feel. And I really don't like that I do.

We walk up the street to his house and he tells me in great detail about the new boxing equipment he's bought and I nod, saying very little at all. He lives in a huge old white-chipped-paint house.

'My roommates are probably home, so...'

He ushers me into his bedroom. *Good*. At least we're both on the same track. All being well, there will be little conversation from this point forward.

I look around his room. There's a few guitars on stands by the wall, his bed is unmade and there's piles of papers and clothes strewn over every surface. It smells like nag champa and tobacco.

I sit on his bed and he shakes his head. 'I can't believe you're here, like, in my room. Hilarious, yeah? Not how I thought my night would turn out at all.'

I smile. 'Me neither, I was in my pyjamas and then...'

He steps towards me and I think he's going to kiss me, but he stares. *Come on, Drew*. I move closer to him and he leans past me and picks up his guitar.

'Can I play you something?' he says.

'Sure.' *Oh god. Please don't*.

Drew loops the guitar strap over his head and starts strumming, and I feel really hot and aware of my skin. This is quite possibly the most awkward I've ever felt. Only it isn't, because then he starts to sing. Or not really singing, he kind of warbles his voice in these long notes. His eyes are closed. He's being very serious, and it is taking all my might not to laugh. He starts singing lyrics now and I can't quite work out what song it is, he must see the confusion on my face because he suddenly stops singing, but doesn't stop strumming. 'John Farnham,' he says, then closes his eyes again. "Two

Strong Hearts”.’

‘Of course,’ I mumble.

When he’s finished playing, he sits awkwardly next to me. I wait to see what he’ll do, but he doesn’t do anything.

‘So, you serenade girls like that all the time?’ I look at him suggestively.

‘Not for months.’

‘Well, I’m honoured,’ I flirt, leaning in to kiss him.

He pulls away. ‘I don’t want to kiss. Kissing feels too relationshipy, don’t you think?’

I laugh loudly because he must be joking, but the serious look on his face quickly makes me realise he’s not. ‘Oh. Ahhh. No...’

‘You don’t think that?’

‘No. I don’t. I like kissing,’ I say, still trying to read his face. *Is he kidding? Is this a weird joke?*

‘I mean, we don’t know each other, I don’t know what your motives are.’

What the fuck? ‘My motives? What? I thought we’d maybe make out.’

‘Could we just touch each other for a bit?’ he says, lying down.

I’m so stunned that I lie down too, facing him.

He runs his hands over my shoulders, over my chest and down my arms. I do the same to him. He takes my hand and places it on the crotch of his jeans. I can feel he’s hard.

‘I’m really horny, hey?’

‘Oh yeah?’ I say and then he kisses me fast on the mouth, but I can tell he’s not into it. I’m not into it. We stare at each other, and both smile awkwardly.

‘Can I, like, cum on your tits?’

13

The office is cream. Cream and brown. Even the umbrella stand is cream. There's an inoffensive abstract painting on the wall and two receptionists with perfectly set hair and calm voices. There's a giant peace lily in the corner that's busting from its pot and needs a dust. I sit uncomfortably in the brown, straight-back chair and feel nervous.

I've only been to a therapist once before. After I had Andy, Farida suggested it might be good to have a non-biased viewpoint just for myself. So I made the time—with a toddler and a newborn—to go to the doctor and get a mental-health plan. I waited six weeks to get into the recommended therapist's office, got my mum to watch the kids, then schlepped across the city, to pay money I did not have at the time to a grey-haired man who reminded me of my high-school maths teacher (who I hated) to tell me I should think about meditation to help with my anxiety and stress.

Now I've promised Farida I'll try again with a different doctor, someone she recommended. But I kept putting it off and now that I'm here I really wish I'd stuck to my guns. I don't think therapy is for me. I don't have time to think about the past—there's too much to do in the now to be worrying about stuff back then. I've dealt with what I need to, and now I need to get on with it. Andy and Frankie need me to get on with it. Farida and the shop need me to get on with it. Jude and my family need me to get on with it. Everyone needs me to get on with it.

I shuffle in my seat as flashbacks of the other night smack into me; I shake my head to try to banish them, to somehow shake them loose, and am left with an empty feeling of embarrassment and shame. I can't believe I actually let him jerk himself off on my stomach. I don't know why. I just lay there, staring at his face contorting above me and I felt...nothing.

'I can't believe any of tonight, hey?' he'd said as he handed me a towel to clean up.

'Me neither,' I'd muttered as I got dressed and we navigated an awkward goodbye at his bedroom door. As soon as I got in the Uber I opened the app to delete our conversation, but he'd already done it. I wasn't even out of his street yet.

And I burst into tears. *This isn't okay. I'm not okay, I've got to do something.* So I talked to Farida and got this woman's number. I left a message on her answering machine, and she called the next day with a

fortuitous cancellation.

‘Can I tell you something I’ve noticed about the way you’ve told me your story today, Cleo?’

Dr Tricia Murphy is in her late fifties with a pair of well-pressed straight-leg pants and comfortable brown shoes. There are three large, plump brown chairs in her office and her desk is messy. The lights are dim. It smells faintly of sandalwood and lavender. When she talks, her broad accent makes me think of a publican I once met in a country hotel who told the four drunk men in the corner to ‘Rack off back up yer mothers’ clackers, ya dim shits,’ and I’ve never forgotten her.

Dr Tricia’s no-fuss bogan empathy and essential oils have somehow bewitched me. I’ve ended up telling her everything about the last eighteen months.

She goes on, ‘You’ve talked a lot about how everyone else feels, and how you’re helping them with that.’

‘Well, yeah.’

‘You’re a carer,’ she says, matter of fact.

‘Is that a bad thing?’ I’m trying to read her face, feeling unsettled.

‘Not at all. It’s a great thing.’ She rests her notes in her lap. ‘But how are you caring for yourself?’

I snort. ‘I...’ Then I stop. ‘I try and stay on top of everything, I guess. My kids are my—’

‘You sound like a great mum, Cleo.’

It’s like a thread has been tugged loose from some deep place, unravelling emotion in a shudder through my body.

‘You care about being a great mum?’ Dr Tricia asks.

‘Very much. I don’t...um. I don’t think I realised how hard it would be to not have my kids around. That wasn’t my plan,’ I tear up. ‘I love being their mum.’

‘What do you hate most about this new arrangement?’

I sigh, and stare at the velcro strap on her shoe, notice her stocking sockette has rolled under her arch and wonder if that’s annoying her. ‘That I don’t know what’s going on. And it’s quiet. So bloody quiet.’

Dr Tricia makes some notes, ‘And what do you think about in the quiet?’

‘If my kids are okay. If they’re going to be okay,’ I nod. ‘And if they’re going to hate me.’

She scrawls more notes, ‘What about you? Are *you* okay?’

‘I have to be. Have I been sad and angry and all of that? Yeah, of course. Is it lonely? Kind of. But I’ve had to get on with it. There’s no time to wallow because there’s too much to do.’

‘I’m not talking about wallowing. I’m talking about caring for you the way you care for your kids.’ She pauses, watching my reaction, and I fidget. ‘Mothering yourself the way you mother everyone else. Have you thought about that?’

My voice quivers thinly: ‘No?’

‘How would you feel if Andy or Frankie were in a relationship like yours with Doug?’

The breath leaves my body like I’ve been punched in the guts and I start to cry. Pained crying. Crying that shudders my body. ‘Um. Really worried and really upset,’ I mumble.

She nods to the tissues on the small table next to me. ‘And what would you want for them if they were in a relationship like that?’

The answer pours out quickly without me thinking about it. ‘To leave. To know that, um, there’s more, and better, that they deserve better.’

‘And you?’

I bite my lip to try to stop the tears, but I can’t. ‘I deserve better too,’ I exhale loudly.

‘What do you want for them? How do you want them to feel about their life?’

‘I want them to be happy, to feel fulfilled, and like they are...’ I pause, trying to find the right word. ‘They’re *content*. I want them to be excited, and to go for things and say no and to say yes when they want and feel like they’re equipped to live big lives where they know they’re supported.’

‘How are they going to learn how to do that?’

‘I...’ I gasp in some breath. ‘I’ll teach them.’

‘How?’

I cry more. And exhale. ‘Fuck.’

She laughs, ‘Yeah, love. Big fuck.’ She smiles and nods. Waits to let me catch my breath. ‘They’ll learn if it’s their normal. If they’re seeing you living like that.’ Her breath is calm in her chest, she makes me feel calm.

‘And you’ve already started, Cleo. You’re here. You’re caring for yourself here. And now you do it out there. Small things. I think we feel like change has to be huge and life-altering, but you’ve had enough big changes, yeah?’

I grunt a yes and my eyes widen. She smiles again. ‘Yeah. Quite a few

kicks to the dick these past few years, tell you what,' she says again, looking at her notes. 'This list is impressive, Cleo. It's a wonder you're functioning at all, to be honest.'

Relief washes over me, and the constriction in my body feels different. It eases, and I breathe what feels like the deepest breath I've taken in a very long time. Just having someone else acknowledge that it's been a lot—that it's been huge, and shit—feels good. It feels relieving; I feel relieved. Like I'm not crazy, like the fact I've been gripping so tightly to everything makes sense, but maybe I can let go a little bit. I'm still holding on, maybe just not so tightly.

'Small steps. Then bigger ones will follow. You don't have to punish yourself for the way things have worked out, Cleo. You need to care for yourself. Put your needs first for a bit. When you can.'

I breathe in deep again. *When I can. I think I can.*

‘And how do you feel now?’ Jude says as she takes a mouthful from her stubbie.

I’ve just spent the last hour telling her everything Dr Tricia said in therapy this morning and she nodded, stared wide-eyed; got teary the three times I did.

Jude is deeply suspicious of therapists and therapy. She’s tried it a few times and felt like it was a total waste of time. I can picture exactly how she’d be in therapy, though, staring sceptically at the therapist, trying to fool them with her shiny veneer; finding ways to make them seem incompetent to prove what she already believes. Jude likes to be right, and she doesn’t like feeling out of control. Therapy is rigged from the beginning for her.

‘I feel a bit shell-shocked. She’s right about the kids, that I want different things for them compared to what I allow for myself.’ I pause. ‘That’s wild, isn’t it?’

‘That’s cause we hate women’—she pauses for effect—‘and we especially hate mothers. The message that we must be selfless and self-sacrificing at all times undermines the fact that we are human and therefore fated to mess up. It’s rigged.’ She nods seriously. ‘The other day Perry asked me why I can’t be a class parent and I told him it’s cause I have to work. And he knows that, he gets it. We talk about it. We talk about the fact that when he’s a grown-up he’ll hopefully find something that he loves to do for a job like I love my work, but god, Cleo, why can’t I just be the kind of mum who wants to be a class parent so then he doesn’t have to look at me with those eyes, and I don’t have to feel like I’m the worst mother in the world?’

‘You know that’s not true.’

‘Of *course* I know that’s not true—but I feel it. I love the bogan therapist for bringing it up. So, what are you going to do?’

‘Well, tonight. This is a thing, I guess. I’m excited,’ I say nervously, looking at Jude. She looks like she’d rather be anywhere else than a dance class on a weeknight, but she promised, and Jude is a woman of her word.

‘I’m glad, my love. I still can’t believe we have to sign a commitment contract for a bloody dance class,’ she says, waving the pink form in my face.

‘Farida said Mellie will come for us if we mess her around.’ I point my stubbie at Jude and she feigns a terrified face and then lavishly signs the form in large swirly letters.

AbunDANCE is run by a compact, ferocious woman named Mellie Abundance, a dancer and cabaret performer, who has steadily built a small local fitness empire selling the message that all bodies are dance bodies and leaning hard into the celebration of hard work and reward. She now has waiting lists on all the groups she runs across the city.

Farida, who is close friends with Mellie, managed to get me and Jude spaces for this semester with the promise of some comps for her drag show and a bunch of flowers, and I was thrilled about it. I've wanted to do it ever since I saw the concert Farida performed in a few years ago. I'd sat in the dark watching with my mouth agape, marvelling at the people on stage going all out in their glittering costumes.

'And dating, even though the Drew date was a stupid move on my part.'

'Okay, but it worked for me: I'll be dining out on Mr Can-I-Cum-On-Your-Tits for many, many years. So there's that.'

I finish my cider and roll my eyes at her.

'You're still building your discernment skills,' she goes on.

Do I have the patience, or desire, to build said discernment skills? I feel like I'm wasting time on a lot of half-hearted bullshit that doesn't go anywhere. I open my phone to show Jude the screenshots I took at lunch today of two profiles that made me laugh

The first one read, *My name is Cameron, or as the ladies like to call me, Oi, you there in the bushes.*

'What the actual fuck?'

The next one is of a guy with a nice smile holding a sausage dog, and his profile reads: *I'm looking for a lady to sit on my lap at parties and my face in the bedroom. I have a full-time job.*

Jude snorts. 'Well, there's something to be said for gainful employment.'

*

We walk into a dimly lit community hall where there's people of all shapes, sizes and ages wearing a mixture of peak flash glittering fabrics and normal gym wear. The energy is buzzy, and the music is loud. As soon as we walk through the door Mellie Abundance struts over to us, one leg precise in front of the other, in time to the beat. Her peach ringlets are pulled up into a ball shape on top of her head that bounces as she moves. She's wearing a purple leotard and neon pink tights with blue leg warmers, and I fall in love with her immediately.

'We're Cleo and Jude,' Jude says.

'Farida's friends,' I add.

‘She told me about you. Contracts?’ Mellie Abundance looks at us seriously as we hand our contracts over. ‘You ready? You committed?’ She pauses for us to nod. ‘You’re hot. Both of you.’

I smile and glance at Jude as I try to process Mellie Abundance’s frenetic energy. She is so wired.

‘Great! You’ll start fourth row but don’t worry—work hard and you’ll be first row soon enough. Yes! Turn. It. *Out.*’ She pumps her fist in the air and runs off to another group.

Jude looks at me, outraged. ‘Fourth row? Doesn’t she know who the fuck we are?’ She furrows her eyebrows into a delicious game face and I laugh from sheer delight.

For the first part of the class, we just kept glancing sideways at each other. Jude’s looks all said, *What the hell are we doing here?* and mine just radiated fear. But somewhere around the grape vine, box step, four body roll choreography we forgot about everything else and became entirely mindful of our bodies.

For the next two hours we listen to Mellie Abundance shout commands like, *Your body is fucking magical. And, Put your doubts in the motherfucking bin and move those hips. And Sexy is a construct. We are all sexy. Your body is sexy. You are sexy. Now show me what feels sexy.* The juxtaposition of empowering messaging with the manner of an infantry sergeant-major does something incredible to the energy in the room, and it feels like everyone ends up believing her.

I believe her. And every time I look at Jude and see how seriously she’s taking it, listening to every word Mellie Abundance squawks, I can tell she believes her too.

At the end of the class everyone stands in two lines facing each other and two people dance down the line, and every single person exemplifies a joyous, embodied sexiness as they move their body down the room.

‘Take your time!’ Mellie Abundance shouts above the music. ‘Do not rush. This is your moment and you deserve every drop of happiness it gives you.’ Jude is standing in the line across from me and we swing our hips and raise our hands above our head to the music and laugh ourselves stupid at the all-kicking, all-fist-pumping, tiny powerhouse that is Mellie Abundance.

‘Step into the spotlight and take up space, you magical land sirens. I want to feel your joy!’

‘That was a revelation,’ Jude says as we step, sweaty and smiling, onto

the street after class.

‘I’m obsessed with her,’ I smile.

‘I’m pretty sure she’s not actually human, though?’ Jude cracks up.

‘I loved that so much,’ I say into the air, for myself more than Jude. ‘We need to practise, Jude, yes?’

She nods slowly. ‘I don’t want to do anything to upset Mellie Abundance ever.’

‘Me neither. I want that woman to be so bloody proud of me.’

15

I lean on the shop counter staring absentmindedly at the front door. It's so dark inside now, the temporary boards covering the front window block out all the light. Plus, there's shit everywhere, which is making me feel so uncomfortable. The chaos has frozen me. There's so much to do, but I do nothing.

'Holy shit!' Farida calls out from the back.

'What?'

'This video I made saying I don't understand why they think Malcolm McCane looks like Elton John has over two hundred and forty-eight thousand views.'

'What video? What? Show me,' I ask. Farida is almost always on her phone, recording videos or talking about new trends, whereas I hate being in front of the camera. Even more, I can't stand the sound of my own voice because I just sound so awkward.

Farida hands me her phone with the video open. I push play and watch Farida, in drag as Malcolm McCane, talking about the fact she always gets told she looks like a brown Elton John. Which feels like a mildly amusing comparison until she then does a bunch of shapeshifts into photos of Elton—and the two are almost identical.

I start laughing, 'Oh my god. Why are you twins?'

My laugh only grows wilder when I see Farida's face.

'It's uncanny, isn't it? Like, are we related?'

I press play on the video again. Each photo shift of Malcolm into Elton makes me laugh harder.

The front doorbell rings. A deep voice says, 'Hi. I'm looking for Cleo.'

'That's me,' I say, still laughing. I look up at a man in a yellow high-vis shirt and battered blue jeans.

A beautiful man.

I feel my cheeks flush and try quickly to compose myself as I take in the kind of man they coined the cliché tall, dark and handsome for.

'Hey. I'm Archer. I'm here about your shopfront.'

'Oh. Shit. Yes. Great,' I fumble, handing Farida's phone back to her. This is the carpenter Dad organised to come by and give me a quote. He sent some guys over on the day of the crash to board up the broken window, but he wasn't free himself until today.

‘They really did a number on you, huh?’ He gestures towards the former window.

‘Yeah, they did.’ I walk into the shopfront to meet him. ‘Do you need me to do—Can I—Do you need any, um, help?’

‘Nope. All good. I’ll do up some measurements and then we can chat, yeah?’ He smiles easily, pulling off the measuring tape clipped to his belt. A simple action. Something he probably does a hundred times a day, and yet in this moment, right now, I think it is the single sexiest gesture ever created. The pulse of his biceps. The assuredness. The subtle indication of his waist. I am transfixed.

And I am staring, I realise at the exact moment Archer looks back at me and we make direct eye contact.

‘Sure. Whatever you need. Yes. Go for gold,’ I clap my hands together and nod too enthusiastically. This cannot be passed off as a normal interaction. I can feel Farida’s eyes on me; her amusement darting through the air only makes me more flustered.

‘And, ah, can I get a bunch made up while I’m here? Like that size there,’ Archer says, pointing to an arrangement in a vase.

‘Sure. Yes. Um. What’s your...vibe?’ I say, wishing I hadn’t.

‘Bright colours. Her favourite is orange. Whatever you think.’

He takes a few quick measurements and walks back out through the front door with a nod and the jingle of the bell. Farida stares at me wide-eyed and I shush her before she opens her mouth.

When I step out the front with Archer’s flowers he’s on the phone. He smiles and mouths *One minute*.

‘That’s fine,’ I mouth back with another elaborate hand gesture. I can’t believe just how extravagantly my body betrays me when it’s nervous.

I stuff my free hand into my pocket to avoid another terrible performance and stare at the stickers along the back window of Archer’s ute. *Always was always will be. Read books punch Nazis. Eat more plants.* The final one, down on the bumper glittering in purple and silver, is *I believe in fairies*.

‘Sorry about that.’ Archer slides his phone into his pocket.

‘Nice stickers,’ I say, feeling entirely adolescent.

‘Yeah. Thanks.’

‘The kid who did this had a horrible sticker on his car. Seems fitting that the guy fixing it be in direct sticker opposition.’

‘Really? Great. I mean the universe works in mysterious ways.’

‘It does,’ I pause, trying to think of something to say. Nothing comes. We look at each other. Instead of thinking of something to say, my brain and body team up to catalogue the details of Archer they are currently enjoying.

Dark brown eyes. Perfectly coiffed hair—I can’t tell if it’s effortless or absolutely jam-packed with effort and also hair product—and a five o’clock shadow that highlights a strong jaw.

I force myself to look away and lock eyes with his bumper. ‘So, do you?’

‘What?’

‘Ahh, believe in fairies?’

Archer laughs, ‘The boys at work put that one on there as a joke, so I keep it there to annoy them. And I mean, who am I to say one way or the other?’

‘My five-year-old could write a complex thesis on the topic,’ I smile.

‘Yeah. Mine too.’ Archer pulls out his notebook and looks back to the shop. ‘So, Cleo, how do you need this space to function?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Like, is it currently meeting all your needs?’

I’m startled by these words coming out of his mouth. ‘My... needs?’

‘Yeah. I mean, function- and design-wise. Or are you just after a straight-up carbon copy?’

‘Well, um, shit, I haven’t actually thought about it. Well, no that’s not true. I just assumed that it’d...’ I trail off.

‘Okay, what do you need it to do?’

‘Make people buy flowers?’ I say and he smiles. He smiles with his eyes more than his mouth. I swallow hard. ‘Ahh. They need—it needs—they need to—people need to enter the shop. Know we’re here...feel curious, or...like they’re welcome,’ I say. The intonation in my voice makes it sound like each sentence is a question.

Archer nods. ‘So, it needs to stand out?’

‘Yes.’

‘The opposite of what it’s doing now?’

I feel my cheeks flush, ‘Yes.’ He must think I’m so infantile. My dad has probably told him what a mess it all is. *What I am*. He’s being polite because he pities me. *Shit*.

Archer turns and looks at me intensely. ‘Why don’t you have a think and send me some photos? I’ve got everything I need now to do up a rough quote.’ He pulls out a business card from his top pocket and hands it to me. ‘I

can do some research for you too, if you like?’

‘Yeah. Okay. That sounds good. I do have ideas, I’ll get some images together and send them through,’ I say, trying to seem composed and on top of it all despite everything. ‘My number’s on the card here.’ I point to the card on the bouquet and hand it over. ‘I hope she likes it.’

‘Yeah. I can guarantee she will. How much?’

‘Oh, don’t worry about it.’

I add a line to the Archer mental catalogue: he’s the kind of man who loves his wife and buys her flowers out of the blue because he’s thinking of her.

Archer smiles appreciatively, ‘Well, ahh, thanks, Cleo. That’s really lovely of you. Send me a message with your thoughts, okay?’

I nod and wave him off as he gets in his ute and drives into the street and away. I turn and look at the front of the shop.

Why does everyone keep asking me what I need?

16

‘What just happened to you?’ Farida whispers.

‘I don’t know.’ I turn to her with a Munchian scream-face.

‘It was like a total shut-down,’ she says. ‘Like I could actually see a spinning wheel of death appear on your face.’

‘You. Shut up.’

‘How does your dad know him?’

‘My dad knows everyone.’

‘But he’s so hot.’

‘He’s not that hot,’ I lie, pretending to busy myself with the organisation of ribbon.

‘I love that you have a crush on a hot carpenter.’

‘I do not. Also, we very clearly just made his partner a bunch of flowers, Farida.’

‘Maybe they’re non-monogamous.’

‘As if.’

‘More people are than you think, Cleo,’ she says, leaning in the back-room doorway. She’s wearing another homemade T-shirt with the word Gucci painted messily in thick red letters across her chest.

‘Married people?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really?’

‘The patriarchal structure of relationships as possessive and propertied doesn’t work, Cleo. Exhibit A,’ she waves at me, up and down, and I give her the finger, which makes her laugh. ‘Meet your Prince Charming and wash his clothes for the rest of your life, yes?’ I look at her, disgusted, as she goes on: ‘Exactly. There’s more than one success model. The sooner the mainstream recognises that we are all pleasure-seeking beings with many needs that are incapable of being met by just one person, then the better and more satisfied we’ll be.’ Her eyes sparkle as brightly as her sequinned bomber jacket.

‘I thought you were just scared of commitment,’ I joke, but also that’s genuinely why I thought she was always dating a lot.

‘Quite the opposite. I am deeply committed to loving as many people as possible,’ she says, and gives me a lavish curtsy.

I lean my elbows on the workbench and stare at her seriously. ‘I don’t think I could do it. I think I’m too jealous.’

‘Well, think about it as needs. The idea that one person can meet *all* your needs is really limiting. What you get from Jude is different to what you get from me, and what you’d get from a partner—or *partners*—is going to fill other parts of your intimacy cup,’ Farida smiles. ‘This best friend, soulmate, lover, companion, confidante all rolled into one is a big fat lie. It’s about *all* your cups being filled, Cleo. Which they need to be because some of your cups are dry bitches.’

I scoff standing up, ‘My cups are—’

‘Positively parched.’

‘They are not. I slid into the DMs of a hot barista, thank you very much. And, I’ve been on a couple of...’ I nearly say dates, but I am slapped with a flashback of Drew. ‘I’ve met up with a couple of guys.’

Farida chuckles wide-eyed, ‘Met up? Is your dad arranging all these *meetings* for you now, too? Because if he is then you should have him arrange one with old mate hot hammer.’

‘Jesus, Farida!’

She grins, ‘And who is this barista? What is happening?’

‘Nothing. Flirty banter. Occasionally we’ll send each other amusing memes. That’s it.’ I start to process what she’s saying. ‘Do you think if more people were non-monogamous, they wouldn’t cheat?’

‘Oofft. Don’t know...’ She pauses. ‘If Doug had said to you that he wanted to shag somebody else, how would you have handled that?’

I feel a tense tweak in my stomach. ‘Oh god, I don’t know. He probably was. We were both so unhappy.’

‘Everything I’ve read about cheating says it has nothing to do with sex, really, and it’s more about other needs that aren’t being met. Feeling something new. Plus, secrets are powerful,’ she says sincerely.

‘Part of me wishes we had talked more, earlier. But when you’re in it you think...it’s easier to just not talk about anything until—’

‘See now, this is the thing. You can’t be non-monogamous and not be an expert communicator cause that’s what it all is, *vulnerability, conversation, boundaries*. So much talking. I mean, I date smart, heady people already, so add an extra layer of something to talk about and that’s all we do,’ Farida looks tired at the thought of all the talking.

I say, ‘Ultimately what I’m looking for is a man—’

‘...or men...’

‘Or *men* who make me feel like you and Jude do,’ I say, realising I mean

it.

‘What? Deeply frustrated and super horny?’

I poke her arm. ‘I think my problem is my type. I go out with the same kind of guys, and it always turns out to be a complete bin fire.’

‘So don’t.’

‘What?’

‘Stop dating your type and just go on dates, Cleo. As many as you damn well please.’

‘I think I’m bad at—’ I start.

She cuts me off again. ‘So practise.’

‘I just don’t have the small-talk energy in me. The filtering is exhausting. I’m operating on reserves as it is, Farida, and I think I’m terrible at it. Can I even be bothered?’

‘So, why don’t I do it?’ Farida doesn’t even look up from her phone.

‘What?’

‘The first bit. I do the initial conversation bit and see if they’re worth you chatting to and then you can tap in if I think they’re a goer,’ she looks up casually. As though she’d just offered to get milk from the petrol station, not be the steward of my dating life.

‘Farida, you wouldn’t—’

‘Are you kidding? I’d love it. I’ve been training to judge straight men my whole life.’

Oh god, between Jude writing my profile and now Farida choosing my matches I feel completely useless. Maybe this is a terrible idea. ‘But how?’

‘I’d match, start the chat, if I think it’s worth pursuing, I hand over the reins and then you organise deets to meet,’ she nods enthusiastically. ‘You’d be able to read everything I’ve written, and I’ll just pretend I’m you, so it’ll be basic-bitch shit until you come in.’

I scoff, shaking my head. ‘I can’t decide if this is genius or crazy.’

‘Don’t they usually think people are crazy until they actually realise they’re a genius?’ She smiles. ‘Hey...are you actually considering it?’

‘I am,’ I tell her, genuinely.

‘Oh my god. Well, let’s at least try then, yeah?’

I literally have nothing to lose giving Farida control of this, and I quite like the notion of outsourcing it, really. It feels like working smarter, not harder. ‘Okay.’

‘You should put a number on it, though,’ she says pointing at me.

‘A number of dates?’

‘Yeah. Twenty dates in like three months or something.’

‘That’s a lot.’

‘It’s like one or two a week—you can do one a week. Get out there and learn what you like, Cleo.’

‘Good god. Can I count the two I’ve already been on?’

Farida rolls her eyes. ‘Sure.’

‘And can they be with the same person? Like, does it have to be eighteen people to date, or can it just be eighteen more dates?’

‘It’s your plan, Cleo. Do what you want. That’s the point.’

‘Okay,’ I nod. ‘Eighteen more dates to go.’

Farida holds up her hand for a high-five. I oblige, feeling both terrified and thrilled at the same time.

Later that week I rush into work with coffees and treats as a thank you to Farida for opening the shop while I went to watch Frankie get an award at her student assembly. I was shocked to see Doug there in his high-vis work wear. We waved across the hall at each other, but I was grateful he didn't want to stand near me. He took photos of Frankie on his phone and cheered loudly, and my body felt a collision of gratitude, rage and something in the vicinity of delight. The gratitude and delight are for Frankie. The rage is all for me. I got through the entire ceremony with the thought *Better late than never, fuck head* on repeat in my head. When the assembly was over he walked over to me as we waited for Frankie to find us.

'How proud was she, hey?' he mumbled and I gave an unintentional chuckle which instantly made me furious with my body's genial betrayal. He handed me his phone open to a photo of her, and I laughed: Frankie beaming on the stage like an Olympian on a podium. 'I'll send it to you, yeah?'

'Yeah. Thanks, Doug.'

When I tell Farida about it she rolls her eyes. 'I feel conflicted,' she says, biting into the muffin I brought her.

'I know. Me too. It's good he's putting in an effort, but also: about time,' I say.

'And also, the bare minimum. But I'm happy about the bare minimum and that makes me angry.'

I nod, drinking from my coffee. 'You know what I'm not mad about though.' She licks her fingers and opens her phone. 'Cleo? Meet Eric.' She shows me a photo of a pale man with floppy blonde curls and a cute grin. 'He's a babe, yeah?' Farida smiles elaborately with her eyebrows. 'So far he's passed all of my initial tests and I think it's time for a handover.'

'What tests?'

'Can he hold a conversation, is he a psycho, who did he vote for in the last election, if he's pro-choice, and whether or not he likes coriander.'

'Why is that a test?'

Farida looks at me like the answer is obvious, and I nod. She's taking this very seriously, and I love her for it.

Their conversation has apparently been going for a couple of days, so I log back into my account and start reading.

Eric is polite and funny, he gets all of Farida-pretending-to-be-me's jokes

and asks good questions.

I ask him what he's up to today and he replies quickly. I feel a pulse of nerves.

I'm at home, playing my NFL Coach simulator. It's great.

I reply:

What is an NFL Coach simulator? Do you just pace and feel stressed for 90 minutes because your players are letting you down, but ultimately it's okay because you're paid very, very well for your high-stress position?

Hahaha. Exactly. All from my command centre.

'What the hell do I say to this?' I say out loud to Farida, who reads over my shoulder.

'Can I reply for you?' Farida asks as the doorbell jingles and a woman dressed from head to toe in beige linen pokes her head tentatively inside.

'We're still open,' I say. She comes inside, and a bit of Q&A establishes that she wants a luxe bouquet with no pinks, which I put together from a bunch of eucalypt foliage, orange kangaroo paw, some banksia and other bits, like some dried palm leaves which I stole from someone's front yard a while ago and had cut into diamond-shaped fans. I finish it off with a dramatic orchid, some dark red cascading Amaranthus at the front, and a mixture of brown and red ribbons to tie it all together. I love thinking about shape, colours, textures and adding a touch of drama in everything I make, and this ticks all of these boxes. The woman seems surprised when I hand it to her, and excited.

As she leaves I hear my phone ding and my stomach drops. 'Did you already send a reply?'

Farida looks sheepish as I pick up my phone and read what she's written: *Command Centre is going to be my nickname for my vagina from now on.*

I let out a noise that sounds a lot like a squeal.

'What? You told me I could reply.'

'I thought you'd show me first.' I keep reading.

Eric replies immediately. *Hahaha. Yes. I imagine your Command Centre is very impressive.*

Oh, it is. Correct.

I reckon I'd know the right buttons to push to get that baby fully functional.

I shake my head, pretending I'm annoyed, but secretly I'm thrilled by

Farida's confidence.

Farida says, 'What? He's funny. You're funny. He loves it.'

'Um, hello, you're the funny one.' I stare at her and then the phone.

'Well, what do I say now?' Farida signals with her hand for me to give it back, and I look over her shoulder as she starts typing.

Good to know. I like a confident operator. All of these command centres are different, so I imagine it can be overwhelming.

'Happy with that?' Farida asks before she hits send.

'Sure. Fine,' I say, trying to hide my general air of excitement as we wait for him to reply.

He's quick. *You're not wrong. If you're skilled, though, and have been trained well, then you can work out most operating systems.*

We laugh as we read. 'You need to ask him out for a drink. Immediately,' Farida says.

'Do it then,' I mumble.

Well, step one to gaining an access code to this command centre is getting a drink. How's tonight?

She shows me and I wince with embarrassment, but nod: send.

There's a pause. The phone dings in her hand.

Tonight is great. I'd love that. Sure you don't need to do a reference check about my operating skills?

I'm really going to do this. Shit.

I quickly scan the bar. Eric's not here yet. My mouth is dry. I'm nervous. A date. Dating. I am dating. I am going on twenty dates. Well, eighteen more dates. An experiment. I am going to be open. I am going to lower the stakes. I am going to wait and see what happens and trust my gut. It's just a conversation. *Breathe, Cleo.*

My phone buzzes: Eric texting that he's running ten minutes late. I order us both a drink and feel my phone buzz again: Jude.

You are out of this world brilliant, and this guy is lucky to be in your orbit. Here's to the twenty. Here's to you and your beautiful heart. Trust it. I love you.

My heart thumps love through my body for my beautiful mate. These moments happen often, pulses of gratitude for our friendship.

'Cleo?' Eric's standing in front of the table holding a single daisy in his hand. I stand up and we hug. Eric looks exactly like his photo. 'You look great,' he says, he has a thick Aussie twang, which I didn't imagine, and he hands me the flower.

'I got you a beer,' I say pointing at the table.

'Thanks—you're awesome.'

Eric is lovely. A good guy. He has a son who he talks about with grand affection, and I really like the way he talks about his ex and why they broke up.

'Like, it was no one's fault, we just became mates, I reckon, rather than being in love with each other. We got together in high school, so that's normal, and yeah. She's a great chick and she's got a fiancé now and he's cool.' He smiles and drinks from his stubbie, and I mentally add to my list of green flags the way he talks about the women in his life. So many green flags. He's handsome. He's lovely. Eric is green-flag central.

I feel a niggle in my solar plexus. Like my body is trying to get my attention too, as my brain creates this impressive list.

Something isn't right.

There's no chemistry. No spark. None of that *I am desperate to see what you're going to say next, please touch me because it feels like fireworks, I want to kiss you now and live inside your brain, where did you come from* energy. I want that energy. I'm disappointed. Maybe I should go on another date with him. Maybe that feeling will come with time, but I already know it

won't.

You already know, I tell myself.

*

Eric and I say goodbye outside the bar. I tell him I've had a lovely night and he agrees and I think he wants to go in for a kiss but I make it a hug, then walk quickly towards my car, my mind racing with thoughts. *Eric is lovely, why are you being rude? You should be proud of yourself for trusting your gut, there's no point persisting if you're not into it. Was I not into it? There was absolutely nothing wrong with Eric. What if he's as good as you're going to get? You wouldn't want Frankie and Andy to settle, so don't settle. Why do you think it's okay to settle? What do you even want, Cleo?*

I look at my phone and there's a message from Archer.

Just checking back in, Cleo. You got any ideas or thoughts for me?

I've been avoiding messaging him. He kept checking in, and I kept ignoring him, unsure of what to say.

That's a lie. Because I know exactly what I want the shop to look like. I've got heaps of ideas and thoughts to share with him. I've known since before I bought the shop.

I get into the car and look at the folder of images saved in my phone. The late-night secret dreaming of what I want my shop to look like. There are other pictures, too. I know what I want my dream bedroom to look like, my home, my clothes, the art on my wall. What kind of life I want, and who I want to be. I know it all. I get lost in the photos of other people's visions realised and always feel a pang that it's only possible for them, and not for me. It doesn't feel like it's possible for me. *I don't have enough money. The kids need stuff before I do. The shop is in so much debt. What if it looks shit? What if it's a complete failure? What would people think? Or worse still, what if it's a success? What if people look at me? What if it goes well and then I'll be forced to look at all the wasted time and energy of it not working. Who do I think I am?*

I'm terrified.

I hear Dr Tricia in my head asking me what I want for Andy and Frankie. And again, the answer comes with such ease, *I want them to have all these things.* But I don't want them for myself? I've been protecting myself. Not really caring for myself at all. Not the way I care for everyone else. *Start small,* I hear Dr Tricia again. The vision in my head of the shop is so clear. I want it to be white. I want places to put flowers outside the entrance like a chic Parisian florist. I want a bold sign to sit above the entrance. I want more

light. More windows.

I want. I want. I want.

I open a message and type a reply to Archer.

I feel a bit sick but I read and re-read the message, staring at the three photos I've attached that capture what's in my head. Then, I take a deep breath and I hit send, throwing my phone on the passenger seat like it's cursed.

Shit. I quickly pick it up and send a follow-up:

Understand if this isn't possible, or if you think it'll look stupid.

Sorry. Just thinking out loud. Got a bit carried away. Let me know what you think.

When I get inside Jude is on the couch eating ice cream from the carton.

'Bad day or good day?' I ask.

'Good day,' she waves the spoon like a wand in my direction. 'Good date or bad date?'

'The date was...nice,' I say as I sit down on the couch and exhale loudly.

'Nice?'

'Yeah. He's nice and funny and it was...' I search for any other adjective at all but can't think of one. 'Nice.'

Jude's brow furrows. 'You keep saying "nice" like it tastes bad. Has Doug fucked you up so totally that you don't feel comfortable with someone being nice to you?' She stuffs a spoonful of ice cream into her mouth. Joking, but also not.

'No, I don't think so,' I rush out quickly, and then pause. 'Fuck. Do you think so?'

'No. Maybe. I think you know your own intuition.'

'I do,' I say, stretching my arms high above my head. 'I just don't think I trust it yet.'

Jude's eyes widen and a giant huffing sound reverberates from her body. 'You need to discuss this with Dr Bogan next session.'

I make a mental note to do just that and put my hand out for the tub. Jude hands it over. 'So you don't want to see him again?'

'I don't think so.'

'Yeah, that's a no,' Jude smiles.

'It's a no.' I'm whispering, although I know it is.

'Did you tell him that?' I pull an uncomfortable face so she knows I didn't. As we hugged and he said he'd love to see me again I said, 'Sure,

that'd be great.'

'You need to tell him.'

'I didn't know how, and saying that to his face felt too confrontational so I just hugged him and quickly walked away.' I groan loudly, and my phone buzzes: Archer.

No apologies needed. These are bloody great. Totally possible, I reckon. Let me draw some stuff up. Thanks, Cleo. Let's do it.

I exhale. *Yeah, Cleo, let's do it*, I repeat in my head, then start typing my reply. *Really? This is great. I'm so relieved. Thank you. Hope you're having a good night.*

My phone dings almost straight away.

My daughter and I are learning to roller skate. She's excellent at it. I, however, am not. I stacked it hard. Have definitely bruised my entire body.

I laugh out loud.

'Is that the guy?' Jude looks at me suspiciously.

'No. It's the carpenter.'

'Why is the carpenter messaging you on a Friday night?'

'Because I finally messaged him my ideas, and he's just saying he thinks they're possible. So, that's good.' I smile, trying to seem casual, like, I should feel casual even though I don't. I feel like being excited by Archer's message is somehow not worthy of the thrill I feel in my body, and I should play it down. But why? Especially with Jude.

'That's great, my love.' She stands up and hands me back the tub. 'I'm going to bed,' she takes two steps out of the room and without even turning her back she yells pointedly, 'Tell him he's a no, Cleo. No chickening out.'

I look at my phone, and start typing, except I don't message Eric, I reply to Archer.

Haha. My daughter got roller skates for Christmas. I've refused for this very reason.

*The things we do for love, huh? How's your night?
I just got home from a first date.* I type and send this quickly.
I want to see how Archer responds.

Oh really? How was it.

Nice.

Oh no. Nice is bad.

Haha. Nice is fine.

Fine is worse. What's that saying? If it's not a fuck yes then it's a no.

Well, in that case, it was definitely a no.

Did you tell him that?

It was a less than enthusiastic goodbye? I send with a cringe.

Oh god! Cleo! No. Haha. I think it's best to be honest about how you feel. Hurting his feelings is kind of unavoidable but leading him on is worse.

Yeah, you're right. I'm out of practice with all this.

Dating?

Yeah.

I get it. It's tricky. Maybe just send this...

A gif arrives of a man standing in the shallows of the ocean and getting knocked over and rolled by a wave, with large pink letters that read...
YOU'RE DUMPED.

I open a message to Eric, and type and re-type till I land on: Hello. Wanting to be super transparent, I've really enjoyed talking and getting to know you and tonight was great. You're lovely. But I think energetically we're not on the same page right now. And I don't want to lead you on. I'm trying to trust my gut and it's saying this isn't a goer. Hope your work thing goes great this week. Take care.

I read it over and over again, my stomach churns, but with a deep breath I hit send.

Okay. I did it, I send to Archer, and a quick succession of messages follows:

I'm proud of you.

Is that a weird thing to say? It is, isn't it?

I should've said, Good for you.

Let's start again. Good for you. How do you feel?

Good, I reply. And bad.

Fair. Also, we need to talk about feeling words, Cleo.

Synonyms. Please select the ones that feel appropriate:

a) Relieved

b) Empowered

c) Happy to trust my gut and acknowledge my worth

d) Worried

e) Don't want to hurt his feelings

- f) I tend to people-please*
- g) Amused (by carpenters)*
- h) All the above*

I laugh and reply quickly, *H.*

Good to know.

Eric replies, and my heart beats fast and I feel a wash of anxiety as I open it.

Well, I have to respect that. I must say I thought we really vibed but I'm obviously mistaken. Thank you for your honesty, I guess. I hope you find what you're looking for.

Okay. Good. This is good. I feel better for being honest. For trusting my gut. This feels good. This feels like progress. And this Archer chat feels good too. Too good. What about the flowers he bought? Who were they for? Shit.

I message Archer. *He replied. He's okay. I feel better now.*

High-five you did the thing. Eat some ice cream to celebrate.

Haha. Are you spying on me right now?

I feel my heart flutter a little. Is he flirting? He's flirting. I think. Am I flirting? I'm not flirting, am I? Another message appears.

Oh no! Sprung. Haha.

Hope you're enjoying the view of me in my pyjamas that I just spilt ice berry gelato down the front of.

The view is very nice indeed.

Oh my god. He is definitely flirting. This is flirting. And I...I...like it. And I shouldn't because he is married, and we are working together, and this is a terrible idea AND HE IS MARRIED. I think. Maybe they are open, like Farida says. Archer seems like an emotionally intelligent guy. He seems like he has his head screwed on. He doesn't seem like a cheater. What does a cheater even seem like? That's such a terrible assumption. *Quick. Reply, Cleo, you need to reply.*

Haha. Goodnight, Archer.

19

Jude and I spend our Sunday organising our weekly schedules, pottering around the house, doing three hundred loads of laundry and all the other tasks that become so much easier when the house is child-free. Music is blaring, multiple air diffusers are pumping sweet-smelling essential oils and we sing loudly to each other as our paths cross on our individual organisational missions. Our system works to both of our strengths and the house doesn't take that long to get in order. When I lived with Doug it felt like it was never in order at all.

We head to our local supermarket complex to do our weekly shop, we stop for sushi rolls on the way in and brace ourselves for shopping lists and weekly on-the-fly dinner decisions.

'That's flirting, isn't it?' I ask, as Jude scrolls the conversation with Archer.

'I mean...yes, but also, maybe not? Maybe he's just chatty? Did he seem chatty when you first met him?'

'Not really.'

'Is he definitely unavailable?'

'I assume so. He's got a kid and he got me to make someone a bunch of flowers, so a girlfriend at least.' I pause. 'Maybe he's just being nice because he knows Dad?'

'Sure,' Jude nods. 'Just ask him.'

'No, that's weird.'

'Do you know his surname? We could social-stalk him.'

'No, I don't want to do that.'

'You know I can have his blood group, enneagram type and moon sign worked out in about an hour, don't you?' She laughs, but also she's being dead serious. 'You fancy him, huh?'

'I don't know him.' I think about how flustered I got in the shop just looking at him but resist the urge to tell Jude about that. 'Plus, he's friends with my dad, *and* he's fixing the shop, that just feels like unnecessary drama. Nope, this is a strictly professional relationship.'

'Great,' Jude says, 'I'm glad we cleared that up.'

My phone dings on the table and we both stare at it, kind of hoping that it's Archer.

Cleo. I'm gonna drop the kids off now.

Doug. My heart quickens, as I show the message to Jude.

‘No. Say no. You agreed on 4 p.m. He hasn’t even asked you if that’s okay.’

‘I’m not going to say no, if he doesn’t want them there I don’t want them to stay there,’ I say, feeling panicked, my breath feeling suddenly harder to get into my lungs.

‘Of course. But he can’t demand things like that.’

‘You’re right, but—’

‘But nothing. That motherfucker. What if you weren’t just up the road? What if you were away or something?’

I start typing, my stomach twisting as I do. *I’m not home right now. Give me an hour.* I hit send, and he replies straight away.

But I’m ten minutes away.

Jude looks at his reply, ‘He’s so entitled. I hate him. I hate him with a burning passion.’

I guess I could... I start typing and then I delete it. *See you in an hour.*

I feel sick. I know he’ll be pissed off, but I don’t care. Or I do, but I know how to deal with a pissed-off Doug, I have a doctorate in dealing with a sulky, pissed-off Doug.

‘What did you say?’ Jude asks and I show her the phone. ‘Good. Cleo, good on you. Fuck him.’

‘I feel gross, but also, yes, fuck him.’

I proceed to feel gross for the next fifty minutes as we do the supermarket, get home and wait for him to show up. When we hear Frankie’s excited voice on the front doorstep, Jude glances at the clock. ‘He couldn’t even give you a full hour.’

I open the door and Frankie comes rushing in with dried food all over her face.

I hug her tight. ‘Hi my girl, how are you?’

‘Good. Look what Daddy bought me.’ Frankie throws her backpack onto the lounge and starts pulling things out. Doug comes in with Andy on his hip and hands him to me. I hug him tight, nuzzling my nose into his neck and he giggles as Doug drops their bags on the ground.

‘Where were you?’ he says, his whole demeanour tense.

‘Out,’ I say.

Jude pokes her head into the room, ‘Doug,’ she says with a nod. Her tone is so forceful, I can feel Doug’s shoulders stiffen. I bite my lip to stop myself

from smiling.

‘Hey,’ he mumbles.

‘How’d you go?’ I ask.

‘Yeah, fine. Everything was fine. Dunno why you worry so much.’

‘You all good for next week?’ I ask genuinely, feeling like he might need an out. Waiting for the moment he’ll need an out.

‘Yeah, all good. I want to see my children, Cleo.’

‘I’m not suggesting otherwise.’

‘Look, Mummy.’ Frankie holds up two bright-haired new dolls.

‘Oh, wow, how cool are they?’ I say.

‘Aunty Jude?’ Frankie says walking towards Jude who kneels so the two are at the same level.

‘Yeah, Frank?’

‘Do you think Perry will want to play with these when he gets home?’

‘Of course I do. He’s going to love them. Show me.’ Jude sits fully on the ground, and Frankie climbs into her lap.

I stare at Doug, watching him watch this play out, seething and silent. I want him to leave, but he looks like he’s waiting for something. Praise, maybe.

He seems to rouse himself. ‘Okay, Frank, I’m going now.’

‘Bye, Daddy,’ Frankie says, barely looking up.

‘You going to give Dad a hug?’

‘Nah,’ Frankie says, continuing her conversation with Jude. ‘And look this one has—’

Doug raises his voice slightly. ‘Frankie can you come—’

‘You said no, didn’t you, Frank?’ Jude says, looking at Doug.

Frankie nods. ‘See the glitter in her hair, Mummy?’ Frankie holds the doll up to show me.

‘Fine.’ Doug quickly kisses Andy on the head, scowls at me and leaves.

I look at Jude, who mouths the word *sorry*.

‘It’s fine,’ I say out loud as I squeeze Andy in a hug, relieved that it’s over, that another week off is over, and that my babies are home where they belong.

20

Archer points to the smashed wall above the front door. 'So, we can put three smaller windows across the top up here'—he steps a couple of paces forward from the front counter into the shop—'and then we'll move the door so it sits in the centre, and whack two large windows either side—'

'Like the photo,' I say, knowing what he's referencing.

He turns and smiles. 'Exactly. I've got a mate who's a glazier—I've already talked to him, actually—he said it's pretty straightforward.' Archer stops to give me a chance to look at the drawings, and I'm a little taken aback by how enthusiastic he is about it all. He stands with one arm folded across his chest, the other hand resting on his stubbled chin, thinking. His breath moves steadily in his broad chest. He's happily spent the last thirty minutes chatting with Farida and me as though we've all known each other for years. He has a sturdy energy. Grounded. Calm. I've noticed that he doesn't try to fill a silence. He's content when conversation lulls and really listens. I get a bit transfixed watching him, noticing the details of his face, before I realise what I'm doing and quickly shift to fiddle with the papers trying to make it look like I'm thinking, not ogling.

'In the photos you sent they were using portable crates as shelves, so I thought we could just replicate that, but I think you need something else. You don't want to be lugging those in every night, you know?' Archer says as his brow furrows, thinking.

'No, we do not,' Farida shouts from the back.

'What if we build in some step shelves onto the front wall out the front as a permanent fixture, so it's easy for you to move stuff in and out?' He says this to me, but it feels like it's more for himself. I don't really get what he means. 'Here...' He picks up a pen and does a quick sketch on one of the pages. It looks like two sets of stairs mounted outside, under the windows. 'Do you think that'll work?'

'Yeah. Wow that's great,' I smile. He's really thought about everything I sent through. I feel startled by his attention to detail. Startled by this man paying attention with such ease.

'Wait,' he quickly sketches a bucket on one of the steps he's drawn, and a limp flower popping out of it, then looks at me with a smile. 'Should probably stick to buildings,' he chuckles, and I feel myself grin mindlessly.

Jesus, get it together, Cleo. This is a business relationship. A platonic

business relationship with your dad's friend. Your dad's married friend. You're too old for crushes. Plus, he's not flirting, he's talking about work. This is a work thing. He's friendly. You can be friendly.

He starts rolling everything up. 'We'll start later this week, yeah? If that's all good?' Then he opens his wallet and puts a fifty-dollar note on the bench and I look at it quizzically. He nods towards the pre-made bunches and grabs one out of its bucket.

'She loved the first bunch.'

'Who?' I say quickly before I can stop my mouth, and then I force a smile.

'My daughter, Freja.' Archer says this like it's obvious. 'Yeah, we do week-on, week-off. So, you know, I miss her a lot.'

'Oh, yeah, same. My ex and I just started and—'

'It's hard, yeah?'

'Really hard,' I say, and we look at each other. We don't need to say anything else, there's a mutual acknowledgment of the grief. He knows. He gets it. My shoulders relax.

Archer picks up the plans, his notebook and another bunch of flowers, and waves to Farida. I make an awkward quick-step to follow him outside to his ute.

'You're not gonna know yourself when this is done,' he says as he gets in behind the wheel.

'I think the plans are great, Archer. Thank you.' I review my tone for competence and confidence as he drives away.

I feel overwhelmed by contradictory feelings. Relieved that Archer gets it and that the plans for the shop aren't difficult, which also makes me excited. West Side Honey is finally going to be the shop I always wanted. Then I feel stupid for how easy it all turned out to be and how big a deal I made about asking for what I wanted.

And I feel exposed, because Archer seems to not just understand what I want for the shop. He seems to understand me.

21

The shop is being rebuilt, in tandem with my dating life.

Archer's around the shop every day, and we're getting to know each other in small bursts as he works, then most nights we end up texting each other in a completely platonic, totally professional, nothing-but-friendship-as-the-intention kind of way. Last night we talked about recipes, and our parents; the other night we were watching the same TV show and bantered back and forth. He's different via text compared to when I see him. He's shyer in real life, almost; in writing he's more open. He asks questions and gives thoughtful answers. The ease of it, and the way he understands all my jokes, surprises me.

Also, Farida's been swiping fervently, and I've somehow managed to schedule four dates for this week while the kids are at Doug's. FOUR. I'm going on four separate dates: one this afternoon, then tomorrow night, Thursday after work and Saturday afternoon. Farida has assured me that they all get the tick of approval and so I jumped in and made a bunch of plans when I had the energy and now that it's time to actually go through with it, I'm re-evaluating my past self's grip on reality.

I recognise Dennis, the landscape gardener, as soon as I walk into the bar. He looks up and smiles at me, and he has a great smile—nice teeth—and thick, black hair. He jumps down from the bar stool to greet me. He has to jump down from the bar stool because he's too short to step off the bar stool. I wave with my fingers trying to hide how taken aback I am. Dennis is a small man: like the exact proportion of a jockey. And he's wearing a crisp white T-shirt with a black and white photo of Yoda on it. I notice all of these details at once and I wonder what on earth Farida was thinking.

'Hi,' I say, and Dennis goes in for a hug.

'Can I get you a drink?'

'A gin,' I smile. *Breathe, Cleo*. I'm finding out what I like, I'm trying new things, I'm learning what I want now. I'm meeting new people. The stakes are low. Just talk.

I never realised that I was so good at asking questions until today. I now know all about Dennis' job, his family, his dream of being a psychologist and how he wants to work with addicts because of the guilt he feels about not being able to truly support his best mate from school. Dennis is lovely, a good guy, and about halfway through my second gin I even find myself

considering what sex with Dennis might be like. We have very little in common, but the conversation is easy, and I think I might be enjoying myself. I tell him about me and Jude and our modern-day commune, our ‘mummune’ as Jude calls it, and I tell him about her and her work.

‘What sort of brands and stuff is she working on now?’ he asks.

‘Have you heard of the Beverage Babes?’ I say, and Dennis shakes his head. ‘Well, they’re these two impressive women, a couple, who brew beer and they align each brew with a social justice issue, donate money to causes. She just did their launch campaign. It’s really exciting.’

‘Yeah, right, that sounds great. Like what causes?’

‘Domestic violence, period poverty, gender equality,’ I list, smiling. ‘Privilege in general.’ I pause. ‘Do you want another?’ I catch the bartender’s eye and gesture same-again-thanks.

‘When you say privilege, what do you mean by that?’ says Dennis.

I’m slightly taken aback by the question. ‘You know that our culture has been built by predominantly straight white men and it’s flawed for anyone who isn’t any of those things,’ I say with a kind of nonchalant air, assuming Dennis will agree. But he doesn’t. His posture changes, his back straightens.

‘Of course, you’re one of those feminists,’ he says, and his eyebrows furrow.

Oh my god. Another Drew. ‘I am, yeah. Aren’t you?’

‘Me? Nah. Any rate, I’m not angry all the time about the way things are.’

‘What?’ I say startled.

‘What I don’t get is why we should all have to feel bad about the way things are now. Like, why we have to apologise about decisions someone made last century. Like, I’m a good person. I don’t oppress anyone or—’

‘Really? Okay—’ I’m interrupted by the bartender, who puts our drinks in front of us and I pay, then I take a deep breath and I let Dennis know what I really think of what he just said.

‘Woah, yeah, I guess I’ve never thought about it that way,’ Dennis says some time later, after I’ve spent far too long trying to rationally, and for some reason politely, tell him that everything he thinks is wrong and why. ‘You’re kind of blowing my mind here, Cleo.’

‘Yeah, well,’ I say. ‘You don’t know what you don’t know, I guess.’ I drink down the last of my gin.

‘I reckon a lot of men would be intimidated by you. They are, aren’t they?’ Dennis says this like he’s uncovered a great mystery.

I make eye contact with the bartender. He has clearly heard this comment, and his eyes are filled with compassion, which I appreciate.

‘Another round?’ the bartender asks.

‘No, thanks.’ I shake my head.

‘Really?’ Dennis asks surprised.

‘Yeah. I’m done.’ I hold up my empty glass, but I mean this conversation and this date. I’m going to leave now, exactly like I should have with Drew.

‘But I was enjoying the conversation. Really.’ He’s genuinely surprised by what he thinks is my sudden rejection.

I pick up my bag and slide off the barstool. Dennis jumps down and goes to hug me again, but I hold out my hand and he shakes it. I notice the pained twitch in his eye when I do.

‘All the best, Dennis.’

‘Yeah, right, okay. You too, I guess.’ He pauses. ‘You need a ride somewhere?’ he asks holding up his car keys expectantly.

‘No thanks,’ I tell him and then I leave, and I video call Farida.

‘He was an actual jockey.’

‘He said he was five foot eight...*Shit!*’ Farida grimaces in pain and holds her finger up to her mouth. She is simultaneously hot-gluing sequins onto a pair of jocks and talking to me.

‘I know,’ I tell her, ‘I just checked his profile again. They’re all close-up selfies.’

‘I mean, why not just own it?’ Farida laughs. ‘Well, obviously, I know exactly why, because patriarchy, but also why start out a date with deceit? Especially such a dumb one.’

‘Right? He’s busted the second you see him.’

‘But aside from height, how was it?’

‘I thought he was lovely at first, and then it took a swift and ugly turn where he said, *but those feminists are so angry and white men aren’t the problem.*’

‘What did you say?’

‘I explained privilege to him.’

‘That sounds weirdly calm...?’

‘I don’t know, he was harmless, in a horrifyingly problematic way. He kept saying “I’ve never thought about it like that,” and I realised he’s not having these conversations with anyone else. I said at one point that the world has been built by straight white men, yes? Like, historically that’s a

fact? And he agreed. So, I said, that means that it's been built to suit them. I was like, if you're not a hobbit then living in Hobbiton is hugely inconvenient, and then that felt fucking insensitive the second it came out of my mouth, but I think that's what cut through, because he told me how much he loved that I was into Tolkien.'

'That's so good.' Farida clicks her fingers. 'I'm impressed.'

'And then I tried to talk about systematic racism and that's where I lost him, but by that point I couldn't be fucked continuing the analogy because I've only watched the first *Lord of the Rings* and I found it incredibly boring.'

Farida smiles. 'Well, who knows, maybe he'll start thinking about things in a new light now.'

She holds up the bedazzled jocks, and I stare, wide-eyed. 'They're excellent.'

'Now, let's hope date number five in this dateapalooza is better,' she muses. 'Who's tomorrow night, again?'

'Maverick, the non-binary twenty-six-year-old polyamorous barista,' I say with a very straight face.

'Oh, yes,' Farida nods. 'I think you and Maverick are going to have a lot of fun.' Farida's eyes glint, and I feel both excited and terrified at once.

22

‘You look sensational,’ Maverick says.

‘So do you,’ I say, meaning it. Maverick does look great. Their shirt is unbuttoned just enough so their chest tattoo peeks through, their chest framed by brown leather braces clipped to battered jeans.

Our back-and-forth messages over the last few weeks have been light, frivolous and flirtatious. I popped into the café last week and they scrawled *Get a drink with me* on my coffee cup along with their phone number.

I start the this-or-that game I learned from Will the candle-maker, and Maverick amuses me with their answers. Then we exchange chit-chat about our days and Maverick bites their lip and looks me up and down, so boldly and confidently that it makes me blush.

‘Can I be honest with you, Cleo?’ Maverick says as I fidget on my barstool. ‘I’m really horny and I’ve been thinking about fucking you all week. And, cards on the table, I’m not looking for anything serious, and I think we have a—’

‘Stop,’ I laugh. *What do I even say to this? What do I do?*

Trust your gut, Cleo, and have some fun.

‘What, not keen? Is that too forward? I did drink half a bottle of wine before—’

‘No. Stop talking.’ I put my hand on Maverick’s knee. They smile, leaning in, placing their hand on my neck and then they kiss me passionately. No build-up. No lingering. A kiss that is teeth grazing my bottom lip and just enough tongue, and full of what’s to come. Maverick pulls back and smiles, ‘I knew we’d be good together. Let’s get out of here.’ They stand up, taking my hand.

I gulp down a quick mouthful of my drink and grab my bag, thoroughly enjoying every second of how this evening is unravelling.

‘I live just up here,’ Maverick points up the street, then pushes me up against a brick wall and kisses me, both their hands running up my thighs, over my stomach, and clutches my breasts, thumbing my nipples through my top and bra. It makes me gasp loudly. I grab at Maverick’s face with both my hands and kiss them deep. Messy. There’s no chance for me to be in my head about any of it because it’s happening so quickly.

‘Fuck, you’re stunning,’ Maverick whispers in my ear. I don’t say anything just blink and smirk, running my hands down their neck to their

bare chest. Maverick bites my lip before pulling back and looking me in the eye. 'Come on. I want to lick every single inch of you.'

Pleasure pulsates through my entire core as Maverick takes my hand and we walk quickly up the street to their place and then we're inside. Kissing against the closed door. Unbuttoning buttons. Kicking off shoes. Maverick on their knees with hands on my waistband and my pants and underwear come off in one quick tug. Maverick lifts my leg over their shoulder as their tongue ravenously finds my clit and I moan loudly. I put my knuckle in my mouth and bite, my other hand clutching at the door to stop my body from melting into Maverick. They look up at me, we make eye contact, as they use a single finger to push me over the edge. I pull at Maverick's shoulders, wanting to kiss them, touch them, wanting every single part of them.

'You are—' It's all I get out as Maverick unbuttons their jeans and kicks them off, kissing me and pulling me up a hallway and into their bedroom, onto the bed.

Where we fuck all night. I lose count of how many times I cum. We rest. Kiss. Cum. Rest, kiss, cum.

'What do you mean you've only seen the first *Lord of the Rings*?' Maverick stares at me, mouth agape, slice of pizza in hand. I just told them about my date with Dennis and they laughed, but found this particular detail the most interesting.

'They're too long,' I say through a mouthful of margherita.

'What? They're cinematic masterpieces.'

'Are they, though?' I pick up another piece of pizza from the box between our naked bodies as we sit cross-legged on the bed.

'If only I'd known this a few hours ago.'

'Oh, really? You wouldn't have fucked my brains out?'

'Definitely not. Would've maybe fingered you in the toilets, but that's it. You definitely wouldn't have been brought home to experience my full suite of skills,' Maverick drops a splodge of tomato sauce on their bare stomach and I swipe it with my finger. 'Was that the full suite?'

'Maybe not the *full* suite.' Maverick shrugs. 'But now you'll never know because we can't ever fuck again.'

I scoff loudly. 'Because of the lack of hobbits in my life?'

'Yeah. Sorry, babe. It's a non-negotiable,' Maverick says, pushing the pizza box to the floor and lying down on the bed.

'Well, it's been a pleasure,' I hold out my hand for Maverick to shake and

we both laugh. I look around Maverick's room; thriving plants, handwritten notes, polaroids and prints arranged in artful clumps on the walls, spilt tobacco on most surfaces. A decade ago I would've been wooed by all of this, and for sure gotten my heart broken. Now though...I smile, satisfied, and look at Maverick, 'I should get going.'

'Really? You can stay if you want?'

'Thank you, but I'm going home,' I say because this is genuinely what I want to do. I want to go home. I want to have a shower and sleep in my bed.

'This has been a delight, Cleo,' Maverick says kissing my hand.

'Message me whenever you want to have some more fun, yeah?'

'Of course,' I say, meaning it, and then I lean down and kiss their mouth, and giggle my whole way out of their house and into an Uber and home.

What just happened?

It's well past midnight when I creep into the house, and I startle Jude, who's standing in the kitchen in her dressing-gown and screams dramatically when she sees me.

'Date went well, then?' she says, once her heart has returned to her body.

'There was no date. We didn't even have a drink. We sat in the bar and they said, "I'm really horny, want to get out of here," and I don't even think I replied but the next thing I know is I'm starring in some kind of suburban fuckathon.'

Jude claps loudly. 'This is sensational. What a move. Can you imagine being that confident in your twenties?'

'You were that confident in your twenties.'

'Well...' Jude laughs. 'You going to see them again?'

'I don't know yet. Maybe. I'll see how I feel.'

'*I'll see how I feel,*' she mimics, and then she smiles.

'What?'

'It's just nice seeing you do some things for yourself.'

'I'm just—' I cut off the justification before it begins. 'When did you get home?'

'About ten minutes before you. Long shoot...but good,' Jude nods wearily. 'My shoulders are killing me.'

'Maybe you need to find yourself a twenty-year-old barista to rub your back and give you orgasms?'

Jude cackles. 'Oh god, I totally do.'

23

So, *what really lights you up, Cleo?* was the first question Gabe the librarian asked me. Or, more specifically, Farida. She liked that he was reading in one of his photos, that he mentioned *The Fast and the Furious* and *Pride and Prejudice* as his equal favourites, and that his profile described him as ethically non-monogamous. Their conversation flowed with a kind of simple genuineness that startled Farida, and she messaged me in all caps after less than an hour.

MEGA BABE ALERT GABE THE LIBRARIAN IS DELIVERING THE GOODS.

After the kids had gone to bed, I read their exchange and took over.

Gabe is honest and to the point, and sends short articulate voice memos with his thoughts. This conversation feels different from the others I've had so far. I very quickly learn that he's from the UK—he still has an accent, which I think is sexy—but has lived here for over a decade. He has a dog he adores, named Jennifer, and a self-declared obsession with his indoor plants, which he is hoping will one day blossom into outdoor plants when he sells his small unit and buys a house with a big yard.

I have a good feeling about this, was the last message he sent me as I drifted off to sleep last night.

We've agreed to meet at a brewery, and I am surprised by how I feel at the prospect of meeting him, which is equal parts calm and nervous. It's my fourth date this week and my seventh in the twenty-date plan. Number six on Thursday night was a complete disaster. Julian, a very nervous and sweaty-upper-lipped graphic designer, made small talk for about twenty minutes before he burst into tears and told me this was his first date since his wife left him. Then he apologised, threw a fifty-dollar note on the table and ran.

As I walk into the factory-sized building, I glance around the occupied tables. Gabe is sitting in a corner, sipping from a beer glass, completely absorbed in his book. I watch him for a moment. He looks like a Nordic hipster with his slight frame, bearded face, thin-rimmed glasses and considered haircut. I instantly feel entirely too dowdy to hang out with him. I can tell he is tall, even sitting down. *He's such a babe,* I think and almost as though he heard it, he looks up and sees me. He grins and places a bookmark in his page as he stands to greet me.

Once Gabe has bought me a drink, I am relieved to find our conversation

flows as naturally in real life as it did via message.

‘Tell me about being a librarian,’ I ask.

‘It’s not as sexy as it sounds.’ Gabe leans back in his chair with a cheeky grin.

‘Come on—I think you’d look great in a pencil skirt.’

‘It’s true. I do have good legs,’ Gabe laughs. ‘I studied English lit at uni. Did an honours year, and then realised I had zero interest in academia. I’d worked in bookstores the whole time and loved it, so I did that for over a decade.’

‘I’d love to work in a bookstore.’

‘Also, not as sexy as it sounds. You’d know this with your shop, that people generally can be really shit. Which is a brilliant segue to: I wanted a change. I realised what I loved about bookstores was basically the reading community, so I went back to uni and here we are.’ He holds up his glass.

I smile and raise mine too. ‘And you run a branch?’

‘Yeah, been there over a year now. There’s lots of things I want to do but it’s slow progress making the kinds of changes I’d like to make—we’re part of local government, which means everything takes time, and I have to hear the phrase *but that’s the way we’ve always done it* whenever I propose any kind of change. Libraries are a service, yeah? But we do a shit job of engaging *whole* communities...’

He realises he’s been talking a lot. He pauses, looks at me and unashamedly checks me out. It makes me feel sexy.

‘I love my local library now I have kids. But yes: before then I never went.’

‘Exactly. Tell me about your kids.’

I feel my face light up. ‘Frankie is five and Andy is two. And they are perfect.’

‘Of course they are.’

‘Frankie is brash, and she has to figure things out for herself, she likes to understand how things work. She is all questions, deeply inquisitive. Andy though, he’s maybe too chill. Completely happy to go with the flow. Always happy. So, when he’s upset you know it’s legit.’ I feel the love parts of me inflate with pride.

‘So complete opposites?’ Gabe asks as I drink from my beer and nod. ‘How long have you been single?’

‘Nearly two years.’

‘And Andy’s nearly two?’

‘Yeah. Well spotted. Shit hit the fan big-time. It was a Jackson Pollock painting without the cheerful colours,’ I joke, trying to keep things light.

‘Sorry to hear that.’ He pauses. ‘Actually, I’m not at all, because if it hadn’t happened, we wouldn’t have met. I mean, I know that’s selfish,’ he says, ‘but fuck your ex.’

We order more drinks, and we keep talking. Gabe wants to know all about me. He asks questions about the shop and my life. We flirt, joke, and make each other laugh. I have no idea about any of the books or films he references, and he gives me expert short summaries and doesn’t make me feel like a fool. Still, I feel incredibly dorky. But I breathe and try and stay present, and lower the stakes in my head.

‘I used to love reading when I was a kid. Roald Dahl was my favourite. But I have no time now. Ever. I’d love to read more, really,’ I tell him, taking a sip from my beer. ‘Actually, what I want is someone to read to me. I’d love that.’

Gabe smiles. ‘So, there’s these things called audiobooks...’

‘Oh, what are they?’ I hold eye contact. ‘Have you had much dating success?’

‘Sure. Nothing serious lately. I was in a long-term situation for years but that ended.’

‘A situation?’

‘Is that what I said? Oh no,’ Gabe says. ‘It wasn’t a Jackson Pollock painting, if that’s what you’re thinking. More a Monet.’

‘She had cataracts?’

Gabe laughs loudly. ‘Yes. Well, things weren’t always as they seemed.’

‘Meaning...?’

‘Got my heart broken.’ He shrugs. ‘Not saying she was the only one at fault. I mean, she can have most of the blame, but I’ll take my share.’

I note that this also passes the ex-girlfriend green-flag protocol and feel relieved.

‘How long were you together?’

‘Four years of glorious non-monogamy,’ he smiles.

‘That’s right; your profile said. So what are you looking for, ideally?’

‘Ideally? Mates and dates. I’m not someone who can do one-night stands anymore; I want more than that. But also I’m not looking for anything serious right now. Not opposed to it if it happens, but it’s not on my radar. How

about you?’

‘Very much the same. Low stakes. Nice dates. Nothing too big. I haven’t done non-monogamy before, though,’ I say, suddenly feeling very nervous.

‘Do you ever get jealous?’

‘Not really. Curious, more than anything, I suppose. I like knowing details, but that’s not everyone’s vibe.’

‘Sure.’ I pause, tentative. ‘What happens if one of you falls in love with someone else?’

‘Then you work that out in the moment.’ He smiles. There’s no judgment in his tone. ‘Have you ever heard of the term compersion?’

‘No.’ I shake my head.

‘It’s a poly term. It’s essentially the opposite of jealousy, the notion that their happiness makes you happy.’

‘It’ll just take some unravelling in my brain, I guess, that you could be happy if they’re happy with someone else.’

‘Absolutely. It requires being really bloody solid, and a lot of trust.’

‘And self-confidence...’ I say it as a fact, but it comes out like a question.

‘I suppose, yeah. I just like connecting with as many people as possible. Monogamy has never made much sense to me.’

I realise I’ve never thought about how I feel about monogamy. It’s not something I’ve consciously thought about, just something I’ve done. ‘What does your family think?’

‘Ahh,’ Gabe smirks. ‘They’re not in the picture, so they don’t care what I do. At all. Which is a good thing.’ He pauses. ‘My family really are a Jackson Pollock—except made from shit...’

‘That bad?’

‘That bad. Bet you’re one of those weirdos with a great family, aren’t you?’

I nod. ‘Pretty much. My dad is one of my most favourite people on the planet. He’s a relatively old-school Croatian, so I’m perpetually the good daughter.’

‘Noted,’ he smiles. ‘I like you, Cleo.’

‘I like you too.’

We hold the moment long enough for my stomach to flip. Then he goes on: ‘I think I’m at a point in my life where I’m not going to settle anymore for, well, anything that doesn’t feel true to me.’

‘I get that.’

‘I thought you might. There’s so much bullshit we need to contend with, and the last few years I’ve just tried to not please anyone else but myself.’ He thinks about this. ‘I guess that isn’t a revolutionary position for a straight white guy to take, but you know what I mean?’

‘Yeah. It’s hard work to unravel it all, though. You’d really like my best mate—she thinks very similarly.’

‘Maybe you should give me her number?’ he jokes.

‘She’s my person, you know? We live together and I don’t know what I would do without her.’

I’ve just started telling Gabe about our modern-day commune, when a young woman with a large acrylic cat brooch on her cardigan comes up to our table.

‘Excuse me—my friends and I have a bet we’re hoping you can settle for us.’ She points to the table where two other girls are staring with a mixture of glee and embarrassment. ‘They think you’re on a first date and I think they’re wrong and that you’re fully together.’

‘What’s at stake?’ Gabe asks.

‘The next two rounds,’ she says.

Gabe nods. ‘Are you a good person?’ he asks.

The girl blushes. ‘Yes.’

‘Well, in that case’—he looks at me—‘we’ve been married for ten years. Four kids.’

I laugh, and add: ‘High-school sweethearts.’

‘Really? I knew it,’ the girl squeals. ‘Now I hope you don’t think this is creepy, but I took a photo of you because of how cute you looked—I’m a photographer so it’s not weird, okay maybe a bit weird, but...’ She shows us the photo on her phone. ‘Can I send it to you?’

‘Yeah.’ I smile.

The photo is beautiful. All eye contact and laughter; our hands touching. I barely recognise the carefree, delighted-looking woman in the small frame.

We drink until the brewery packs up around us, and then we stand out the front as I order an Uber.

‘Kermish is five minutes away,’ I say. The energy has shifted now we’re standing up, and expectation fills the air as we try to read each other.

‘Cool.’ Gabe nods, his hands stuffed in his pockets. ‘So, this was great.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Yeah. Big plans for tomorrow?’

‘Not really. My kids get home.’

‘Of course.’

Gabe bites his lip. I want to kiss him. I want him to kiss me. *So bad.*

I giggle awkwardly. ‘Ahh, the inevitable will-they-or-won’t-they-kiss moment,’ I say.

‘Oh, wow. Are we going to kiss?’ Gabe steps towards me.

‘Well, I was hoping—’ but I don’t finish the sentence because Gabe is kissing me. Very sweetly.

We pull back and smile at each other. ‘Yeah. I was hoping we would too.’

He kisses me again. Not as sweet this time. Passionate. Purposeful. The kind of kiss that could easily lead to more.

We pull apart and stare at each other with looks that read of mutual acknowledgment of the heat between us.

I look at my phone. ‘One minute.’

Gabe takes my face between his hands and kisses me again, making every second of this minute mean something. Then my car pulls up, and I place a hand on his chest to brace myself slightly, smiling, ‘See you soon?’

‘Please.’ He opens the car door for me; I hop in, and he waves goodbye.

Holy shit, I think as the car drives off. I look at my phone. Messages from Farida, Jude and Archer.

Farida: *I WANT A FULL REPORT CARD ON OUR DATE, PLEASE? Also, I’ve found date number eight for you, so if it was shit don’t even worry about it.*

Jude: *Enjoy your date. Get out of your head. I mean the bar is: not ejaculating to John Farnham, so I have high hopes. Love you.*

Archer’s text is a selfie of him holding a hammer and smiling in front of some decking. *Built this today.* Then a photo of him drinking a beer. *Then drank this to celebrate. Hope you’re having a great weekend, Cleo.*

I grab my face in my hands and laugh loudly, shaking my head, as Kermish glances nervously at me in the rear-view mirror. Part of me feels like I’m doing something wrong, or bad, but I push those feelings aside and decide to enjoy this new feeling, this audacity.

My phone buzzes with a message from Gabe.

I wish we were still talking. Still kissing. You are a brilliant woman, Cleo. Thanks for tonight.

Is this for real?

24

The kitchen is pulsing with a deep bass remix that slams classic songs together with filthy female-centred raps about vaginas. Jude and I are performing a concert for the kids, as they squeal in delight. All five of us are dressed in a wild profusion of feathers, tulle and glitter, and we are women on a mission: a mission to Mellie-Abundance-choreography right. We are determined.

Last week in class we were flailing so badly that in the end we were lovingly exiled, just the two of us, to our very own line beyond the fourth line. It was totally embarrassing, but also hysterically funny. We giggled our way through the class, both of us trying and failing to muster any composure. Then another two people got relegated to our newly ostracised fifth line, and the four of us bonded over our collective shame.

Afterwards, Jude and I agreed that if we were going to get through another class with any kind of dignity, and not have Mellie Abundance assassinate our credibility in a spray of fluoro yellow lycra, then we'd have to do some practice this week.

'What line do you think Mummy and Auntie Jude will be in this week?' Jude yells over the music.

'First!' Frankie squeals and Jude claps and grabs her hands, and the two of them spin around in a circle.

'Perry, what do you think?' I say, as I swing him around. His tiny legs are wrapped tight around my waist and he is dressed as a full glittering princess, with tiara.

'First. Duh,' he pouts, and I glance at Jude, who looks over with amused eyebrows.

Andy's blissed out and closed-eyed, his wobbly toddler legs dropping low to the floor in full communion with the music. When he opens his eyes, we all clap and cheer for him and he runs full tilt into Jude's arms, embarrassed. She lifts him up high. 'You are brilliant,' she beams at him, and my heart explodes into a full glittering fireworks spray.

'Am I brilliant?' Frankie asks.

'Nope,' says Jude, and Frankie looks devastated. 'You are magical.' Frankie swishes her tulle skirt, loving the adjective upgrade.

'What about me, Mama?' Perry asks, model-walking up the hallway in small plastic pink heels.

‘You are remarkable,’ Jude says, and looks at me. ‘And you, my love, are the most astonishing of them all.’

Tears spring up in my eyes. I feel immense gratitude for it all, for having this magnificent human in my life, who shows me unconditional love.

So much of my relationship with Doug was conditional. Not telling him things so I wouldn’t upset him. Not trusting him with my thoughts or worries. There were whole parts of myself, especially at the end of my marriage, that he just didn’t know. I shrank myself, showed him a diminished version of myself just to keep the peace.

We dance, and I make this promise: I’m never, ever going to shrink myself, and my needs, for others again. I’m never going to be in a relationship like that, ever again.

The next few hours are a collision of routines, dropped carrots, towels with hoods that make the kids look like animals, pyjamas, many loads of washing, the five of us sitting in front of the TV, amused by five- and six-year-old logic that makes us laugh out loud, before we both have to yell about crossed boundaries and (for the third time) for babies to get back into bed. By eight-thirty, we’re finally sitting on the couch together, staring mindlessly at the TV.

‘So, the Gabe date was good?’ Jude looks over.

‘It was just easy and fun, we flirted, and it was so good. He’s smart and confident and seems like he’s got his shit together,’ I smile. ‘You know what I realised? I’ve forgotten how good it feels when a man thinks you’re great. It’s been nice to be reminded these last few dates.’ I bite my lip. ‘That makes me a bad feminist, doesn’t it?’

‘No. It’s nice being desired. Like, I know I’m impressive—I work my arse off to be impressive. But to everyone who knows me, that’s just the way I am.’ Jude shimmies her shoulders.

‘Yes, I find you entirely boring.’

Jude ignores me. ‘...but to new people it’s like *woah*, and that feels powerful. Yes?’

‘Yes. I just feel more confident, I think.’ I sigh. ‘Why couldn’t we date like this in our twenties?’

‘Because that would’ve been dangerous,’ Jude looks serious. ‘I finally feel ready for my twenties now that I’m in my thirties.’ She pauses, and I nod in total agreement. She says, ‘When are you going to see Gabe again?’

‘Soon, I hope. He’s been messaging me all day.’

These last few dates have made me feel things I haven't felt in a long time. Reminders that I am a sexy, confident, smart woman. Things Jude tells me all the time, but this week I felt them for myself. It's not ideal that it's taken a couple of good dates to remind me, but I want to feel these things again.

'I think what this week has made me realise is that I want to go on dates and keep things light and enjoy myself. Trust myself.'

'Well then, that's what you should do. If the last two years have taught us anything it's that we can do whatever we decide to.'

'If we have each other,' I add.

'That was implied, no? I can't do anything without you,' Jude smiles.

25

The general chaos of my morning has had a Frankie-shaped spanner thrown into it. She's being unusually clingy, so I decide to bring her to work with me. She's delighted by this, but it totally throws Andy's routine off as we drop him at day care, and he wails louder than ever, feeling left out. This, as always, is like a nail in my heart, but I have to get to the shop to open up before Archer and his team arrive. Net result: the mum guilt is high this morning which means there is zero space in my brain for anything of my own.

'Your boyfriend here yet?' Farida asks as she saunters inside.

I sputter coffee from my mouth as Frankie pops her head around my legs to greet her.

'Oh! Franks! You're here. I didn't know you were here.' Farida wraps her up in a big hug, which Frankie allows, and grimaces at me apologetically.

'You not at school today?'

Frankie twists the curls around her face in her fingers and shakes her head.

'Needed a mental-health day, didn't you babe?' I say.

'We all need those.' Farida holds out her hand and Frankie high-fives it before dawdling over and wrapping her arms around my legs. I pick her up and sit her on the bench and she pulls my ear to her mouth.

'I like Farida's dress,' she says, glancing at the white fabric with sequinned stars stitched into it.

'It's pretty, huh?' I whisper back kissing her on both cheeks. 'You should tell her.'

Frankie opens her eyes wide, a little shy, and pokes her finger into my chest.

'You want me to tell her? Hey Farida—Frankie and I love your dress today,' I say.

Farida poses dramatically and does a model-strut around the back room, which Frankie thinks is hilarious. I lift her down onto the ground and she struts a couple of steps with Farida, who then starts teaching her to vogue.

'Come on Mummy!' Farida and Frankie both squeal, so I take my turn and start twerking elaborately, exactly as the door opens and I spin on my heel to see Archer: standing in the doorway, cast in a perfect shaft of sunlight.

‘Morning,’ he beams. ‘We like a welcome party, don’t we, team?’

‘Good morning.’ I pull myself out of my dramatic pose and stand up straight, while Frankie and Farida both giggle behind me. ‘Archer, this is my daughter, Frankie.’

He kneels to her level and holds his hand out for her to shake. ‘Hello Frankie.’ She glances at me, and I nod, so she shakes his hand with a meek hello.

‘Are you here to be my boss today?’

She shakes her head.

‘Oh, really? See those folks out there...’ He points to two other workers wearing high-vis, one with tight corn rows and strong shoulders and a younger guy with a bandana. ‘Miranda and Dan, this is Frankie,’ he says, and they both wave and say quiet greetings. ‘I need a good leader to help oversee our work and I reckon you’d be good at that job.’

Frankie stares at him wide-eyed.

‘Cause how old are you, Frankie?’

‘Five,’ she says, holding up five fingers.

‘Five? Oh, I was going to say twenty-five.’

Frankie laughs. ‘Twenty-five?’

‘You probably can’t be my boss then, if you’re only five.’

I think you can tell a lot about someone by the way they talk to kids. And I love the way Archer is speaking to her. I feel my body do a minor swoon as I mentally add this to my green flags list, then my brain jolts my thoughts back on track. *Professional, Cleo. Professional.*

‘Yes I can,’ she says emphatically.

‘Oh, you can? You’ll do it? Great. Thank you.’ Archer stands up. ‘What I need you to do, Frankie, is to look after these plans for me. Can you do that? They’re very important.’ He hands her four rolled-up pieces of paper and she takes them carefully in her tiny hands.

‘You can take them to your table, babe.’ I turn to Archer and say in a lowered voice, ‘Thank you.’

‘No worries. If she’s not well, you didn’t have to be here; we can handle it.’

‘No, I think she just needs a mum day.’

‘I get that. I could do with a mum day myself.’

‘Really? Your mum great?’

‘Yeah. A dead-set queen. She lives interstate, so it’s been a while.’

‘I hope my son refers to me that way one day.’

‘Oh, he will,’ Archer says, his brown eyes glinting.

I lose my thoughts and stumble on my words. ‘I don’t need...a mum day is...No mum day for me, a dad day maybe.’

‘Well, yeah, I think everyone wants a day with your dad, Cleo,’ he says with a nod, turning on his heel and strutting back into the shop.

I laugh too loudly, then quickly look around to see if Farida saw me flailing, but thankfully she was too distracted by Frankie.

I set Frankie up on her mini couch with the iPad and pull out my phone while I eat my lunch. There’s a long voice message from Gabe.

You thought libraries were boring? I just had to tell a young couple to stop making out in the study room because two senior citizens complained, so, you know.

I type back, *How did they know they were making out?*

The walls are glass. We could all see. I told my staff to leave them because access to space and resources is part of our community remit. But complaints are complaints.

What did they say?

Let’s just say I wasn’t the only one who was blushing.

I giggle, and Farida looks over. ‘Hot librarian or hot barista?’

‘Librarian,’ I whisper, looking to the front of the space in case Archer and his team are in earshot.

‘They’re at lunch,’ Farida waves her hand dramatically. ‘When’s your next date with Gabe?’

‘Don’t know yet. Next week, I guess.’ I smile. I like the feeling fizzing in my body.

‘Can we just take a second to celebrate my odds? Out of the three dates I’ve organised for you there’s been no *major* disasters. This is a great strike rate, wouldn’t you say?’ Farida beams.

‘We are not calling counselling the newly divorced graphic designer a success.’

‘Well, no, but I’m taking some credit for Maverick,’ she says, and I raise my eyebrows, curious. ‘Because of the labour I am putting in, you had the mental load to flirt, and thus I am the reason you got to orgasm a gazillion times—’

Archer clears his throat. He comes in through the back with an embarrassed look on his face. ‘Sorry,’ he mumbles.

OH MY GOD. I look over at him, ‘It’s...um—’ I go to change the subject, but Farida cuts me off.

‘Did Cleo tell you I’m acting as her dating pimp, Archer?’

‘*Farida!*’

Archer grins. ‘She did not.’ He looks at me and I can’t formulate a single word and just stare at him, mouth agape.

‘Well, I’ve womanfully taken on the task of wading through the shitstorm of online dating profiles so I can hand over the best ones.’

‘You charging for this service? I might need your help too, Farida.’

‘Oh, really?’ Farida is excited by this.

‘Yeah. I’m, ahh...’ He looks a little self-conscious. ‘I’m pretty shit at it all.’

‘Why’s that?’ Farida asks.

He considers this, and takes a breath before he speaks. I’ve noticed this is something that he does: slows down, speaks consciously. ‘It all feels pretty false to me, like people are just going through the motions, saying things they don’t mean... Having the same conversations without any real substance. It’s not really my thing.’

‘What is your thing, Archer?’ Farida asks, and I make an apologetic noise, looking at Archer with a gaze that I’m hoping will read as: *what an intrusion on your time and personal life*, while my insides are screaming, **TELL ME EVERYTHING.**

‘As in?’ Archer wants clarification.

‘What are you looking for? *Who* are you looking for?’ she says, and I want to kiss her for her confidence.

Archer chuckles, ‘I guess I’m looking for a woman...’ Farida nods elaborately in agreement and Archer laughs. ‘... who knows who she is, and is, um...I’m attracted to honesty and, um, someone who knows what she wants.’

‘Yes. Hot carpenter gets it,’ Farida says, and I watch the realisation of what she’s just said hit her face suddenly like a slap. She stares at Archer with a very red face, and it might be the first time I’ve ever seen her blush.

‘Apologies for the accidental objectification.’ She shifts awkwardly. ‘Archer. Your name is Archer,’ she muses. ‘But surely it isn’t a secret that we think you are quite attractive?’

‘We?’ I scoff quickly, realising I’ve now also just made a terrible error.

‘Oh, so you don’t find me attractive?’ Archer pretends to be offended.

My entire pelvic floor couldn't be tighter if I tried. 'I find you, I think... we are...there is a professional...' My entire body locks up with embarrassment.

Farida is staring at me, wide-eyed, with a look that very clearly says: *STOP NOW, CLEO!*

'We think you are a very efficient carpenter,' is what drops from my mouth next. *How? How did we get here?*

'In that case, I'm going to get back to work...efficiently.'

'See? Hot work ethic, that's what we meant,' Farida adds as Archer walks through the plastic divider separating the front and the back of the shop, and Farida and I stare at each other, her bemused and me mortified.

‘I expect more from you. You should expect more from you. Push. Your. Gorgeous. Fucking *bodies!*’ Mellie Abundance shouts. She is a vision in sequins and brutal positivity as we run through last week’s choreography and combine it with what we learned tonight.

Our kitchen dance rehearsals have paid off, and I am moved to the third line. Jude was running late, I didn’t even notice when she got here, until I spun around to see her looking frustrated back in the fifth line. *I hope she’s okay, I think. What if she’s not? What if she’s angry at me for making her come? She’s only doing this because I wanted to do it and now she’s—*

I take a breath. I can feel my body seize with the onslaught of anxiety and I take another, deeper, breath. *Focus on the steps. You can check in with Jude later. This is about you,* I tell myself, and it kind of works. I get laser-focused as I sweat my way through the next hour of ferocious movement. There is no time to think about anything other than moving my limbs in the right order. I can’t think about Doug or the renovations or my twenty dates or embarrassing myself around Archer any time I’m near him. All I can focus on is clapping in the right spot, crossing my arms to my shoulders, and shimmying my hips like, as Mellie Abundance says, ‘This is your motherfucking Superbowl half-time show and the whole world is watching.’

By the last run-through I feel like I’m at least somewhat more in control and would even go as far as to say I know what I’m doing.

‘I don’t care if you fuck it up, but I do care about your effort. *Nooooo Exccuuusssses!*’ Mellie screams into a megaphone before whacking it between her legs and popping two handheld glitter cannons in quick succession. Then she turns the music up as loud as it will go and encourages everyone to dance their ‘fucking guts out’, which everyone obediently does. I move to the back row to join hands with Jude and roll our hips and swing our arms together, which inevitably folds us together into a hug as we move to the music.

‘You okay?’ I ask her.

‘Yeah, sorry I was late, just work is—’ she stops. ‘You’re so good at this,’ she nods, looking at me.

‘I really love it,’ I say quickly and Jude laughs with pure delight.

I get home without Jude—she’s gone back to the office. The shit was hitting the fan with a pitch they have coming up at the end of the week and

she's really stressed. I open the door and Mum and Dad are both asleep on the couch with the TV blaring. I look at them, their hands lightly entwined as they both snore, and I pull out my phone and snap a picture of them. They've been married for forty-one years and they still hold hands.

My dad is the second man my mum has ever been with. When I was younger she'd tell me to play the field and not settle down too early. 'You have your whole life, Cleo, go find out who you are,' she'd say, and I took this advice until I didn't—I gave everything to Doug when I was twenty-five.

I thought I was so mature, that I'd found what my parents had, or at least I could build it. I thought I knew myself and what I wanted, and maybe I did, but I was a baby. In the last few years, I just...lost that confident, assured part of me. Or maybe not lost, just quietened her. Shushed her knowing and her longing for ease and got in the habit of using every shitty decision or outcome as evidence that I couldn't trust myself.

Doug leaving was the culmination of all that. I loved him and I allowed his chaos: I brought all the mess on my babies. How could I possibly trust myself?

But, really, if I'd been trusting myself the whole time I don't know if I'd have stayed with Doug in the first place. I think I probably knew when we very first started dating that he wasn't right for me. But *this*—this image right here, of forty years of safety, security, hands entwined—was so much what I wanted that I forced it.

I take a breath and Mum wakes up and blinks. 'What's the time?'

'I just got home,' I whisper, as she glances at Dad and sits up.

'How was dancing?'

'It was good, Mum. How were they all?'

'Good. Nothing to report,' she smiles, and I sit next to her and take her hand.

'Thanks, Mum.'

She looks at our hands and then at me, she holds eye contact and nods. 'I rearranged your linen closet, it didn't make sense before. Jakov, wake up.' She shakes my dad, and he startles awake.

'You gonna show me your moves, Tiger?' he laughs sleepily. 'How's the shop?'

'It's looking really good.'

'Good. Good. Good.' Dad stares at me and does his usual furrowed-brow full-body scan, like he's firing up his internal lie detector.

‘It’s going to be great, Dad, Farida and I have got plans and I’m excited. I know what I’m doing,’ I say—and usually when I tell him things like this they’re unconvincing lies, but tonight this feels true.

After they’ve left and I’ve checked on my sleeping babes, I decide, with confidence inspired by Mellie Abundance, that I want to send Archer a message. To clear the air, having achieved the near-impossible feat of avoiding eye contact all afternoon.

I quickly type: *Hi. Just wanted to apologise for the embarrassing display this morning. I appreciate the work you’re doing and don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.*

I get in the shower and think about how far I’ve come, how much better I feel, and how I don’t need Archer to reply, because I’ve said what I wanted to say and that’s enough. Then my phone buzzes and I quickly dry my hand and read it immediately.

Haha. This is lovely. No stress, Cleo. I thought it was funny.

I exhale, relieved. Then another message appears.

How’s your night?

I finish showering and tap out a reply in between applying a hundred potions to my face, because as soon as I turned thirty-five I suddenly started caring about night creams and eye creams and serums as though it was a physiological imperative.

It’s good. Sweaty. I had my dance class, I send.

Dance class? Cool. What kind? You’re aggressively krumping in my mind now. FYI.

Haha. Good lord. You poor thing. That’s an image no one needs.

Dunno. It’s pretty great.

My breath catches in my throat, and I don’t know what to say.

Another message appears, *But then any image with you in it is pretty great, Cleo.*

Flattery will get you everywhere. Haha, I type back.

Our messages overlap. *I’ve really enjoyed this job, Cleo. And getting to know you. I like how you just knew what you wanted and needed and just put it out there. It’s really refreshing.*

Wow. I’m startled by this perception, that this is how he interpreted my messages, how he sees me.

That’s a really lovely thing to say. Thank you. I spent a long time betraying myself, but I’m unlearning that.

Like not being true to yourself?

Yeah. Making myself small, minimising myself for the benefit of others. Not showing up fully. For a myriad of reasons.

I'm glad you feel like you can take up space now. I'm thrilled that West Side Honey is yours and all you.

Me too. So much.

You owning yourself and your space is an act of defiance in so many ways and it's so unbelievably attractive.

I stare at the screen. Startled. Overwhelmed. Turned on. Who talks like this? My phone buzzes again.

Sorry if that's overstepping a boundary.

Not at all. I am swooning. This whole conversation is so...I stop. I want to say sexy but worry that's too much. This whole conversation is so...

Fuck it. I type sexy and hit send. I throw the phone away from me and wait for him to reply.

It beeps quickly.

I reckon it could be sexier.

GOOD LORD. How did we get here? Do I even want to be here? I breathe in deeply.

I do. Oh, god I want this so badly.

You are stunning, Cleo.

I just sent him a short video, finger to lip, then tracing a line between my breasts. We started texting hypotheticals of all the things we'd like to do if we were in the same room, and that led to these short videos of our naked bodies. I am so turned on and am so totally carried away by the fantasy.

Archer sends a video of his hand stroking down his bare chest and stopping at his hip.

And then this:

I let my nails lightly scratch down the other side of your neck and down the side of your waist to your hip, down your thigh. Back up again...

I'm not touching you where you want me to touch you, though. Not yet.

I squeal into my pillow. Please touch me there. I do my own version of his video—my hand caressing my own nipple, then down to my stomach—and I hit send.

I really want to make slow eye contact with you while I do this...

please...those beautiful eyes, he replies.

Fuck. I slide my hand between my thighs and imagine it's him. I give myself over to my own touch with the image in my head of this man, his tongue and hands all over my body, touching me exactly the way I like. I cum quickly. And tell him so.

Fucking you right now is the most important thing I can imagine. I see you. I'm here with you right now in this moment and all I want to hear is the sound of you breathing...as I make you cum over and over again.

And then I hit voice record and touch myself exactly the same way, recording my second orgasm, and hit send.

Fuck, Cleo

This is so sexy

You're so sexy

I'm so close

I wish I was there, I type, meaning it.

We say goodnight and I wait for the insecurity to come, and...

It doesn't. I fall asleep totally satisfied.

I wake up before my alarm this morning and look at the clock: 4:11. I have to get up soon anyway, to go to the flower market. I stretch, taking up the whole bed, and look out the window at the moon. I flash back to last night. There's a weird sensation in my chest, a nervousness about seeing him today, about how that will be. Whether he regrets it.

I don't regret it. It was one of the sexiest experiences of my whole life. But what if Archer does? Then, I tell myself, I will deal with that, because I'm more than capable of dealing with that.

I look at the baby monitor: at a snoring Andy. His perfect pouting lips and plump cheeks. For all the heartache and all the bullshit with Doug there's no part of me that wouldn't do it all again in order to get Andy and Frankie.

I get ready fairly quickly considering I'm putting in a little more effort than usual, but not so it looks obvious enough that Archer might notice. I pick up the baby monitor to pop it into Jude's room and tiptoe down the hallway, easing into Frankie's room to tuck her back in. She's such an enthusiastic sleeper, always has been: thrashing legs and loud in-her-sleep giggling and covers splayed all over the floor.

I take a second to watch her chest rise and fall, and I ponder the pure magic of this tiny human. Who I made. Two whole humans exist because I made them. It's incomprehensible.

I walk through the kitchen and...

Jude's door is open. Jude never sleeps with her door open. I look in and her bed's still made. Jude isn't here. *Shit.* My heart races a little. *Something's wrong. Something must've happened.*

I call her, and it rings and keeps ringing.

What if she's been in an accident? Still ringing.

It goes to voicemail and I hang up, feeling sick. I open the door to Perry's room and he's sound asleep in his bed. *Where is she?* The rational side of my brain tries to tell me that everything will be fine and there'll be a logical reason why she's not here...Then my phone starts ringing in my hand.

'I'm so, so sorry,' a raspy-voiced Jude whispers into the phone. 'I fell asleep. I'm heading home right now.'

'You're okay, though?'

'Yes, yes, I'm fine. Fifteen minutes.'

I make myself a coffee to take with me while I wait for Jude to get home

and get distracted thinking of the tattoos on Archer's hips that felt as real as though I'd touched them. A dishevelled Jude creeps into the kitchen holding her boots, hair standing to full attention on the top of her head. She looks supremely apologetic.

'I am so sorry,' she whispers. 'Benji and I cracked the campaign idea, and then I woke up when I heard the phone. Bloody hell.' Her eyes are wild.

'It's okay, all good. Coffee?'

'Please. I'm too old for this shit,' Jude leans on the bench.

'But you *looove* it,' I mock her, and Jude groans. 'You still love it, yeah?'

'I have no idea, my love.'

'Jude, are you okay?' I search her face for answers.

'Yeah. Yeah, just tired.' Jude looks at the microwave clock. 'You need to go. I'm sorry.'

'It's okay, I'm just worried about you. I can stay and do drop-off?'

'No. No, go. This will not be the last time I fall asleep at work.'

'It should be. Your job is chaos.'

'Maybe I'll just quit and come work for you.' She mimes a phone call.

'*West Side Honey, this is Jude.*'

'You're hired. Also, it's chaos there too. Just a Farida-shaped chaos.'

Jude smiles. 'Please tell that divine woman I miss her.'

I'm distracted the entire morning. Excited and nervous to see Archer. I wonder if I should message him and then I get obsessed with what to say, so I don't say anything, and hope he'll message me. He doesn't. *How do I get myself into these situations?* Maybe I shouldn't have let things get so out of hand last night. And now? Now I need to see him and I don't even know what to do. *Shit.*

When I get to the shop he's already there with his team. I see his ute first and then his outline through my brand new windows. I walk through to the back, and Farida glances up at me.

'Um, you look hot today.'

'Oh yeah? Don't know why.'

Shit—I've tried too hard. Thankfully the plastic sheeting means there is a literal divide between us and I don't need to look at Archer.

But I know he's there. I can see his commanding shadow. Hear his voice.

'That is bloody stunning,' I hear him say with a laugh, and it stops me dead in my tracks. More flashbacks from last night spill through my body and I'm swallowed by remorse. I shouldn't have done it. I don't even know the

guy. What if he puts those videos on the internet? What if my dad sees them? What if my kids see them? I mean, my face isn't in them, but it was stupid.

The guilt builds quickly. I'm used to guilt. It's become one of my default settings since I had the kids. Always feeling like there's something I could be doing better. Always feeling like I'm failing. Like I'm not enough. That there are other parents out there doing more and being better, when I can barely keep my head above water some days. I feel embarrassed and ridiculous and guilty for everything.

I put the flowers down on the table, 'I'm just...I need a coffee, do you want one?'

'Have you finished yours already?' She already bought me a coffee this morning.

I nod, picking up my full cup. 'One of those days.'

I burst through the plastic and make direct eye contact with Archer. 'I'm doing a coffee run. Anyone need anything?' If eyebrows could talk mine would be yelling loudly at Archer right now.

'I'll come with you,' he says casually, putting his tools on the ground. He walks towards me and the only thing I can see is the size of his hands and how muscular his arms are beneath his rolled-up sleeves.

'Morning,' he says when we're outside on the footpath.

'Morning.' My nervousness makes me walk quickly.

Archer strides to keep up with me. 'So, you look gorgeous today,' he says, lightly bumping into my shoulder.

I groan, 'Oh *god*.'

'What? It's true.'

'Archer, look, last night was—'

'A brilliant surprise.'

I stop in my tracks. 'Yeah, it was. Only I thought maybe you...Or I didn't...' I fumble.

He looks a little crushed. 'You're not feeling okay about it?'

'I feel...I felt...' *Jesus, Cleo, just say what you think.* 'I loved it. I loved last night, every second of it. I just wasn't sure if you did.' I press my lips together tightly so I don't keep blurting.

Archer makes a relieved sound. 'Good. I was freaking out then.' He looks at me. 'Cleo, I like you, the reason I haven't asked you out already is because we're working together, and it'd be unprofessional.' I stare at him, wide-eyed. 'But last night kind of changed the game.'

‘Well, yes,’ I nod, thinking about the hip tattoos again.

‘But I’ll have you know my intention was to ask you out as soon as that last drop of paint is down on Friday.’

My blush blushes, but I manage to say, ‘I’d really like that.’

‘Because it’d be *nice* or because it’s a fuck yes?’ he smiles, looking me straight in the eye.

‘Fuck yes,’ I mumble.

‘Pardon?’

I whack his chest and he grabs my hand and raises it to his lips and kisses it gently, and I swoon hard, losing my breath.

‘Professional,’ Archer says. He steps back and raises his hands with a smirk. ‘But last night was *very* hot.’ He bites his lip and I want to kiss him so badly it becomes all I can think about.

‘It was.’ I nod, staring at his mouth as he takes a step towards me. I become very aware of how stunning his eyes are.

‘I really want to kiss you, Cleo,’ he says, and I nod again.

Then my phone rings obnoxiously and the moment’s gone: we both sigh, frustrated, as I take it out of my pocket.

It’s Frankie’s school. *Shit.*

I sprint into Emergency and Doug's standing near the reception desk tearing at a fingernail with his teeth.

'Where is she?' I stumble out. 'Why aren't you with her? What's—'

'She's not here yet, still on her way. They'll let us through when she gets here,' Doug mumbles, erratic, eyeing the reception nurse.

'Did they say that? I should talk to—'

I step towards the desk, but Doug stops me with his body.

'I just talked to them. As soon as the ambulance gets here, they'll let us through.'

I burst into panicked tears and I can't catch my breath; it keeps getting caught in my throat.

'Hey. Hey. Hey.' He grabs my shoulders. 'She's okay, she's okay, Cleo. She's okay.' He hugs me tight, and I cry into his chest. He lets me and keeps repeating *she's okay, she's okay, she's okay*.

When I answered the phone, the school told me she'd fallen off the monkey bars and they thought she'd broken her arm. Their protocol is to call an ambulance and they'd already done that, so I would need to meet her at the hospital.

I literally ran back to the shop, grabbed my keys and drove too fast in a daze of worst-case scenarios. *She's hit her head. She's in a coma. They're going to need to amputate her arm. She's going to need surgery and she's never had a general anaesthetic before what if she has an allergic reaction...*

'What did the school say to you?' Doug says, and I finally step back and look up at him.

'She fell and they think she's broken her arm, and they called an ambulance.'

'Yeah, that's what they told me.'

'It must be bad if they've called an ambulance? She's in an ambulance. *Our baby is in an ambulance...*' I start crying again and Doug bites his lip, his face flooding with concern, then his eyes widen. He's looking through the reception area to where some paramedics are wheeling a bed through a door.

Frankie. I can just see her on a trolley as it gets wheeled away.

'That's her,' I yell at the front desk. 'That's my daughter. She just got here. She just came in.'

'She was just there. Can we go through?' Doug says over the top of me.

The nurse at the desk stands up and looks around him. ‘Give me two seconds, okay?’ he says curtly.

‘That’s her, she was literally right there,’ Doug shouts, and we stand at the automatic doors waiting to be let through. It feels like forever. But finally the doors open, and the same nurse is standing behind them.

‘I’ll take you to her.’

‘Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,’ I gush, grabbing his arm.

Up a winding corridor along the multicoloured lines that run in patterns along the floor. Distorted PA announcements, and someone is sobbing loudly behind a closed curtain in the distance, but everything feels like it’s in a tunnel and my only thought is to get to Frankie.

The nurse thrusts open a curtain, and there she is. Looking so small on a grown-up bed. Tear-streaked cheeks and bloody knees, drowsy eyes, and her left arm limp across her chest in a tiny sling. I rush at her, and it takes all my restraint to not climb into the bed with her and cling her close to my chest.

‘Miss Miranda said I can have McDonald’s for dinner,’ she says, looking up at me and Doug, and then across to her teacher, who nods awkwardly.

The next few hours fly as they do X-rays and we wait to see doctors. Eventually we learn the arm is fractured, and it seems like a straightforward break: she won’t need surgery.

‘You don’t need to wait any more,’ I say to Miss Miranda, who’s refused to leave until she knew Frankie was okay. She’s the kind of woman who matches her brown hairband to her hair, and buys her shoes at the chemist. The kids love that she keeps a spare label-maker in a Tupperware container in her handbag.

‘I’m sure that one of the higher-ups will call you later, when you’re ready,’ she says, ‘about the time she’s taking off. And I’ll put together some work, and we can—’

I stop her. ‘Okay, we’ll let you know. We’ll work it out. Thank you for today, for looking after her.’

She smiles shyly and nods, touching my arm gently, and then looks to Doug: ‘I got your email about being a class parent next term too, thank you, that’s great. We definitely need the extra help, so I’ll email you with the schedule once it’s finalised.’

Doug glances at me coyly, then back to Miranda. ‘Yeah, no worries, all good,’ he mutters, standing up. ‘You right to get back to school or you wanna —,’

‘Thanks, I’ll be fine. Take care.’

And then she goes, and I am dumbfounded. *Class parent?* Doug wants to be a class parent. *Doug emailed about being a class parent.*

He sits back in the chair and holds Frankie’s hand as she sleeps. They’ve given her some painkillers to knock her out while we wait for the next doctor, who’ll set the break, to get here.

I don’t say anything. I sit back down. And I let it go. As though that interaction, that effort, is the most normal thing in the world.

‘Do you ever think about her as an adult?’ Doug asks in the quiet.

‘Sometimes.’

It trips me out a bit, thinking about that.

‘Yeah. Me too.’

‘She’s gonna be a full take-no-prisoners boss, don’t you reckon?’

I laugh. ‘Yeah. I just want her to be happy,’ I say, meaning it.

‘She will be. She’s a lot like you,’ Doug says, not taking his eyes off Frankie.

‘She’s better than me,’ I say half-heartedly.

‘She’s certainly better than me,’ he says. ‘Thank god.’

I try to read his face, wondering if he’s fishing for some kind of affirmation. I don’t think he is. I think he’s being genuine.

The curtain billows open. ‘Hi, I’m Doctor Anwar Khan and—’ He stops talking and stares at me.

Anwar. Brothers Nice Anwar. One-night-stand Anwar.

‘Chloe,’ he mumbles. He clears his throat, then looks at his chart, then back at me, then Frankie, then at Doug, coughing a little and smiling awkwardly.

I want the chair I’m in to melt into the floor and disappear, along with my whole body.

‘Frankie. Frankie. Hello, Frankie, like I said, I’m Doctor Anwar, let’s get you a cool cast for your arm, okay?’

And I smile, I smile so big I think I might break my cheeks. Which at least Dr Anwar would be able to fix with a really cool cast.

Dr Anwar, it turns out, is an expert at both dealing with children and pretending like he hasn’t had his penis inside his patient’s mum. He acts like nothing happened. So I also act like nothing happened.

‘I think we’ll admit her tonight just to keep an eye on her circulation, but she should be all good to come home tomorrow,’ he says, nodding at me. I

smile even bigger.

‘Thank you, that’s...that’s all good,’ Doug says, shaking his hand, and I make an awkward, guttural, shuddering sound which, thankfully, neither of them notices.

‘I’ll go pick up Andy,’ Doug says, after Dr Anwar has left with a subtle over-the-shoulder wink that made my insides squirm.

‘I can get Mum and Dad—’

‘No, I’ll go. I want to. You stay here with her.’

‘Okay.’

He stands up and takes a step towards me, lowering his voice. ‘She’s going to be fine, all right, Cleo?’

‘Yeah. Yeah.’ Doug looks terrified. I rub his arm. ‘She’s going to be fine.’

‘Yeah.’ He nods, staring at me, and I smile awkwardly. We look at each other like this for seconds that feel like hours, and when I can’t deal with it any longer, I shuffle clumsily and drop my eyes to the ground.

‘Okay, going now,’ he says, and leans down next to Frankie, getting really close to her face, and whispers something in her ear, and she laughs. He kisses her face, little pecks, over and over. ‘You stay here with Mummy tonight, Franks, and I’ll be back in the morning, okay?’

Then he goes and I stare at his empty chair.

What is happening?

29

Jude peeks through the curtains and ushers Perry inside. His body is stiff and he looks scared as he glances at Frankie in the bed.

‘It’s okay, babe, she’s okay,’ I tell him and he turns to look at Jude for confirmation before quickly launching his body onto the bed next to Frank. Jude and I both yell, *Careful!* with the exact same cautious tone and pitch, and Frankie and Perry laugh.

‘Here you go my love,’ Jude hands me a bag. ‘My brain imploded, and I packed you a month’s worth of knickers, so you know, you’re prepared.’

We set the kids up with snacks and an iPad and step to the other side of the curtain.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah, just...it was terrifying.’

‘It’s the fucking worst. She’s okay, though?’

‘Yeah, they say she’ll be fine. I think they’re just extra careful because of the painkillers. She’ll go home in the morning.’

I tell her about Doug and Miss Miranda and Jude is stunned.

‘He what?’

‘I know, right? Class parent. I’m having a fucking conniption, Jude. I don’t know what I’m so angry about.’

‘You don’t want to be a class parent, do you?’

‘I can think of nothing worse,’ I say. ‘I think it’s that...’ I can’t find the words.

‘Is it because he’s trying?’

‘Maybe. Is that fucked?’ I whisper, glancing in at Frankie and Perry, whose heads are leaning on each other lovingly.

‘It’s not fucked, it’s frustrating that everyone is going to think he’s great when he’s been a giant piece of shit for so long.’

‘Maybe that’s what it is. Him being praised for doing the bare fucking minimum.’

‘Look, he might not even do it. So what if he sent the email, there’s a million steps between an email and his father of the year ceremony.’ Jude rubs my arm. She’s right, but something still doesn’t feel right about it.

Jude and Perry leave when Frankie’s dinner arrives on a tray and I get my phone charger out of the bag Jude packed for me. Plugged in, it lights up with messages from Dad, Doug, Archer and Gabe.

First, I call my parents to let them know everything is okay. Dad talks to Frankie for ages and tells her he's going to take her shopping on the weekend which she is thrilled about, and I am less than enthused. Doug sent me a photo of a sleeping Andy and nothing else. So I take a photo of Frankie with a chicken nugget in one hand and send it back to him. She looks so little and big to me all at the same time. The sight of the tiny white cast on her arm makes tears well, but I pull it together. I let Archer know she's okay.

I'm glad to hear that, he says, pretty bummed about her shit timing, though.

This makes me smile. *We were going to kiss.* I wish we had. I wish we'd kissed. I want to know if it's as good as it is in my head. He then sends me a long message filled with handy kid-in-a-cast tips and I swoon. Then I message Gabe because we were meant to go for a drink after work tonight; Jude was going to watch the kids. I messaged him quickly from Emergency but I want to follow up to make sure he knows I'm not flaking.

Wanna call? he sends when Frankie is asleep, so I facetime him.

'A video chat? What if I was naked?' he says when he appears on the screen.

'I mean I was kind of hoping you were,' I whisper.

'Just making dinner,' he says as he props the phone up against something, and takes a step back so I can see half his body as he cuts up carrots on a chopping board. 'She okay?'

'She's fine. I can tick broken bone off my list of parenting achievements.'

'Give her a longer object than a pen if it gets itchy,' he smiles. 'Not that I'm speaking from experience.'

'You lost a pen in your cast?'

'I lost two pens in my cast,' he says, putting the knife down and biting into a piece of carrot.

'How old were you?'

'I'm not telling you. I still want you to think I'm desirable enough to go on another date with me.'

'That's pretty much a guarantee,' I flirt, and Gabe looks thrilled. We have an easy back-and-forth conversation for the next forty-five minutes until Gabe's dinner is ready.

'I'm really looking forward to seeing you again, Cleo,' he says.

'Me too,' I say. Meaning it.

‘And Frankie is...?’ Dr Tricia asks from her plump brown chair. I verbal-vomited everything that’s happened these last few weeks as soon as I sat down.

‘Okay. She’ll be okay.’

‘And the interaction with Doug? You said yourself that the hospital was weird and that he seemed...’

I feel really hot, and uncomfortable. I don’t like where this is going. ‘He seemed like, I don’t know, like he’s on top of things a bit more. Which pisses me off, too. I’m really angry about it.’

‘Why?’ She smiles and looks me in the eye. It’s like she knows something I don’t and she’s coyly waiting for me to work it out. Which is really fucking annoying.

‘Because he never got his shit together when we were actually together, he was fucking useless, and now it’s like, I feel like...’ I stop, hating this, hating every second of this. ‘Was I the problem? Like he leaves me and then gets his shit together? What the hell?’

She nods, really letting me know she’s heard me. ‘Him making good choices for the kids is a good thing, though?’

‘Of course.’

‘Do you think Doug felt useless when you were together?’

This question twists my guts. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You’re very competent, Cleo. For people who don’t have their shit together, like Doug, that can be pretty triggering,’ she says, clutching her clipboard with both hands. She’s not wearing any rings. In fact, she’s not wearing any jewellery at all, I notice. *Is that weird? Can I trust someone who doesn’t wear any jewellery to really know how to help me? I love jewellery.* I twist the ring on my pointing finger and feel guilty and angry, and like Dr Tricia can somehow read my thoughts and is going to know that I’m doubting her ability to help me.

‘So it’s my fault?’ I try to sound confident, but it comes out a little whiny.

‘I didn’t say that. What things would you ask him to do?’

‘Everything. Until I stopped asking at all. I didn’t think I should have to ask. We were both living under the same roof, we were both parenting the same kid, we were both working. But it’s like he couldn’t look at what needed to be done and then do it. He had no initiative. I did *everything*. And I

know he had a lot of mental-health shit going on, but he wouldn't do anything about that either. He'd always say he would, but he never would.'

Dr Tricia nods and writes notes down, and I keep going. 'Everything revolved around him, and what *he* wanted, how *he* felt, how it might impact *him*. He just sucked all the energy out of the room, all the good out of everything.'

'That must've been really hard, Cleo.'

'It's just the way it was. So I just kept trying to make it better. I tried everything to make him happy, but he was miserable.'

'I believe you, Cleo.' She breathes in deep and lets me hear this. 'I have absolutely no doubt that you did everything. But you know what happens in relationships like this? You stopped being his partner and became his carer. And part of that, which we've talked about, meant you stopped caring about yourself.'

I nod slowly, trying to take it in.

'It's like you had two kids and one on the way, and no husband at all.'

'Yes. I would say that to Jude all the time,' I say feeling understood, finally.

'So, you took a mothering role. And what happens in relationships with that dynamic is it kills all chances for intimacy. Because healthy people don't want intimacy with their children. There's no place for partnership.'

She leans back in her chair; gives me a moment to process this.

'And when there's no intimacy, no partnership, it just leads to resentment.'

'Oh my god,' I mutter.

'I'm going to assume he felt emasculated, out of control, useless, like he couldn't get anything right. And that pressure he felt is gone now. Now he has all his other issues, which there's quite a few of, by the sounds of it, but at least he has some space to not always feel like he's letting someone down.'

'So, it *is* my fault?' I feel confused and a bit sick. I've never thought about any of it this way. About how Doug may have felt.

'No, Cleo, there's no fault here. There's unacceptable behaviour on his part, yes. Absolutely. You did the best you could with the information you had at the time. You had a baby, another baby on the way and a husband who refused to take any responsibility for his actions. That's exhausting. So you, understandably, took control and tried to fix what you could.' She pauses, and I nod slowly, taking it in. 'But we can only control what we can control,

yes? And you couldn't control him then, no matter how much you tried. And you can't control this arrangement now, no matter how much you want to.'

My stomach drops and my breath quickens in my chest. I stare at her.

'You need to cut yourself some slack, Cleo. Feel your feelings. What you went through is a trauma. It's the hardest thing in the world to care for someone more than they care for themselves.'

I exhale hard, nodding at her. 'Yup.'

It's all I can manage. Her recognition of all this seems to reach inside my body and run cold water over some parts of me that feel like they've been on fire for years.

'So, your anger is valid. Feel that, and let's work on controlling the controllable. Which is you, your feelings, articulating your needs, asserting your boundaries. You can control those things. But not anyone else,' she takes a breath. 'You know the saying *Not my circus, not my monkeys?*'

I chuckle and nod.

'You're the ringmaster of your own circus. Run your circus well. If Doug wants to run his circus into the ground, that's his prerogative.'

'But my babies,' I cry, looking at her.

'One day they'll know it all. You won't even need to tell them. They'll know. Trust me, they'll know, and for now that has to be enough.'

She stands up and hands me the tissue box from her bookshelf.

'Frankie's already working it out.' I wipe my eyes.

I tried to control Doug's circus. I wasted so much energy on his circus. I still do. And I hate that. I bet *he* hates that. And I know what that feels like because I let people try to run my circus all the time, too. *Oh, god.* I groan and shift in my seat.

'What do you want from Doug now?' Dr Tricia asks.

'Nothing. I don't want anything from him. I mean...there's a fantasy in my head where I tell him how shit I think he was. Is?'

Doctor Tricia smiles. 'And why haven't you told him that?'

'Because it wouldn't help the kids.'

'And that's the only priority?'

'Always.'

'So, Doug feeling different—it's good? This is a good change for the kids, yes?'

'Yes.'

'Is there a fantasy where Doug apologises for how much he hurt you?'

she says, leaning her head to the side.

I feel like she's grabbed the breath in my lungs and is squeezing it in her grip. I can't talk, just nod.

'Well, what if we look at these changes as part of that apology. Because in my experience, Cleo, words don't mean shit without action. Which I know is ironic since I've built a career talking, but you know what I mean.' She chuckles to herself.

It eases the tightness in my chest, and I grin slightly..

'It's okay to feel sad about the past and optimistic about the future at the same time. Both of those things can be true.' She smiles more. 'What about you? What's a good change for you right now?'

'I've been dating,' I say, and am surprised by the wash of giddiness that swirls around inside my chest.

'Oh, really?' she says, leaning forward. 'Tell me about that.'

31

My phone dings: a message from Dad. *We're here.*

I look over at Farida. 'They're here.' She follows me out the back door and up the alley as Frankie and Perry come running at us, Frankie with a giant fluffy rainbow teddy bear under her arm.

'What is this?'

'Deda and Yiayia got it for me for being brave.'

'Wow, did they?' I look over at Mum and Dad and they both beam. 'This is massive. How lucky are you?' The death stares are violent and Mum laughs as she finishes getting Andy out of his car seat.

'Want me to sign your cast, Franks?' Farida asks as they hug.

The bell on the new front door jingles and Archer comes outside. 'Okay, are we ready?'

This shop is officially done and I couldn't be happier with how it turned out. The light pours through the new windows and everything feels bigger and brighter.

Mum and Dad peer inside. 'Looking good, Tiger,' Dad bellows as an Uber pulls up and Jude gets out.

'Right on time, my girl.' Jude hugs Mum and I watch them both admire the shop.

'Cleo, come break this on the building,' Dad yells, holding up a bottle of champagne that he just got out of his car.

'Isn't that for boats?'

'Right in time, my girl,' Dad bellows, because Jude's getting out of an Uber. Dad puts his arm around her, and she nudges him as she admires the shop.

'Wait, I've got an idea.' Farida looks up from the ground, where she's been texta-ing thick cartoon flowers on Frankie's cast, and dashes into the shop.

She reappears seconds later with scissors and thick lilac ribbon, which she ties to the door handle and then looks embarrassed when she realises there's nowhere to tie the other side.

'I'll just hold it,' she says.

'Speech!' Jude yells, knowing I'll hate it.

'I'm not—'

'Speech!' Frankie mimics, and they all join in, Archer included.

I roll my eyes. 'All right. Thank you all for being great. And thanks to Archer and his team for being—'

'Sexy!'

'Farida!' Mum giggles.

'Sorry, Mum.' Farida flashes her a cheeky grin.

I go on: 'Thank you for being so...great.' Archer and I stare at each other, and I feel flushed. 'Um, here's to big changes, and the new West Side Honey.'

They all cheer as Farida hands me the scissors and I cut the ribbon with a flourish. Dad hands me the bottle of champagne, and I look at it. 'Can't we just drink this?'

'Nah, it's a shit one. There's a good bottle in the car.'

'Oh, okay.' I hit the bottle hard into the side wall and it smashes extravagantly, and I feel pure happiness as they all cheer again.

'Oh no! The paintwork,' Archer bellows sarcastically and my dad wraps an arm around his shoulder.

Mum gets out an esky she's filled with pita, dips and cold cuts and dad pours champagne into paper cups as Archer sidles over to me when I've just put a too-big piece of bread into my mouth.

'So, the job is finished,' he says with a grin. 'You know what that means?'

I cover my mouth to chew and we have to wait an excruciatingly long time before I can speak. 'I think it means that we no longer work together.'

'Go on a date with me?'

'You free Sunday afternoon?' I whisper it, trying to appear like I'm just having a casual chat with the builder so my parents don't suspect anything.

'Yeah, actually, I am.'

I sit on the front steps in a new dress I don't need to wear a bra with. I feel positively audacious about it, which seems ridiculous, but I'm choosing to lean into audacity over ridicule. I thumb the tiny purple blooms on the lavender bush next to the front steps and take a second to breathe. Archer will be here any second to pick me up for our date and I am a little nervous, but mostly excited. We've been texting and talking and I find him deeply intriguing. The way he talks about politics, his family, his culture, his values, it's all interesting to me. He's interesting. He tells great stories and is confident in who he is and what he believes, but not in an obnoxious way. He seems infallible.

When I got home from the the shop opening the other night he messaged, *Can I just call you instead of typing all this?* I said yes, and we ended up speaking for hours until I fell asleep, and the same last night too. So now I am genuinely looking forward to his company. Even if there is no physical chemistry, I know I'll enjoy myself, and that is helping me to lower the stakes and be present, to control the controllable and let tonight be whatever it will be.

When Archer's ute turns the corner the flipping of my stomach propels my body to a standing position before my brain has really even clocked on. He gets out and walks around to greet me. 'Well...' he smiles, staring.

'What?' I'm nervous, suddenly self-conscious, glancing down at my front to ensure everything's still where it's supposed to be.

'You. You're divine,' he says, without taking his eyes off me.

I feel a series of giddy waves roll down my body starting in my heart and crashing into my pelvis. 'I like your—' I start, but the words stick in my mouth as I really take him in. The first time I've seen him not wearing high-vis, and he really is a startlingly beautiful man. Thick brown hair swept back; piercing brown eyes accentuated by the orangey-red shirt he's wearing, unbuttoned over a white singlet so the tattoo on his chest just peeks out. He wraps me in a hug, and it lingers, like we're both clinging to possibility.

As we unravel, I look closely at the engraved silver filigree collar tips on his shirt. 'I love these.' I look up at him.

'They were my grandads. I only wear them on special occasions.' His arm wraps my waist, and he ushers me to the passenger side of the car.

'And this is a worthy—'

‘Yep.’ He cuts me off. ‘You better believe you are.’ He opens the door with an elaborate hand gesture.

When Archer starts the car, he looks over at me. ‘Okay, we’ve got to drive for about an hour—’ My eyes open wide, and he says, ‘No, it’ll be worth it, I promise.’ I think he blushes. ‘I mean, I hope it’ll be worth it.’ He mimes elaborate concern. ‘So, you’re in charge of music.’ He hands over his phone with the app already open.

‘Deal,’ I say with an exhale, taking my role very seriously.

The conversation is easy as we drive and talk mostly about the music that we love, the gigs we’ve enjoyed, and the albums and artists that have marked our hearts. I’m surprised how passionately Archer talks about Dolly Parton, and he seems impressed by my knowledge of seventies rock; we both trace our affinities back to one of our parents.

The further we get away from the city, the more winding roads get and the lush the scenery.

‘Where are you taking me?’ We’re driving through the middle of a rainforest now.

‘You’ll see.’

‘Did you maybe think twice about driving a woman you hardly know into the middle of the forest on a first date? Some people might find it terrifying.’

Archer turns to me, looking shocked. ‘Oh no, I...’ He nods when he sees I’m smiling. ‘Yeah, noted.’

He turns his indicator on, and we drive down a small, rocky road to a circular clearing flanked by well-grown trees receding into deep untouched forest. Archer parks the car in the centre of the circle and turns off the engine. The sun stretches beams across the ground like spotlights.

‘This is...wow Archer, this is stunning,’ I say, unclipping my seatbelt.

I take a few steps; stretch my legs and breathe in the smell of eucalypt, and let the choir of cicadas and birdsong roll over me.

‘What is this place?’ I turn to Archer as he rolls out a picnic blanket in the tray of the ute and places a cardboard box filled with grazing treats on top.

‘This right here...’ He looks around and inhales deeply. ‘This is one day going to be my bedroom.’

‘Very forward of you, bringing me to your bedroom,’ I smile.

And he nods with a chuckle. ‘Maybe I didn’t think this through, huh?’ He opens the esky and offers me a beer.

‘How long have you been separated?’ I ask, drinking from my beer and

stuffing a dried apricot into my mouth.

‘Four years,’ Archer says casually. Distractingly, he’s lying on his side like a marble statue.

‘And Freja is...?’

‘She’s seven and she’s pretty bloody awesome.’

‘Yeah,’ I laugh. ‘I always say that about my kids, I just think they’re so cool.’

‘Frankie, and...?’

‘Andy. He’s eighteen months.’

‘And their dad?’ Archer says, picking up an olive.

‘He’s around and he is...’ My face twists; I’m not sure what to say about Doug. ‘He’s trying harder as a dad than he ever did as a husband.’

‘You guys don’t get along?’

I shrug. ‘He’s got a lot of shit he needs to work out. But you and your ex are...?’

‘Solid. Took us a few years to get here. But we’re good now.’

‘Were you married?’

‘Nah. We were together for twelve years—mortgage, dog, kid, renovation, the whole bloody thing—but neither of us felt the need.’ He pauses. ‘We’re not religious, and I’m deeply suspicious of the government, and...I just don’t know why they need anything to do with my commitment.’

‘It’s expensive paperwork in the end, isn’t it?’

‘Exactly. It’s bloody hard changing gears, though. From being together, a committed unit, and they’re your person even if sometimes they do your head in. And then you just go to not really having anything to do with them at all. You used to know everything about them and then: nothing. It can be a real mind-fuck.’

‘I think about this a lot. Like, I’m able to mostly get rid of him, you know? I don’t have to be around him—but my kids still do. It messes me up a bit, if I’m honest.’ I lean over to put some cheese on a cracker, which breaks as I bite into it and falls onto my chest.

‘That must be really hard, Cleo,’ he says. ‘Everyone has shit, don’t they? Especially when you get to our age. What I find interesting is how people feel about their shit and what they’ve done about it.’

‘What have you done about it?’

‘Therapy. Lots of therapy. And a men’s healing circle once, but that turned out not to be my...’ He stops smiling. ‘I think I’m an open-minded

guy. But this was all jump off that waterfall into that freezing pool of water and then shout out your deepest pain and then hug. I'm too introverted for...I don't know, for that way of performing vulnerability. But a lot of people got a lot out of it, I think.'

'Wait, hang on, tell me more about this.'

He tells me the story of his weekend in the woods last year at a men's retreat. A friend of a friend had told him about it, and Archer thought why not, and it was basically three freezing days in a rainforest watching men cry. It did very little for him, he said, except reassure him he has pretty good manners because he didn't leave even though he wanted to. 'But I've since vowed never to do *that* again. If I don't want to do something? I don't.' Archer laughs. 'What about you?'

'I have a therapist and I have Farida and Jude.'

'A wicked combo,' he smirks.

'So do you go this hard on all your first dates?'

'Too much?'

'No. It's perfect.'

He smiles. 'I don't, actually, but...I dunno, I trust my gut and my gut said *romance this woman*.'

Tears spring in the corner of my eyes and I busy myself cutting cheese and putting it on a cracker, perfectly this time, so he can't see. I don't know what these tears are. *Shock, maybe?*

Shock that someone exists who wants to romance me like this.

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As Archer packs up the food box, I shift positions and pull at the extra blanket in the corner covering my legs. Archer sits back down. Not touching, but he's closer. I wish we were touching.

He starts talking about his plans for the house he wants to build, and I can't stop thinking about kissing him. About making a move. *When we go to leave, when we get out of the tray, I'm going to make a move*, I decide.

'...And there'll be floor-to-ceiling windows across this wall that look out at that view and Cleo?'

'Yeah?'

'Can I kiss you?'

'Mm-hmm.' I nod. *Did he read my mind?* 'Yes. Yes, you can.'

Then we're kissing. And this kiss is...it is completely compatible. We don't need to teach each other. This is as though we've been kissing each other our whole lives. And I want more.

Archer's hand runs up my neck and cups my head while his other wraps around my waist and pulls me in close. I straddle his lap and he kisses my neck then down my chest and I moan loudly, my hips grinding against him. I unbutton his shirt and pull it over his shoulders, I run my hands over his chest and then slide in under his singlet; I need to touch skin. I tug at his shirt and he whips it off, and I bite my lip, staring at his bare chest as he looks at me, at my dress, pulling at the fabric. I untie the bow at the back and Archer glides it open, his mouth kissing one of my nipples instantly as my head rolls back in pleasure. Then he pushes me back so I'm lying down between his legs, my knees up over his hips as he runs his palm flat over my chest, my nipples. He shifts his arse out from underneath me so he's on his knees, leaning over me, and the hard metal tray is pressing into my shoulder blades, and I shift to try and get comfortable. Archer kisses my neck and then his body starts to shake and I wonder what's wrong with him; then I realise he's laughing. He whispers in my ear, 'This is killing my knees.'

'Yeah.' I start laughing, too. 'My shoulders are about to give out.'

He sits up on his haunches and looks at me, his eyes dazzling. The sun is setting now, lighting everything around us with an orange glow. Archer groans dramatically as he unfolds his body and stands up, then steps off the edge of the tray. I try to stand up in an alluring manner, but I step on my dress, of course and stumble a little, embarrassed. But Archer isn't laughing

now. He's watching me.

He wants me.

'Take it off,' he says.

So I do. I slip the new dress off my shoulders and stand in the tray of Archer's ute with the late sun turning my white lace knickers to gold. He holds his hand out for me and I step towards him; place my hand on his shoulders as he lifts me down, sliding my body against his.

We start to kiss again. Archer moves me around the side of the car, where he opens the passenger door and sits me down so my legs are still outside and he reaches for my knickers and slides them off slowly. He kneels there in the dirt with my legs over his shoulders and starts with an open-mouth kiss on my knee, and I gasp.

I hug my pillow and let flashbacks of Archer delight me. In his ute, then back at mine, in this bed right here, when he'd brought me home. We went for hours—it was delightful and relaxed; our fingers, tongues and mouths learning each other's bodies with a kind of ease that astonished me. We'd talk and laugh and orgasm, and repeat this dance over and over.

'More?' he'd say, his eager eyes glancing up at me from between my thighs, and every time I'd nod yes. He left in the early hours of the morning, and I fell asleep straight away.

There's a double knock on my door as Jude flings it open quickly and stands there smirking. 'You have a good night?' Her eyes go wide. 'Cause you look like you had a good night.'

'Jude. It was unbelievable.'

'Really, that much fun? Did you have sex?'

'So much sex.' I sound awe-struck even to myself.

'Yaaaaay!' she cheers.

'And this was not first-night sex, this was like; I don't even know what this was...'

'What do you mean?'

'We sixty-nined and it *worked*. Who does that on a first date?'

Jude cackles loudly. 'You horny bitch. I love it.'

'Oh god, Jude. It was incredible. The whole thing.'

Jude listens as I regale her with the highlights.

'Look at you with a crush.'

'I totally have a crush. Huge crush.' Hang on. '...Crushes. My next date with Gabe is tomorrow night. Is it bad if I have sex with Gabe the day after?'

Jude stares at me and doesn't even dignify such a stupid comment with a reaction.

'I know, I know, I can do whatever I want.'

'I'm absolutely here for back-to-back boning,' she says with an encouraging nod.

I close the shop a little earlier today to head home and get ready for a date with Gabe. We've checked in with each other pretty much every day, but it's been over a week since I saw him. Now he's invited me over to his place for dinner and I am looking forward to getting to know him a bit better. I like how energetic and excitable he is. He's always doing something fun—trying new restaurants, or going to gigs or events, and his life just seems so exciting: well lived.

I feel boring and tied to my routines, and I want some of this Gabe energy to rub off on me.

As I pull up outside our house I pick up a message from Archer. *It feels weird not seeing you every day. Hope it's been a good one.*

He's right: now that the shop's finished and I'm not seeing him every day, having him in my space, it *is* weird. I miss him. No way I'm going to say anything that needy and dramatic, but I'm glad he did. I bite my lip, enjoying the feeling sloshing around in my body, the fizzing excitement of multiple possibilities.

Then I jump as a tiny hand smacks down on the passenger-side window and Frankie's face pops up. I get out and race around to see a filthy Frank, covered in dirt with a plastic bag tied over her cast.

'Come on, Mummy.' She holds out her hand.

'Frank, what's going on? Where's Daddy? Are you okay?'

Frankie pulls me by the hand into the front garden and yells, '*Ta-da!*'

Doug is hovering over a newly built garden bed, the raised kind enclosed in a timber square. Andy toddles over, also covered in dirt, with a plastic hammer in his hands. He raises them over his head, signalling for me to pick him up.

'Surprise,' Doug says, dusting off his hands and smiling.

'What's this?' I try to read his face.

'It's a veggie patch, Mummy. We built it,' Frankie says. I try to take this all in.

'We knew you'd always wanted one, didn't we?' Doug says, not making eye contact. 'So we thought we'd surprise you. We haven't planted the seeds yet, though, have we, Frank?'

'Nope. Mummy, you have to help us.'

'What about school? What about...Does Jude know?' I say, looking

towards the house.

‘No,’ Doug says. ‘Took the day off together, didn’t we kids?’

‘Mummy, do you love it?’ Frankie says, and the three of them all stare at me with wide, proud eyes and I push my confusion to one side.

‘Are you kidding? I love it.’

Frankie squeals in delight hugging Doug right around his waist and he picks her up. ‘See?’ he says to Frankie, and she rests her head on his shoulder.

The image hurts me to look at. Because it’s beautiful, and Frankie looks so genuinely happy in Doug’s arms; and Doug looks delighted too—I haven’t seen him smile like this in, well, I can’t even remember how long. But I also feel so deeply, deeply protective of my babies, part of me wants to swipe Frankie out of his arms and scream at him to fuck off and leave us alone. Everything about this unsettles me. I’d prefer sulky, uncommunicative, mean Doug any day—at least I know how to handle him.

This, however...I don’t know how to handle this.

The four of us spend the next twenty minutes planting seeds and small seedlings. Doug and I don’t really speak to each other: we talk through the kids.

‘These are Mummy’s favourites,’ Doug says when Frankie pushes the tomato seedlings into the soil.

‘You and Daddy really surprised me, huh?’ I say with a nod.

When the garden is finished, we stand up and I don’t know what to say. I have to get ready. I have to leave soon. I have to get him to leave.

‘You sure you like it?’ Doug asks.

‘I do, but you didn’t need to...Let me give you some money for the—’

‘It’s a gift.’

‘Okay. Thanks.’ I pause. ‘Everything okay?’

‘Yeah fine. She’s got some project at school yesterday, she wants to do it on AFL, a poster.’

‘Okay.’

‘And he doesn’t like blueberries anymore. Not interested. This is what happens.’ Doug turns his head and reveals a decent scratch down the edge of his cheek near his jawline.

‘Oh no.’ I touch it without thinking, then pull my hand away quickly.

‘It was an accident. Couldn’t work out how to cut his nails, so can you do that?’

‘Do it when he’s asleep.’

‘Ahh. Of course.’

We stare at each other. It makes me uncomfortable. *Tell him he needs to leave.*

‘This was lovely, Doug, but...’

He’s annoyed. ‘But what?’

‘But in future shoot me a text first, please?’

‘It was a surprise.’

‘Yeah, but what if I didn’t want a veggie patch?’

‘For fuck’s sake, Cleo. You have to ruin everything don’t you?’

I take a deep breath. ‘You can think whatever you like, Doug. I still need you to text first.’ He looks shocked. ‘Come say goodbye. Daddy’s got to get you dinner and Mummy’s got to get ready, she’s going out.’

Jude only just gets home before I have to leave, so I facetime her on the drive to Gabe’s.

‘I can’t believe he thought it’d be okay to just show up like that,’ she says. ‘No, wait—I can. That cockhead. How do you feel?’

‘Good, but shit. But good. You should’ve seen his face when I was like, *And? Send me a message, dickhead.*’

‘Dr Bogan is going to be so proud. I’m so proud.’

‘I was thinking about it as I got ready—how everything with Doug takes so much effort. It always did. And then with Archer and Gabe everything is just easy and I’ve been thinking that’s amazing. But...it’s not that amazing is it?’

‘You deserve things to be easy, my love, and for people to treat you with respect and kindness and consideration. Like, that’s the literal base level of expectation you should have.’

‘Exactly. My bar was set so bloody low.’

‘Raise that bar, baby, and do not compromise about where it sits ever again.’

‘Fuck Doug,’ I say.

‘Fuck Doug,’ Jude hoots.

I sit on the kitchen bench at Gabe's house as he sautés garlic in a pan next to me. His house is neater than I'd expected for some reason. Minimal. Everything is purposeful, deliberate. Dark wood; bursts of vintage orange or dark greens. Small piles of books and the odd potted plant, thoughtfully deployed. Even Jenny his dog fits the calm aesthetic. I am nervous.

'Did you have to shush anyone today?' I joke, trying to keep the mood light, and let go of the icky Doug residue that feels like it's stuck all over me.

Gabe shakes his head, 'See, that's a fallacy, I don't want people to be quiet in my library because—'

'Because it's about community.'

He laughs. 'Exactly. I *want* people in my library, and I want them to be excited to be there.'

'I'm excited to be *here*. To eat this,' I smile as Gabe tips a can of tomatoes into the pan. Neither of us says anything, we just glance sideways at each other and smile, and I don't know what to do.

'Want to play a game?' I say. It's the first thing that comes to mind.

'Of course.' Gabe flings a tea towel over his shoulder. 'Fire away.'

'Okay, so I went on a date with a candlestick-maker—'

'Excuse me, what?'

'This was his date move.'

'Oh, I'm intrigued...'

'Night-time or morning?' I say.

'Both, for different reasons,' he says, chopping herbs and adding them to the pan.

'That's not the game—you have to choose one. I'm morning.'

'Fine, me too.' He sips from his beer. 'My turn?' I nod, and he puts his finger to his chin, with a dramatic thinking face. 'Be embarrassed or be afraid?' He raises his eyebrows, impressed with himself.

'Oooh, that's a hard one.' I think about it. 'Embarrassed, I don't like feeling scared. I think embarrassment is easier to deal with.'

'I disagree, I think scared is easier, because you either do the thing you're scared of or not, and then it's done. But embarrassment can stay with you forever.'

'That sounds like the fear of someone who's done some embarrassing shit in their time,' I muse.

‘Oh, there are stories you will never, ever hear that I will happily take to my grave.’

‘Okay, my turn...um, parties: guest or host?’ I ask.

‘Guest, cause then I can leave after a certain amount of polite time, or not even go.’ He glances at me, but then his head’s in the fridge and he’s moving jars around, unable to find the one he wants.

‘Me too.’

With his back still turned so I can’t see his face, he says, ‘Cowgirl or doggy?’

I take a drink from my beer and wait for him to turn around. ‘I like being on top.’

‘Thought you might,’ he says, looking me in the eye. ‘You like being in charge?’

‘I do, yeah. You?’

He considers it. ‘I mean, I like both. They both have their benefits.’

‘That’s not the game.’

‘Going from behind feels super...’ He stops.

‘What?’ My chest feels hot.

‘I don’t know...primal.’

‘Mmm. Yeah.’ Our eyes lock. After a moment the fridge starts beeping but Gabe ignores it. I watch his breath get heavy in his chest. He closes the fridge door slowly.

‘Kitchen or bedroom?’ He looks at me steadily, taking me in.

‘Bedroom,’ I say.

Then Gabe is kissing me like his body has been waiting for this moment. Standing between my thighs, his hands on my cheeks. I wrap my arms around his neck and press myself into him. He pulls at my top, it comes over my head and I grab at his, fumbling it off, throwing it on the floor. We need to touch, skin to skin—as close as possible.

He pulls away, looking at me. I try to bring him close, but he pulls further back and breathes out loudly. Then he leans over to the cooktop and turn off the gas ceremoniously. ‘Safety first,’ he smiles.

His thumb traces my bottom lip, and I suck it slowly and Gabe takes a sharp breath in. He slides his hands under my arse, lifting me up as I wrap my legs around his waist with a moan, and he carries me to his bedroom and onto his bed. We pull at each other’s clothes, clumsy in our eagerness, and finally we’re both naked. He kisses down my chest to my stomach, his hands

running like silk over my skin. He looks up at me with a little smile that unravels me, and I pull at his shoulders. I want him. Now.

The sex is intense. It's needy and passionate; close faces, eyes locked, fingers intertwined. He's very confident, he tells me exactly what he likes and expects me to do the same. I do. He teases me, pushing me right to the edge before making me wait and it drives me wild. I am loud and I don't care, and Gabe loves it.

Eventually we lie in each other's arms, eyes blinking with delight, completely relaxed.

'How old were you when you first had sex?' I whisper, following the line of his neck with my finger.

Gabe thinks about it. 'Fifteen? Her name was Miranda Moore and she had badly dyed blue hair and she always wore a bindi.'

'Oh, Miranda.'

'Gwen Stefani was doing it, so apparently it was fine and not cultural appropriation at all,' he laughs, kissing my forehead. 'We were hanging out in her bedroom listening to *Top Hits 97* on CD and then all of a sudden we're having sex and I'm staring at her forehead bindi and a poster of Will Smith, and Chumbawamba's playing.'

I whistle. 'Sensorially, that's a lot.'

'It was.' He kisses my shoulder. 'That song is deeply triggering.'

'Like, you get a massive boner?'

'Oh, massive...'

I dance my fingers down his chest to his hips and then trace circles on his inner thighs. His hips lift up into my touch.

'Yours?' he asks with a pleased moan.

'My boner is definitely massive,' I say. 'No, I was sixteen and it was at a party with a guy named Kai and it was fine.'

Gabe's fingers copy the patterns I'm drawing on his thighs onto mine.

'Did Kai make you cum?'

'He did not.'

'So, he didn't know how to do this?'

I bite my lip and shake my head as he moves his fingers against me and I grab at his arm, the look of wanting on his face turns me on even more. I roll away from him, tucking my knees under my body.

'I like this view,' he says as one palm runs over my back and my arse. His fingers on me, and in me, and I breathe hard into the mattress as pleasure

takes over my body. He then quickly shifts his body till he's kneeling, fucking me from behind, both of us moaning loud with how good it feels. All of it.

It's 3 a.m. when I finally say for the hundredth time, 'Okay, I've really got to go now.'

He puts his finger to my lip and shushes me, and I raise an eyebrow. 'I thought you said librarians didn't do that anymore.'

'We're not in the library.'

I grab his face and we kiss, and kiss and kiss, until I push him away and stand up quickly so he can't distract me again and I finally get my clothes back on. Gabe pulls on a pair of shorts and walks me out to my car, and we lean on it.

'Message me when you get home,' he says.

'I will.' We start kissing again, wrapped in each other's arms, and I push him away. 'I'm going now,' I say as I open the car door and get in, but he holds it open. 'You're beautiful.'

'*You're* beautiful,' I laugh as he shuts the door and waves goodbye.

Well. That was even better than I thought it would be.

I'm working on an arrangement out the back of the shop, half-aware of Farida greeting a customer, but not really paying attention.

'Welcome to the new West Side Honey,' Farida says with a flourish.

There's a courier coming in forty minutes and I'm focused on creating the perfect-shaped bouquet, as well as finding a place for the tingling and swooshing my stomach does any time I think about Gabe and Archer. The guttural wail of a grown man, however, snaps me out of it.

I make eye contact with a startled Farida, who's patting the man on the back and beckoning me frantically with the hand that isn't patting. I can see now that the buckled-over man is Glen, my Friday regular.

'Oh, Glen, what's...are you...'

I'm walking past the counter to join them as Glen stands up and lurches towards me, hugging me tight or, more accurately, leaning his body weight into me, his head propped on my shoulder as I hold him up.

'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry,' Glen sobs. 'It's my mum.'

'Is she okay?' Farida asks, and I can tell from her apologetic shrug that she immediately wishes she hadn't.

'She's...She's...She died.' Glen pulls back finally and looks at us, his face crushed by grief.

'Oh, Glen. I'm so sorry to hear that,' I say.

'The funeral home has a flower place but I told them I didn't want their flowers I wanted your flowers because Mum always loved your flowers and I want the whole room to be covered in flowers because she loved flowers, your flowers,' he rushes, and Farida and I nod, just catching it. 'I've got a photo...' He pulls his phone out of his pocket and starts scrolling.

Farida nudges me and mouths, 'A photo of what?' and I shrug, panicked that he might mean his mum.

But what he shows us is a photo from the Dior million flowers installation. Walls of blooms; every surface covered from floor to ceiling, with *Dior* spelt in roses. My eyes widen and I look at him. 'Glen, this is—'

'I want the wall behind her to be covered. I want her name like this, and I want her coffin to *explode* with flowers. I don't want funeral flowers, Cleo. I want it to look like this. You know her favourites. Bright. It has to be bright. Like Mother. You can do that can't you?'

'I mean, we can, of course...' I stumble.

‘Glen, I know you love your mum, but do you know how expensive something like this is going to be?’ Farida says without thinking, as I zoom in and out on the phone image.

‘I don’t care about the cost. Do you need a deposit? Money isn’t a question.’

Farida and I look at each other, both of us pleading with the other to say something.

Eventually I say, ‘When’s the funeral, Glen?’

‘A week on Wednesday,’ he says.

Eleven days. Can we pull this off in eleven days?

‘You want a ceiling-to-floor wall installation with her name, and then the coffin, yes?’ Finally, Farida jumps into action, grabbing a notepad from the counter, behaving like she does quotes like this every day. Glen nods and she says, ‘How big do you want the wall?’

‘Like a backdrop to the coffin. Like the picture.’

Which I stare at in my hands, still zooming in and out, trying to calculate how many flowers I’d need.

‘How big’s the room?’ Farida looks at Glen seriously.

‘I don’t know, the funeral people will call you, I told them to call you. They can tell you that. But like this size, I’d say.’ He points to the wall behind Farida.

‘Okay...’ She scrawls something down on the pad. Glen is still clinging to my hand—he hasn’t let it go, which is fine because the tight grip is helping me try to process this. My brain is whirring rather than working right now, though.

‘You want her name set into the wall like this, yes?’ Farida asks, taking the phone from my hand.

‘Yes.’

‘And her coffin to be covered?’

‘Covered, yes. Not funeral flowers,’ Glen says, looking me in the eye; a look almost of pleading. ‘And not fake flowers. They have to be real.’

I nod and squeeze his hand, unable to formulate words just yet.

‘Okay.’ Farida’s still making notes. ‘How many bundles is the wall, Cleo?’

‘Like...maybe eighty?’ I say, staring at her; unable to do the quick maths on what we’re looking at here. Farida starts punching the buttons on the calculator.

‘Do you have family, Glen? Are there people helping you?’ I ask.

‘It was just Mother and me. She has friends, though. Many, many friends.’

‘I’m so sorry.’ It’s all I can manage. My heart’s hurting for him.

‘Glen, this is only a rough estimate,’ Farida says, ‘but it’s like twenty-five grand’s worth of work, maybe more. That’s too much. What if we just did the —’

‘Okay.’ Glen reaches around to his back pocket, pulls out his wallet and hands Farida a credit card.

‘Are you...’ I mumble, unable to compute what’s happening.

‘Let’s do, umm, fifty per cent deposit, then we can finalise it later,’ Farida says, her eyes imploring me to pull it together.

Glen turns to me again. ‘I want it to be the best. It needs to be beautiful. And I know you’ll make it beautiful, Cleo. I know you will.’

‘Of course we will. Of course,’ I say, meaning it.

Farida runs the sale, takes Glen’s phone number and the name of the funeral home, then comes around the counter and hugs him tight. ‘Glen, I’m so sorry. This is so shit,’ she says.

‘Thank you.’ He half-smiles, then shuffles to the front door.

‘Glen, wait,’ I say, and he turns back. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Joy.’ He smiles.

‘That’s a beautiful name.’

I watch Glen put on his bike helmet, just as he has every Friday for the last few years, and ride away.

Farida turns to me, stunned. Neither of us says anything for a long time.

‘I want to squeal,’ she says finally.

‘I want to dance for joy,’ I say without thinking.

‘For joy?’ Farida smiles.

‘For Joy.’

‘Good god, Cleo,’ Farida starts laughing, and I start too, I can’t help it. We squeal and whoop and jump up and down. And then we stop, realising how entirely inappropriate we’re being.

‘Oh, Glen. I feel awful,’ I say with my hands on my heart. ‘I hope we’re not taking advantage of—’

‘Cleo.’ Farida has her phone out, typing and scrolling quickly. ‘Cleo, Glen’s loaded.’

‘What? How do you know?’

‘His surname was on his card. I’ve never looked before...it’s Doxiadis.
Joy Doxiadis was his mum.’

‘The import furniture lady?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Cleo, this is a huge deal.’

We stare at each other. We make a weak attempt to sober up and show proper respect to Glen’s late mum.

Then a smile cracks across my face and Farida squeals again and we don’t stop squealing until the delivery guy comes to pick up the order.

This week my to-do lists have to-do lists and everything in my brain revolves around Joy Doxiadis and her funeral. Farida and I are working long hours, calling in favours from suppliers and market friends, and basically firing on all cylinders as we problem-solve and plan, and problem-solve potential problems in our plan. One problem I didn't account for was Doug telling me when he dropped the kids off yesterday that he can't have the kids next week because of something to do with his work. 'We'll just pick up as normal next Sunday, yeah?' he said, and I stared at him, stunned.

I said, 'Fine, whatever,' because what else was I meant to say? I don't want the kids with him if he doesn't want them there, and I don't want them to stay with his shitty parents. I'm so angry at him, because of course in the biggest week that my business has ever had he is incapable of showing up. Thank god for my parents and Jude. Part of me thinks this is his way of getting back at me for the veggie patch, but then I wonder if I'm being melodramatic. I feel somewhat vindicated because of course it was all too good to be true, and it was only a matter of time before he fucked it. I sent him a furious text once he'd left.

In the future don't think you can just make changes to our arrangement without speaking with me first. I've got a huge week at work too. Do better.

He didn't reply.

Archer, on the other hand, is going above and beyond to help me with the funeral stuff, he's coming by tomorrow to build the wall structure. I texted him frantically trying to rearrange our next date and he said he'd be happy to help. Gabe too, told me to let him know if I needed anything. If everything else goes to plan, I feel like I might actually pull this off. Even though I'm terrified I'll mess it up.

'So, I'm doing my best cunnilingus shoulders because it's a Tegan and Sara number, so you know I'm feeling the pressure to turn it out for the lesbian gods,' Farida says. She's regaling Jude and me with a story about a drag show she did on the weekend. Jude had a meeting nearby, so she popped in after and surprised us with lunch. She's spent a good hour talking us through some ideas for advertising and marketing, and the energy in the shop space is electric.

'Wait; *what* shoulders?' Jude says.

‘You know—this move.’ Farida shimmies her shoulders from side-to-side. ‘Cunnilingus shoulders. You gotta be committed with your whole body.’ She nods emphatically.

Jude smacks her forehead. ‘Oh my god, cunnilingus shoulders, yes.’

‘And then she yells at the top of her voice, mid-routine, “Are those fish alive?” and I’m like staring at her going, bitch, are you for real? They’re in my shoe!’

Farida pulls out her phone and shows us a photo of her outfit. The shoes in question are silver platforms with clear heels that contain sloshing water and orange goldfish. ‘So she starts up again, “This is a violation of animal rights!” and I’m like, for fuck’s sake, but I keep ignoring her and I keep dancing, and then she does it again.’

Jude and I are laughing so hard we’re crying; there are tears streaming down my cheeks and I can’t breathe.

‘I can’t...’ I wheeze.

‘So I take the platforms off, as part of the routine, like, I’m still lip-syncing, and then I pick one of them up and dance over to her table, and pour the fish into her wine glass and watch her scream.’

‘Farida!’ Jude howls.

‘So, they float to the surface and the woman is like, “They’re dead! They’re dead!” And I look at the DJ and he cuts the music, and the club goes silent and I stare at her, walk up real close and say, “They’re plastic. Now can you shut up and let me finish this stellar routine?” And the woman bursts into tears and storms out.’ Farida curtseys dramatically. ‘I couldn’t have choreographed the whole thing better if I tried.’

‘This is magic,’ Jude exclaims. ‘It’s almost as magic as Cleo telling Doug to get fucked, and getting her back blown out multiple times last week.’

My mouth opens wide. ‘Excuse me.’

Farida is laughing. ‘Please tell me something eventful happened on your weekend, Jude.’

‘Nothing on the weekend...but we did find out this morning that we got the public transport campaign.’

‘Jude! That’s massive.’ I look at her, and she shrugs it off.

‘That’s awesome, Jude. And, um, you seeing anyone at the moment?’ Farida asks. I’m sure Farida has a bit of a crush on Jude, which is why I think she’s in full flight trying to be as dazzling as possible. Not that she has to try that hard, really.

‘Do you know the designer Victoria Firth-Smith?’

Farida nods, wide-eyed.

‘Well, we met at an event the other night, and she is something else.’

‘You didn’t tell me.’ I feel a little weird that this is the first I’m hearing of it.

‘It’s not a thing. You know me, I’m not looking for anything, but it was hot. She’s hot. Dynamic and funny and smart. She is the kind of woman I would date. If I was dating.’ Jude drinks from her beer.

‘Should I date her?’ Farida jokes.

‘I’ll give her your number,’ Jude winks. ‘So, Farida—you found any more suitors for our girl here?’

‘I’ve got a couple waiting in the wings that I’ve put on hold because of Joy Doxiadis’ funeral fun times.’

‘Can I really be bothered meeting even more people?’ I say. ‘It kind of feels greedy.’

‘Greedy?’ Jude exclaims. ‘What if Archer and Gabe both turn out to be douchebags?’

‘I just don’t see that happening,’ I say without thinking, and catch Farida and Jude exchanging a look. ‘I mean, I’m enjoying getting to know them and I’m...’ I search for the right word.

‘Turned on?’ Farida offers.

‘Satisfied?’ Jude adds.

‘Catching feelings, maybe?’ Farida pushes.

I shake my head. ‘Low stakes and cute dates, remember?’ I’m reminding myself too. ‘Twenty dates to learn what I like.’

‘And what have you realised so far?’

‘That my bar was too low.’

‘When you’ve only had cornflakes, cheeseburgers taste incredible,’ Jude smiles. ‘But what if you try a steak? I mean suddenly you’ve got these guys around who seem impressive because they’re not Doug.’ She shrugs. ‘Just keep trusting your gut is all I’m saying. Keep dating. Don’t put all your boys in one basket.’

‘...A memoir by Jude Clark,’ I say. ‘No, no, you’re right. I’m enjoying the experiment and I’m going to keep going. I’m going to get to twenty. Farida, keep finding me interesting treats to snack on, please.’

‘I hate this metaphor,’ Farida says, scowling with disgust.

Archer meets me at the shop after work the next day and we build the flower-wall frames. He's already designed and measured them up, then he cut the struts in the alleyway next to the shop.

When I say we get to work, what that actually looks like is me sitting on the back of his ute while he joins timbers with a nail gun and I stare at his biceps, occasionally holding things in place, or handing him tools I don't know the names of and watching him laugh at me when I give him the wrong one.

'So, when you get there, you'll just have to put this leg bracket in like this...and put these four screws in, yes?' he says, pointing at the foolproof way he's built the legs so Farida and I can do it on Sunday. We're borrowing a truck from Farida's cousin but the walls will only fit in pieces. I would never even have thought to think about this, but Archer was across it. 'Are you paying attention?' He's mock-stern as he watches me watch him.

'Of course I am.' I'm not really. 'No, actually I wasn't. You're very distracting.'

'Me?' he scoffs. 'What about you?' He steps towards me, standing between my legs to lean down and kiss me.

'No. No kissing, we're working.' I jump down from the ute and duck under his arm to stand next to the wall. 'Show me again.'

Archer rolls his shoulders back and groans dramatically as he bends down and walks me through the process again, and I try my hardest to pay attention.

'Is it bad that I'm happy about a funeral?' I say, when the first wall is nailed together. I dip a brush into a tin of white paint to do the edges.

Archer shrugs. 'I don't think you're happy about the funeral. I think you're happy about what the funeral means.'

'Yes. You're right. I just really want to do a good job,' I say without thinking, and suddenly feel I've made myself vulnerable. I change the subject. 'I hoped it would've meant more shirtless carpenters, though.'

'I should take you to Fair Work.' He looks over at me and lifts his shirt to bare his stomach before gunning two nails into the wall with a dramatic flourish.

I snort. 'What would your complaints be?'

'My boss is sexually objectifying me on the job, asking me to take my

shirt off, ogling me constantly and paying me with dinner.'

'Ogling? I'm not ogling. I'm...admiring.'

Archer laughs loudly. 'Right, that's way better.' He pauses.

'That is better, actually. I like feeling your eyes on my body.'

'Well, that's lucky because I like looking at your body.'

'I love your body,' he says, closing the distance between us, but I turn and aim my paint brush at his chest.

'No, no touching until we're done.'

'See, you're a terrible boss. These working conditions are ludicrous. Where's my incentives?'

I glance up the street to make sure no one is around and balance the paint brush carefully on the tin. 'Incentive,' I say, and look at Archer as I slide my thumbs up the side of my skirt and slip off my knickers. I step out of them and stash them neatly in my pocket. 'Well? Get building.'

We work quickly, glancing at each other, as it starts to get dark. I feel his eyes locked on me when my back is turned, and I lightly brush my fingertips against his skin whenever I walk past him. When he's finished nailing up the second wall he sits where I was on the ute and watches me paint. I try to make interesting shapes with my body—I pop my butt out and throw my hair over one shoulder and arch my neck. Archer takes this as an invitation because suddenly he's behind me, one hand around my waist and kissing my neck.

'I want you now,' he whispers, and I drop the paintbrush on the road and turn to kiss him.

We stumble towards the back door to the shop and he leans me against it, his knee between my thighs as he pulls my top over my head. He stops and takes a moment to stare at my bare torso, at my bra, as I run my fingers through his hair.

'I'm going to open the door,' I say, but Archer reaches his hand past my waist to the door handle and we stumble inside, locked together. I pull his shirt over his head, running my hands down his chest. Everything slows as I marvel at how taut the skin is over his muscles, and how beautiful his body is. I fumble at the button on his pants as he struggles with my bra clasp. We're giggling as we kiss, instinctively taking control of our own undressing.

When I'm naked Archer steps me towards the workbench until my butt is resting on the edge and I grab at his underwear, wrapping one leg around his hips. His lips kiss my chest, his fingertips are on my skin, his teeth graze my

nipple as he takes it in his mouth and I moan loudly. That makes him bite a little harder, which makes me moan louder.

He looks up, smirking, 'Tell me you want me.'

'I want you,' I say, pushing him backwards onto the floor. I straddle him, my hands on his chest as my hips grind into him and he makes a low, primal sound and grabs one of my hands and raises himself quickly to a sitting position. I am startled by his strength, as my knees adjust and we stare at each other, panting, finding the perfect angle as we stare at each other, completely enraptured by the pleasure surging through our bodies.

We sit on the floor in our underwear, leaning against the front counter with a mostly empty pizza box between us. We draw lazy patterns on each other with our fingertips, pressing kisses to skin that rarely gets kissed, like we're staking claim on new territory.

'How old were you when you first had sex?' I whisper, feeling a slight dig of secret delight at asking him the same question I asked Gabe the other night.

Archer smiles. 'Seventeen. You?'

'Sixteen, at a party and it was...' I pause, knowing what his face will do with the next word, '...fine.'

'Fine? Oh no.' His nose turns up. 'My first time was awful. I was terrified, she was terrified. I didn't know anything. I hadn't really watched that much porn cause it was all shit dial-up internet back then.'

I make a sympathetic face and rub his arm.

'It's all right,' Archer laughs. 'I saw her like a decade later and we made up for it.'

'Oh, I love that. That's great. I never saw my guy again, although when Facebook happened I did stalk him.'

'What did you find out?'

'He was something boring like an engineer and wore his collar up, so I'm glad I dodged that bullet.'

'Can I ask you something?'

I sit up, and nod cautiously.

'So, this thing with Farida, the dates, twenty of them. Are you counting this, us, in that?'

'Well, yeah. It's an experiment.' I feel a little uncertain. 'Doug and I were together for so long and then I didn't have the space or time or the inclination to go out with anyone, and I think I just wanted practice.'

‘Practice?’

‘I was twenty-five when I met Doug, and Farida pointed out that I only knew how to date in a twenty-five-year-old-Cleo pre-app way. You know?’

‘Absolutely. I felt exactly the same when Freja’s mum and I separated. I get it.’ He takes a breath. ‘I guess what I’m asking is what my expectations should be. I want to know what you’re looking for.’

‘In a relationship?’ I sound nervous. ‘I don’t know yet, honestly. I think my focus is on myself and my kids right now. And I’m just taking things as they come and trying not to overthink things.’ I study his face to see if this answer will suffice.

‘So, nothing serious?’

‘Yeah. That’s not on my radar right now. Low stakes, cute dates is where I’m at.’

‘Cool,’ Archer says, nodding. ‘I can do that.’

‘Cool? Really? Did I...umm...’

‘Cleo, you just told me the truth, that’s enough.’ He picks up my hand and kisses it. ‘We should get going, huh?’

I nod, trying to read him, feeling anxious that I’ve somehow said something wrong. But he’s right: I did tell the truth, and that ought to be enough.

Archer just blows my mind and I don’t know how to feel, apart from intrigued and seen and...nervous. This is making me nervous.

Low stakes. Cute dates, I repeat in my head as he drives away.

‘Ahh! *Jebi se! You shit. Kurac glavom!*’ I whisper-shout in Croatian. I slam the hot-glue gun down on the table and stuff my fingers in my mouth, and my phone lights up with a message from Gabe.

Here, it says.

I told him to message when he got here so he wouldn’t wake the kids with a knock. I feel like I’m doing something naughty, like I could get in trouble, which feels ridiculous. God, I hope the kids don’t wake up. They don’t normally once they’re down. My heart races and I quickly glance in the mirror near the front door, tousling my hair. I’m going for an accidentally-on-purpose sexy-yet-comfortable ensemble, and I’ve nailed it.

Gabe stands on the doorstep with a toolbox in one hand and a shopping bag in the other.

‘Hi.’ He hands me the bag and I peek inside: four different flavours of ice cream and a six-pack of beer.

‘Stop flirting with me,’ I say, hugging him.

Gabe wraps his arms tightly around my waist and nuzzles into my neck. ‘You smell so good.’

‘I’m glad you could come over,’ I say, meaning it. We hadn’t planned on seeing each other tonight, but I was complaining via text about my failing letter construction. Building the frames for the floral letters to meet Glen’s very detailed font specification has been giving me headaches for days. Cursive turns out to be a bitch: I’d only just managed to get the ‘o’ in Joy to work and the other two letters were going to be way harder.

At least her name isn’t Dominique. Let me help you, he said, and I reluctantly agreed.

Now he’s looking around my lounge room. ‘This place is great,’ he grins.

‘It doesn’t normally look like this,’ I say, walking into the kitchen and gesturing elaborately at the craft-construction mess that covers every surface. ‘I mean, I’ve barely had a second to blink since we got this job.’

Gabe pulls out one of the kitchen stools and cracks a beer, watching me as I dig a spoon into the peppermint ice cream and talk him through my plans. I offer him a mouthful but he shakes his head.

‘Did you bring a toolbelt?’ I nod towards his toolbox.

‘I didn’t.’ He puts his hands on my hips and pulls me between his legs. ‘I’m sorry we won’t be able to fulfill your naked-man-in-a-toolbelt fantasy.’

Not to worry—I already had most of that fantasy fulfilled by Archer last night.

‘Babies are here, yes?’ he goes on, and I nod. ‘Isn’t it meant to be your week off?’ I give him another exaggerated, frustrated nod.

‘What about your Jude?’

‘She’s away on a shoot.’

‘Got it,’ he says, and leans up to kiss me.

‘I was the textbook definition of an emo kid,’ Gabe says as he concentrates on attaching plastic mesh to the craftwood border in his hands.

‘Did you have a side fringe?’ I ask gluing next to his fingers.

Gabe looks at me, puts the letter down and pulls his phone out of his pocket. ‘Brace yourself.’

‘I’m ready.’

He hands me the phone and there’s a young Gabe with an epic black fringe swept straight over his right eye. He’s looking at me with a moody pout. He has an eyebrow ring and multiple silver chain necklaces, and the hand his chin’s resting on has a black and white striped glove on it.

I coo loudly. ‘Aww! Look at you.’

‘I know, right? What a sad sack.’

‘Was he?’

‘God, yeah. I was eighteen and I’d already lived out of home for about eighteen months at that point because things with my stepdad were messy. Then I fell in love with a girl at Burger King.’

‘Of course.’

‘Moved in with her. And she was not in a healthy place and—’ Gabe looks up, shaking his head, ‘Sorry. What a downer.’

‘No not at all. I want to know things.’

Gabe nods. ‘Well, the dot-point version of my family is single mum, absent dad, abusive stepdad. A supremely mean and unwell man who my mother still hasn’t left to this day. Followed by a string of co-dependent relationships, and black box dye to create this majesty.’ Gabe points at the photo.

My instinct is to say sorry about your mum, but that feels like a weird thing to say. I settle on: ‘That’s really shit.’

‘It’s okay. I just learned sooner than most that our parents are messy people who have no idea what they’re doing either.’

‘Please don’t tell my kids that,’ I smile, and Gabe taps the side of his nose

conspiratorially.

‘Do you talk to her?’

‘It’s easier not to,’ he says. ‘Let me guess, you come from one of those gross highly functional happy families?’

‘Sorry.’ I smile. ‘My parents are great. My dad is one of the best people on the planet. Fact.’

‘Of course he is. I mean, look at you.’ Gabe gets up and goes to the fridge. He carefully touches the pictures and photos before he opens the door; points at one and says, ‘That’s a great photo.’

It’s twenty-four-year-old Jude and Cleo, bronzed and beaming. We’re hugging each other tightly, our faces alight with possibility.

‘India in our twenties. We’d just had a deeply spiritual and life-affirming moment on top of a mountain, and then directly after that photo was taken three young men asked us if we were porn stars and if we’d suck their dicks.’

‘And so you did?’

‘Naturally,’ I nod, deadpan.

Gabe takes another photo off the fridge: me, Frankie and Andy sitting on the front steps. Snapped by Jude a few weeks ago when we weren’t looking: we’re all just staring at each other and laughing. I love that photo. I’m so rarely in photos that seeing myself with my babies does something magic to my synapses.

‘They’re gorgeous.’ Gabe looks up. ‘And so are you.’

I look away to avoid accepting the compliment as he picks up another photo, my favourite of Perry and Jude. They’re both wearing tutus and tiaras, Jude is on her knees so she’s the same height as Perry, and she is laughing in this one too, nose scrunched and mouth wide, real joy emanating from her core. Perry is looking at her with awe and whenever I look at it, I know exactly how he feels in that moment.

‘Tell me more about Jude.’

I feel myself light up. ‘Well, she’s ferocious, and she bubbles with a kind of fire energy. She acts first and thinks second, and she tells people to get fucked and she thinks she’s right all the time and she’s hilarious and brilliant at her job and the actual best. She’s the best,’ I smile.

‘I think I’m going to like her a lot.’

‘I mean, no pressure, but if she doesn’t like you then we can’t date anymore,’ I half-joke.

‘Like, that’s it? One shot? Maybe I shouldn’t meet her then.’ Gabe opens

the fridge and takes out two cans, opens them both and takes a sip.

‘Bathroom?’ he asks.

‘First on the left.’

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I become so enamoured by the glue and wood and mesh and perfecting the loop of the ‘J’ that I don’t really notice how long Gabe has been in the bathroom until he’s back in the kitchen.

‘Come with me,’ he says.

‘What?’

I suddenly become aware of the sound of the bath running. I follow him into the bathroom where there’s a candle lit, and all the kids’ toys are in their basket on the floor. I laugh, overwhelmed. ‘There is no way we’re both going to fit in—’

‘It’s not for me.’

‘What?’ I turn and stare at his face. ‘It’s for me? You ran me a bath? What?’

‘You said you haven’t had a second? So take a second.’

‘No. We’re hanging out, I’m not going to....Anyway I’ve got to finish the letters tonight,’ I rush out.

‘I’ll finish the letters,’ he says, matter of fact.

I shake my head, ‘No, this is so lovely, but you don’t have to do this.’

‘When was the last time you had a bath?’ Gabe asks.

‘I can’t remember.’

‘So, take twenty minutes. I have *plenty* of work to do.’

‘Yeah, *my* work.’

‘To be honest, you and your swearing and your blistered fingers are just hindering my artistic process.’

The bath smells delicious. Something in me softens. ‘Twenty minutes?’

‘Please,’ Gabe says, before kissing me sweetly on the lips and shutting the door behind him.

I stare at the bath for a moment and try to process what just happened, my resistance to it and what it means, and how I feel about it. Then I get undressed and hop in the bath. My muscles slowly relax, and I take a deep breath. I drink my whole beer in silence and tell the guilty feelings, or my mother’s voice in my head telling me I’m a bad host, or the feeling that maybe this is a weird thing for Gabe to do, to go away and just enjoy it. Twenty minutes.

When I re-emerge I’m so relaxed I don’t worry about the perfect sexy-

comfort outfit, I just put on some moisturiser and my robe and walk into the kitchen. Gabe is about to finish the 'y'; the 'j', completed, is balancing on two stools.

'You finished it?' I say. 'That was quick.'

'What can I say, I'm good with my hands,' Gabe looks up at me, smiling and calm, completely oblivious to the whirlwind of feelings happening inside me all at once right now.

'See, I don't know if I have enough evidence to support this hypothesis,' I say.

'Oh no; really?'

'Yeah,' I run my hand down his arm and pull lightly on his wrist.

'But the y?' Gabe says, looking at the craftwood in his hand.

I shake my head. 'The y can wait.'

'The y *can* wait.' Gabe puts it down and lets me lead him into the lounge room. And then, as we kiss and touch each other's bodies all over, Gabe shows he is a man of his word, and very good with his hands indeed.

Who knew that a beer, a bath and two orgasms would unleash some inner sex vixen in me. But it has, because I give him head as enthusiastically as I've ever given head in my life, and I love every second of it. Love teasing him, love hearing his low moans, love the moment when I have to shush him for being too loud and he covers his mouth with his hand.

'Fuck, Cleo,' he groans.

I love the sound of my name in his mouth, love the look in his eye and the satisfied smirk on his face after he cums and we both sit on the couch catching our breath, our limbs entwined, giggling silly, sweet ramblings.

'Hey, you don't expect me to stay, do you?' Gabe's finishing the y and I'm eating the ice cream.

'God, no,' I say before thinking, and Gabe laughs.

'Geez. Tell me how you really feel.'

'I'm sorry. That's...you don't want to stay, though, do you?'

'No. I like my own bed and I just prefer not to...'

'Not to what?' I'm curious now.

'Complicate things.'

'Sleeping complicates things?'

'In the beginning? Yeah. Boundaries are good.'

'We're on the same page, then,' I say, but my thoughts race. How many other boundaries or rules does Gabe have for this whole dating thing that I

don't know about?

‘Well, this is quite the development,’ says Dr Tricia.

‘Am I crazy for thinking this can work out, and I’m not going to get totally obliterated in the process?’

‘Tell me what you think this working out looks like,’ she smiles, placing her clasped hands together on her clipboard again, her go-to listening position.

‘Well, it’s...’ I start to answer, then realise I have no idea. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Because you’re enjoying it?’

‘Well, yeah,’ I say, ‘and I don’t want to overthink it. I just want to enjoy it and have no one get hurt.’

‘All right. While that’s an honourable intention, Cleo, people are always going to get hurt. That’s life. But what we want is for you to keep talking, and checking in with yourself about what *you* want, and asking for that. These people you’re dating can’t meet your needs if they don’t know what they are.’

She stops and looks at me, and I nod.

Shit.

What infuriates me about Doug is that it feels like he never considers my needs. When we were together I wanted to be thought of, I wanted to be on his mind, I didn’t want to have to keep asking for him to help me with the house and the kids. I wanted effort.

‘I asked so many times for what I wanted that I got sick of asking,’ I say. ‘And some things I don’t want to have to ask for. I wanted him to *want* to help me, or just do things around the house because it’d be beneficial for everyone, but he didn’t do anything.’

‘And that was your indication of how he felt about the relationship, and his capacity to care for you.’

Oofft. It’s like someone has suddenly switched on a fluorescent light and I’m looking at our relationship for the first time. Like before I was in a room and only had a lamp and I thought I knew everything about the space, but now it’s lit up I can see how broken some bits of the furniture are, or the parts of the space I’ve not been in, or cleaned, for years. It’s startling.

‘Inaction is a choice, Cleo. Doug made his choice over and over again. You asked for what you wanted and he chose, and because he didn’t do anything, or do what you wanted him to do, you thought he wasn’t choosing.

But he was.'

He was choosing the whole time and I tolerated that. He made his position, and his propensity to care for me and the kids, clear a hundred times; and I should've left the first time, but I stuck around believing that one day he'd get it. He'd choose me, he'd make the decision I wanted him to make, because I felt like it was the only choice. But it wasn't: he had a choice and he chose to do nothing, until he chose to blow it all up.

I sob and nod and cry, and Dr Tricia hands me the tissues and waits.

I take a deep breath. I don't know why this makes me feel both relieved and guilty at the same time. I always believed that we'd find the thing that would give him momentum, like he was some code to crack. Like, if I just worked out the right starting sequence then everything would get moving and he'd become the man I totally thought he could be.

'Was I wrong to expect him to do what I wanted?'

'Not at all. That's what you needed, and he didn't do it, so it's like you quietened your need, or invalidated it, and focused on his, on helping him catch up to you. But we can't rush people. They have to make the decisions they have to make for themselves, and you have to choose if that's enough for you.'

'Doug wasn't enough for me,' I say, clenching my teeth.

'No, he wasn't.'

I sigh and lean back in the chair staring at her, trying to find the places in my body to stuff this new information.

'Now, because you're someone who's spent a long time either meeting her own needs and not asking for help, or ignoring her own needs entirely, changing these patterns is going to take practice. But these people you're dating seem like they're open to those kinds of conversations.'

'What do you think about non-monogamy? From a therapeutic perspective?' I ask, genuinely curious.

'I think as long as consenting adults are communicating healthily about their desires and everyone feels seen and respected, then how people choose to love is entirely up to them.'

'Yeah, but does it work?'

'When you and Doug got married did you believe that marriage worked?'

'Of course.'

'Because it's all you've seen. It's the recognised success model. But we honour the success of a relationship based on its longevity, not on its health,

or its satisfaction, or if the people involved are growing and thriving.’ She pauses. ‘You felt like you’d failed when you got divorced, didn’t you?’

‘Yeah. I did.’

‘Failed at what? Being miserable together for seventy years like my grandparents? My grandma stayed with the one abusive man for her entire life—and people applauded them. I’m not saying all marriages are miserable; of course that model works for some people. But so can every other model. It depends on the people in it.’

My heart races. All of this feels disorienting.

‘Cleo, we’re going more inward than ever before. Relationships take a lot of work—self-work, and work together—and even then, there’s no guarantee of success. There’s no golden recipe.’

‘I imagine you’d make a lot of money if you could work it out, though.’

She laughs. ‘What I want for all my patients is to be in relationships where they feel like they can be the truest expression of themselves, and the same for their partner. If that means saying: I hate rock-climbing, go and climb rocks with someone else, and everyone agrees that rock-climbing apart is great, then what’s the issue?’

‘What about compromise, though? You have to compromise in relationships.’

‘Of course, but I think of them as relational compromises. What we have for dinner, where we holiday, how we spend a Saturday morning, where we hang the bloody painting. But compromising on your values, or your hopes, or your desires—it just leads to people being very unhappy. And it’s hard, because that’s how we’ve been taught to do it.’

‘I’m really scared.’

‘What of? Being happy?’ I nod, and she smiles softly. ‘I know, right? What if it all goes to shit? Or eventually it’ll have to go to shit? What if people think I’m shit?’

‘All of that.’ I laugh nervously.

‘Your fear is fine, Cleo. It’s totally reasonable to be scared of being hurt. But you need to communicate that. If you like these people, if you like getting to know these people, if it feels good and safe, then keep doing it, and deal with the next bit when you get there. Control the controllable, remember?’

I nod.

‘You’re allowed to be happy,’ she says. ‘You’re allowed to do things on

your terms. This notion that we'll land in a sort of nirvana one day where we'll have no problems is the most ridiculous fallacy. There'll always be problems—so pick good ones.'

'That's your advice? Pick good problems?'

'Yes. And your fear of dating multiple people you actually really like, who like you back, is a good problem.'

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'How was therapy?' Farida asks when I get to the shop.

'I need to control the controllable and not spend energy on anything else,' I say, placing the finished letters on the bench and looking up at the whiteboard we've installed for our Joy Doxiadis to-do list.

'Yay! You finished them,' Farida says.

'Gabe finished them last night'—I pause, unlooping my bags from my shoulders and stopping to stare at her—'while I lay in a bath that he ran for me.'

'*He ran you a bath?*' she says, her mouth agape. 'Maybe I should've dated him instead.'

My phone starts ringing and Jude's face appears on the screen. 'All right, my loves, I've got two restaurants interested in your flower walls and I've convinced them that paying a grand a pop is a steal, because I'm doing them a favour.'

'Jude!' I gasp.

I felt awful about the size of the job and the waste—the fact that the walls are only being used for the hour-long ceremony and that's it—and had been complaining about it to Jude, so she reached out to a few restaurant clients to see if they wanted a last-minute floral installation as a photo wall for the weekend.

'*Cleo, she's acting like a drug dealer,*' Benji, Jude's colleague and number-one collaborator, yells across the desk from their shared office and Jude turns the phone so we can see him. 'If she rocks up in Wayfarers tomorrow, I'm putting her in floral rehab.'

'Sorry, Benji,' I say.

'If I can convince Yanna that we need a flower wall in the lounge room I'll be tempted to get one myself. She's fucking merciless,' Benji laughs.

'Shut up, you,' Jude cackles. 'I told them to think of the marketing. Which is what you two need to do. Think of some way that West Side Honey can feature somewhere on them, please, so people can contact you.'

'On it,' Farida says.

‘Jude, this is awesome, thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’ She leans back in her office chair. ‘How was last night?’

‘He ran her a bath,’ Farida says quickly.

‘He what? For both of you?’

‘No, just for me. He said he could tell I was stressed.’

‘Good god,’ Jude muses. ‘When are you seeing him again?’

‘This week is so insane...maybe after the funeral.’

‘Right. Farida, I’ve rethought it, and I think you need to do me next.’

‘I can’t do you, Jude, because we love the same kind of women.’

‘Well, shit.’ She shakes her head. ‘Once again you straights ruin everything.’

‘Why can’t you two just date?’ I ask, knowing they’ll both squirm.

‘We can’t,’ Farida jumps in quickly. ‘Two tops. Just wouldn’t work.’

‘Farida, stop dashing my romantic fantasies,’ Jude jokes.

I’m sure Farida blushes. ‘I can’t believe he ran you a bath,’ she says, desperately changing the subject.

‘Rub a dub dub, all the men and Cleo in the tub.’ Jude cracks herself up, and I hear Benji in the background groaning.

‘I’m hanging up now,’ I say.

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I triple check my to-do list before I leave the shop to head to dance. We're ready for the funeral tomorrow. The coffin spray looks massive and dramatic and beautiful. The walls are mostly loaded with their flowers, and we'll do the rest on-site in the morning. Farida and I will have to get there early in the morning, but we're ready.

I leave the shop at the last possible second and get a message from Jude when I'm in the car.

Sorry, love, I really can't get away tonight. I'm gonna have to miss dance. I know, I know. I'm sorry.

Shit, that's annoying. I'm busy with work too and I've managed to find a way, but she just gets so singularly focused. It's like she feels like she has to work twice as hard to prove her worth because she's a mum. I've never brought this up with her because I don't want to upset her, but I should. She needs to know that I'm upset, and annoyed and that if she didn't want to do it in the first place she shouldn't have. Then I think, *Don't be stupid, Cleo. There's no way I would've come without her.* When I park the car I have a minute to spare so I send her a thumbs-up, which I know she will read as me being pissed off with her. I quickly send a love heart too.

Tonight we run through everything we've learnt so far, with a specific focus on our precision, timing, and our sexiness. Our routine starts off hyper and eighties and exactly like you'd expect a Mellie Abundance routine to be, but then you get stunned by a tempo change midway through and all our choreography becomes sensual shoulders and hip-centric moves to an old slow-bass, heavy-funk song.

'This must come from your sexiest places,' Mellie yells at us with her signature positive grunt. 'Don't look at me like that, you all have a low and primal sex place right here.' She holds her flat palms on the base of her stomach, and swirls her hips in a large, deliberate circle.

'We're all water and energy, babes, and I want you to cause a tidal wave of erotic energy with your hips. Do. What. Feels. *Good!*' she screams, then flicks off the bright hall lights and tells us all to get down low and run our hands over our bodies.

At first everyone is giggling and cracking bad double entendres; but eventually the energy shifts, as the entire room gets into the tsunami of pelvic pleasure. The freestyle component of the class tonight is as horny as a high-

school dance, but without the angst.

*

At the end of class there's a message from Jude.

Just got home and relieved your parents of their babysitting duties.

Kids all good, and sound asleep. See you when you get home.

I feel really in my body, and really turned on, and I definitely don't want to go home yet. I message Archer. *Fancy a visitor? I'm on my way back from dance and thought I could pop in.*

Please do.

I bite my lip with anticipation, and then I send Gabe a message.

Thinking of your lips and fingers and hands on my body. And like the idea of you thinking of this too.

And then Jude: *Thanks love. I'm going to head to Archer's for a bit, but I'll be home tonight.*

I sit in the car listening to Dr Tricia in my mind: *Make them good problems.*

Archer quietly opens the door, and he grins when he sees me but puts a shush finger to his mouth, and I nod. It's his week with his daughter. I follow him up the hallway, taking in the details of his home. Lots of unique wooden furniture, First Nations art on the walls and hanging plants...he turns and looks at me and I smile. 'This is beautiful.'

'Thank you.' He points up with one finger and takes my hand in his, and we walk up a flight of beautifully made timber stairs to a landing, where he opens the door to his bedroom.

'Hello you,' he says as he shuts the door behind him.

'Oh, hi.'

'This is a lovely surprise.'

'Well, things got very sexy in class this evening and I thought of you.'

'I'm glad you did.' Archer comes close and traces the line of my jaw with his thumb. He kisses me sweetly, but I pull away as the kiss heats up.

'Things also got very sweaty in class this evening,' I say, throwing him a look of exaggerated alarm, and he points to the bathroom door. I kiss him quickly. 'Two minutes.' I shut the door, peel off my sweaty activewear and jump into the shower while it's still cold, trying to go as quick as I can. Archer has multiple different body washes in different-shaped bottles, and I choose the one that smells like him. As the water finally heats up, I close my eyes and feel my shoulders relax.

The door opens softly and a naked Archer is in the doorway. 'Thought I

might join you?’

I just look at him and nod. We stand there and for the first time we get a good look at each other’s bodies. Studying curves and shapes and details we haven’t yet had the chance to notice. I feel sexy and insecure in equal measure. I’m definitely blushing.

Then we are very quickly a soapy collision of limbs pressed against each other, kissing and laying hands over each other’s bodies hungrily, impatiently. He kisses my neck as his hands run up my thighs and I wrap my arms around his neck wanting him as close as possible. He turns me around, massaging my shoulders, running his hands down my back and over my arse, over my hips to my inner thighs. I push my hips into him and push against the tiled wall and his fingers rub against me and my breath quickens in my chest. I shift my thigh letting him touch me more and lean against his chest as he reads my body and moans, until I orgasm loudly. The volume kind of startles me: I’m so used to having to be quiet that I like the surge of power I feel. I turn around, dazed and smiley, catching my breath as he kisses me softly, both of our heads under the water. I run my hands over his chest and down his body and desperately want to return the favour, I kiss down his chest till I’m on my knees, my hands on his hips, and I tease him with my tongue till he’s moaning low, his hands in my hair.

We lie on his bed facing each other, telling trivial stories and making each other laugh about bad dates and secret vulnerabilities.

‘Why your knees?’ he says.

‘I don’t know...they’re weird. I think they’re weird. I just...I’ve always...’ I feel ridiculously self-conscious.

‘Show me.’

‘No,’ I laugh and reach for the bedsheet as Archer sits on his haunches and pulls it away quickly.

He looks at me intensely. ‘You have beautiful knees.’

‘Pfft,’ I scoff. ‘I do not. They’re all...puffy.’

‘Puffy? They look like knees.’ He leans down and kisses them. ‘Nice ones. I love them.’

‘All right, now you,’ I mutter, pulling the sheet back over my legs.

‘My butt.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause I don’t have one.’

‘Show me.’

Archer stands up and shows off his perfectly excellent arse, tensing and releasing to accentuate the dimples. 'You have a great bum,' I giggle as he lies back on the bed next to me, and we stare at each other, our breath in sync.

'I better go,' I whisper.

'Okay.' We kiss and kiss and at last I pull away. 'You could stay?' he smiles. 'Meet Freja in the morning.'

My stomach drops. I feel suddenly hot. 'Oh, what? Um.' *Meet his daughter? That feels. That's a serious thing? Isn't it? That's not what you do if you're just dating someone.* 'No, the funeral is...there's so much to do. Plus, my kids...' I scoot out of bed and into the bathroom, trying to seem casual and unfazed.

'Cleo, you good?'

'Yeah, 'course!' I quickly pull my clothes back on and look out into the bedroom, trying to radiate an air of cool.

'Because it feels like you might be freaking out a bit.'

'No, not freaking out—' I stop myself. *Why am I lying?*

I lean in the bathroom doorway and try to breathe slowly. 'I...Yeah, that feels like a lot...that I'm not, umm—'

'Okay,' Archer nods. 'It's okay. It's not a big deal to me when Freja meets people that I'm seeing, I let it happen when it happens. But I don't want you to feel uncomfortable, Cleo.'

'No, I don't feel uncomfortable.' I do. I feel exposed. And silly. I feel like I'm overreacting. Especially because he seems so cool and calm right now.

'What's going on?' he says, standing up and touching my shoulder. He feels too close to me.

'I think...I think...I don't know what I'm thinking, actually, just that...' I'm rambling; I hear myself make a strange throaty sound.

'Hey. Hey, can you just stop? Can we talk for a second? This has clearly triggered something.' Archer comes to stand in front of me and I get flustered, I don't want to be here anymore with him looking at me and expecting an explanation; it feels too much. He's too much.

'It's all good. It is. It's fine. I've just...I've got to go because it's late. Okay? I'll message you tomorrow.' I kiss him, a hard peck on the cheek, and then I scuttle out of his bedroom.

'Cleo...?'

'Sweet dreams,' I say, and I walk up the hallway and out the front door

and get into my car, ignoring my phone as it lights up with a call from him,
and drive away as quickly as I can.

‘I’ve got apology Tim Tams in the kitchen,’ Jude says, sitting up quickly on the couch when I walk in the door. She looks tired, and worried.

‘Thank you,’ I say, plopping down on the couch opposite her. ‘Kids?’

‘Sound asleep and completely fine.’

I undo the laces on my sneakers and very deliberately take each shoe and sock off and place them quietly on the ground as I work out what to say next.

‘Jude?’ I eventually say. ‘You didn’t want to come to dancing in the first place, did you?’

‘Not really.’

‘Why didn’t you say that?’

‘Because you wouldn’t have gone, and you really wanted to do it, and I thought I could make it work, but—’

‘But our mutual propensity for people-pleasing is a problem.’

‘Not *people*, Cleo. *You*. My propensity for doing just about anything for you is a problem I’m willing to have—yes.’ She laughs, but not like it’s funny.

‘We’ve got to be honest with each other. I need that from you of all people.’

‘I know. I’m sorry.’

‘Yeah.’ We stare at each other for a moment. ‘I was really pissed off earlier,’ I say, and Jude nods. ‘Because I felt like we’re both really busy but I still made it work, and it upset me that you didn’t.’ I look closely at her face for any signs that she’s upset with me, but it’s just her listening face. ‘I knew you only came for me, though, and I’m grateful for that, for everything you’ve done and do for me, and then I got worried.’

‘What about?’

‘You. And that sometimes it feels like you overcompensate at work for being a mum.’

‘Well, shit,’ Jude says, frustrated, rubbing her temples. ‘You’re right. I do. Totally.’

‘But you’re brilliant at your job.’

‘I am. But I’m also the only person in my studio who’s a single parent. The women don’t have kids, and the blokes who do have them also have partners who do all the nitty-gritty, and I just feel fucking guilty every time I have to leave early or Perry is sick or whatever. So in my weeks off I try to

do twice the work.'

'But you're exhausted, and there's no time for you to do anything—'

'I know.' She cuts me off. 'I'm sorry if you have to pick up my house and kid slack. I think about it all the time. I feel shit. I feel like I'm letting everyone down.'

'I was going to say time for yourself.'

'What's that again?' she says sarcastically.

'Jude, you're not letting everyone down, you're just living your life. Dr Bogan says we're always going to have problems so we better make sure they're good ones.'

'That doesn't sound helpful.'

'I found it really helpful. Maybe you need to stop spinning so many plates, or thinking that you have to spin them all perfectly.'

'You know I fantasise about letting them all smash and see what happens, but the thought of that gives me hives.'

I roll my eyes: typical Jude. 'But they're your bloody plates, aren't they? You can smash however many you want.'

'What is it with you Greeks and smashing plates?' She smirks, deflecting.

'Please just think about it. Because...I've got you, yeah? I just want you to be happy, my love.'

Jude takes a deep breath and looks at me properly, and I feel the gratitude in her eyes. 'How was Archer's?'

'I smashed a plate.'

'What?'

'He asked me to stay over and meet his kid in the morning and I freaked out and ran away. Literally, Jude. I ran out of his house like I was fleeing a crime scene.'

Jude laughs. 'You okay?'

'It'll be fine. I'm nervous about tomorrow and...I don't know. I don't know what happened. I'll fix it. Buy him a new plate or something.'

*

Andy and I barely sleep at all. He's really hot and grumbly and I hope he's not getting sick. He finally falls asleep on my chest in the armchair in his room, which is fine by me because I can't imagine my brain would have let me sleep anyway. Between running through everything for tomorrow and horror at how I left Archer's, my mind is absolutely racing.

What was it about Archer's casual offer to meet his daughter that freaked me out so much? Maybe because I've not introduced my kids to anyone, and

I don't know if I will. *Is it really that big a deal? Why did it feel like a big deal?*

I like Archer. A lot. I love getting to know Archer. I think Archer is brilliant. I want Archer to think I'm brilliant. I think I freaked out about what it means: that I'm in his life. That he wants me in his life. That this relationship feels important enough to introduce me to his kid. Which means he imagines I'm going to be around for a bit. Which means he's thinking of the future. Me in his future.

Even thinking that now makes my throat feel tight with... *fear*. I'm scared. No, I'm terrified. I'm terrified of getting hurt again. Of letting my guard down and giving someone the opportunity to treat me the way Doug did. To act the way I did with Doug. And I know I've changed. I know I wouldn't accept those things again. But when I was in it, I didn't realise how much toxic shit I'd been tolerating with Doug because it just became my normal. What if I fall into something with Archer, or Gabe, or any of these guys I'm seeing, and it happens again? I can't let it happen again.

In the morning I message Archer. *I'm sorry for dashing last night. And not returning your call. Andy is sick. I'll explain when I see you next. But I'm sorry. Have a great day.*

For the first time since I've known Farida, she isn't wearing a single glittering embellishment; in fact she looks positively bland. We're borrowing her cousin Ahmed's truck and she looked at me with such serious eyes when she walked in with him that I knew I wasn't meant to say anything.

'You okay?' I whisper.

'What? This?' she jokes but her eyes look embarrassed. 'It's just easier where my family's concerned.'

'Okay. I love you,' is the only thing I can think to say. I know she leads a little bit of a double life with her family. It's very much on a don't ask, don't tell basis with me too. She doesn't like talking about it. I know they definitely don't get the emboldened out-and-proud version that I get to marvel at every day, but seeing this dimmed-down version of her makes me realise I should ask her more often if she wants to talk about anything.

'Yeah. Me too.' She looks away. Then she pulls two folded shirts out of her bag.

Yesterday I got the West Side Honey T-shirts I'd ordered for us with our logo on them, and she beamed with pride. 'A bloody uniform? Look at us!' she hooted. 'Cleo, let me take them home tonight, please? I've got an idea.'

Now she hands me back my T-shirt, and I unfold it to reveal (relatively) subtle adornments done in sequins and glitter pen, and I adore it so much I get teary. It could be that I haven't really slept, and I'm so nervous that I can't stop shitting, but I'm so proud of us. I feel like we're really going to pull off Glen's very specific vision for his mum.

I hug her tight. 'Okay, we good?' I say.

'Let's do this!' She gets into the passenger side of Ahmed's truck and as they drive off, I glance at my packed car, double-check the shop doors are alarmed and locked, and slide into the driver's seat. I take a second to breathe; centre myself. I check my clipboard is in my handbag—rough timings of everything we need to do and when, with my billionth scrawled to-do list attached to it.

I'm ready.

The car, however, is not. It won't turn over. It won't start. Just a clicking noise. Battery? *Fuck. Fuck shit fuck.* I try again: nothing. I can feel my heart start to race. *What do I do? What do I do? What do I do? What will be the quickest solution?* I just need to get there. *Call a mechanic? Call an Uber?*

Uber is faster. Yup. Done. Deal with the car later. I open the app and order an XL vehicle and remind myself to breathe. *It'll be okay. This is why we left plenty of time to get there.* I choose not to message Farida because she'll just get stressed and both of us don't need to be freaking out right now. I check the app. *Darren is two minutes away.*

I quite manically unload everything out of my car and put it onto the side of the road in a pile and wait for Darren, who is somewhat startled by the amount of stuff we need to get into his Lexus. The energy I'm emanating must suggest it'll be best for him to keep his mouth shut and help, and he does.

'Big...funeral?' he asks awkwardly as we drive off.

'Yes,' I snap. We don't say anything else to each other the whole drive.

Breathe, Cleo. One setback. It's fine. We're back on track. You handled that perfectly. And we're still going to be early. Everything is going to be okay. You've got this.

Darren and I pull into the funeral home and Farida looks sick when she sees me falling out of the back seat.

'What the hell?'

'It's fine. I'm here. The car—'

'G'day love.' A box-dye redhead in her mid-fifties walks out from behind Farida. 'You must be Cleo.'

'This is Kay,' Farida says.

Kay the funeral director is butch, direct and filled with charismatic warmth. I've fallen in love with her after about two minutes.

'I'll tell ya what, love, this is an unusual set-up for a funeral. It's like one of those bloody clothes things with the gangplanks, what are they called again?'

'A fashion show?' Farida says, and I clench my teeth tightly trying not to laugh.

Kay says gruffly, 'That's it. Close but no cigarette, right love?' She whacks Farida's shoulder. 'Now, ladies, are we clear that we only have two hours to get everything in this morning? And then there's a thirty-minute window after the service for the butterfly-and-dove release...that'll be in the garden and you can get the floral walls back on your truck and the floral letters over to the wake hall.'

'Shall we synchronise watches?' I joke nervously.

'Great idea,' Kay says. 'I've got 9:06, what have you got?' Kay looks at

us seriously, and we both glance at our phones.

‘Yes, same. Great,’ I say, as Farida stifles a giggle by pretending to cough.

‘All right, quick sticks, ladies, I’ll leave you to it. Shout out if you need anything, I’ll be in the office,’ Kay says, and she marches out.

‘I’m both scared and attracted to her at the same time,’ Farida whispers as we start moving everything Darren unloaded out of the Uber off the driveway and into the venue.

‘All right, let’s start with the walls...’ and as the words leave my mouth, I know that the bag of screws and the tools for the legs are still in the glove box of my car, where I put them so they wouldn’t get lost.

Farida must see my face lose all its colour. She grabs my arm. ‘What?’

‘I’ve forgotten all the screws, Farida. We can’t put the walls up without them. Oh, god, I’m going to be sick.’

‘It’s okay. Um. We’ll just go and get them. We’ve got time,’ she says, looking at her watch and doing mental trip maths in her head. ‘We’ll flip our plan and do the wake set-up first and then we’ll do in here and it’ll be fine. Ahmed can go. Ahmed you can go back to the shop, yeah?’

‘Easy,’ Ahmed mutters, nodding. I’d love to know what Farida bribed him with today because he’s being over the top with the niceties.

‘Yes. Okay. Yup. Let’s get the truck unloaded quickly and then Ahmed, you can go and get them out of my car, and we’ll still be on track,’ I repeat, trying convince myself. Farida and I are nodding erratically at each other, neither of us wanting to stress the other out too much, but if she feels anything like I do right now then she wants to vomit, cry, yell, laugh and shit herself all at once.

Ahmed drives off as soon as the last bucket of flowers is out of the truck.

‘This is a fucking nightmare,’ I mutter.

Farida nods. ‘Work for a florist, they said. It’ll be beautiful and stress-free, they said.’

She picks up two buckets of white roses. I start laughing and she starts laughing and the stress combined with the ridiculousness means we catch the giggles and can’t stop. There’s a quiet reverent air in the funeral parlour that makes the giggling feel ultra-loud, and us trying to be quiet only makes it worse. I grab at a pew to stop and steady myself and beg my pelvic floor to get a grip. Which makes Farida laugh more. Then we hear a sickening crunching sound. The giggling stops instantly. We run outside in time to see a

giant silver hearse roll slowly over the legs of the wall panels, which we left laid out flat on the driveway.

A young guy with a huge beige uniform draped over his scrawny frame gets out of the car. ‘Oh god, I’m so sorry, I didn’t see. I was trying to avoid the flowers. Is it okay?’

‘Yeah. Yup,’ I mutter, frozen in place. Staring at the cracked wood.

‘Sorry, I’m so sorry. Um. I’m new. I’m new here, can you please...I need this job, you can’t...okay, I’ll help, what do you need? Need me to carry this inside?’ He tries to pick up the broken panel, but it’s too heavy and it just bends weirdly and folds in his hands with another ghastly crack.

‘No!’ Farida wails, the terror on her face so immense that it startles me out of my own and I step towards him.

‘No. No, thank you, we’re all good. We’re all...’ I’m muttering as I move his hands off the wood and push him out of the way, trying not to be too forceful.

‘You sure? Cause I gotta go; I’ve got a pickup—’

‘Yup. You do what you need to do.’

I pick up the snapped pieces of wood and look at Farida.

‘Well, bad luck happens in threes, so we should be good from here on,’ she says.

Anxiety swirls in my ears and everything gets really muffled and I suddenly become conscious of the sound of me swallowing and the way the spit slides down my throat and...

Then everything gets really clear, and I pull my phone out of my back pocket and dial Archer and I pray harder than I have ever prayed that he picks up.

‘Well, it looks bloody stunning in here. Exactly what Glen wanted. Which, let me tell you, is often a disaster zone for florists because the mornings when it’s not right are heartbreaking, no joke,’ Kay reflects, looking at the only-just-completed installation.

‘Wrong how?’ Farida asks.

‘When they’ve asked for chrysanthemums, Nanna’s favourite flower, and they show up with carnations and it’s just something that our families shouldn’t have to worry about, you know?’

‘Whose favourite flower is chrysanthemums?’ Farida asks.

‘You’d be surprised what people love, love. Gnomes is the one I don’t understand.’ Kay looks searchingly at the two of us, as though the key to this mystery might be written on mine or Farida’s face.

‘That would be heartbreaking. We take our work very seriously,’ I say.

‘I can see that.’ Kay looks around the room, then back to her folder.

‘Well, Glen has been explicit with his instructions. The two walls of flowers are to surround the coffin with the floral name in the centre.’ We all look at the walls, which look absolutely spectacular, and tears of relief well in my eyes.

‘It’s the energy in these places, love.’ Kay hands me a tissue. ‘You get used to it,’ she says as she goes out.

I nod, dabbing my eyes.

‘You okay?’ Archer whispers as he appears behind me, breathing fast.

‘Think so.’ I smile weakly.

‘Cleo,’ Glen says as he comes inside for the first time, guided by Kay and surrounded by aunts and uncles. I watch their stunned faces as they stare at the walls. At Joy’s flower-covered coffin at the front of the room.

Glen’s face scrunches in a look I can’t read. *Oh god! He hates it. I’ve ruined his mum’s funeral. I’ve broken his heart.*

‘It’s...it’s maybe not the—’ I start.

‘Oh, Cleo,’ Glen cuts me off, ‘it’s even better than I thought it would be. I knew you’d...’ His voice cracks and tears well in his eyes.

Mine too. I take his hand. ‘I’m so sorry, Glen.’

‘This is...She would *love* this. Wouldn’t she love this?’ He turns to his family and they all coo in stunned agreement.

‘Thank you,’ he says, and I nod, still trying not to cry.

I stare at it all—our beautiful work that we only managed to finish just as Kay walked in for her final check—and then a slap of clarity hits me. That's Joy Doxiadis in the box beneath, and amidst, my blooming installations. I have been so singly focused on getting everything ready and problem-solving the hellfire that today has been, that I haven't taken that detail in.

Glen's mum has died. This is a funeral. All of this is because his most favourite person in the whole entire world isn't around anymore. And he wanted to honour her with something beautiful. Something beautiful that he knew she'd love, and I was able to help him with that.

I cry soft tears as I step outside followed by Farida, Archer and Ahmed, and the four of us stare at each other, completely shell-shocked.

'I don't know how we pulled that off,' I whisper to Farida as we wait for the ceremony to conclude so we can move the installations out of the room and load them back on the truck.

'I do.' She nods at Archer, who has stepped away to take a phone call.

'I mean, yes, but Farida, you're incredible and I don't tell you that enough,' I say. 'I really, actually don't know what I would do without you.'

'Please don't be nice to me right now because I have experienced too many feelings in a short period of time and I may collapse without warning. It's a razor's edge we're walking in this dopamine-lite ensemble.' She hugs me tightly and we cling to each other, letting our closeness say everything we want to say.

I sidle up behind Archer, 'So, I don't know how I'm ever going to say thank you enough for today.'

He smiles. 'That's what you do for the people you care about.'

'But this is a lot, you literally dropped everything, and I was so shit last night and...' I point to his phone, 'I'm sure there's work you should be doing and—'

'You're welcome. I wanted to help.'

Tears again. It's been a big day for the crying. 'I really appreciate it. You just...care, don't you?' I don't know what I'm trying to say. The act of someone I'm with caring for me in ways like this feels so overwhelming. It makes me feel sad for past me and what I accepted as normal. These things should be normal. The person you're seeing should want to help you, should be invested in your work, should run you a bath, should care about what you think and want to romance you. This should be normal, but it really hasn't been for me, I get startled by it; want to push it away.

‘I need you to know that I was really bummed with how last night played out,’ Archer says. ‘And I get why. But I need, and I deserve, more than running away and silence.’

This stings, but he’s right.

‘You do, yeah.’ I nod.

‘I want to work things out *together*, Cleo.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, looking at him, and he smiles, his eyes soft. He is really listening, really present. I feel startled and comforted all at once. ‘I think what I need is patience while I work out how to do that.’

‘I hear you.’

We keep eye contact for a while and then he holds his fist out, which makes me laugh, and I bump it with my own fist as we both laugh away the vulnerable tension.

I don’t know what this feeling in my body is; contradictions, discomfort and ease all at once.

All of this feels more unsafe than being treated like shit in some bizarre masochistic way, because these feelings usher in whole other new feelings. Like: am I good enough, interesting enough, beautiful enough, healed enough to interest these beautiful people who seem to be so interested in me? The shoe is going to fall any second, surely? They’re going to find out the truth about me and realise I’m not worth their time—their care—at all. Like, it’s all some convoluted plan to teach me a lesson about what I really deserve, and everyone is conspiring to show me the truth, because I’ll most definitely get my heart broken again.

‘What’s going on in here?’ Archer touches my face with his hand, and I grab his hand in mine.

‘Just taking some getting used to.’

‘What is?’

‘You being lovely to me,’ I say, and see him wince. ‘I know that sounds shit, but you’re scary, Archer.’

‘In what way?’

‘In that I really like you.’

He nods. ‘Yeah, I really like you too. It’s overwhelming isn’t it?’

I pull his hand to my lips and kiss it.

Once the ceremony is over, the four of us dash into the hall and get to work. I pull out the floral letters one by one and lay them on the ground for Farida to pick up and power walk over to the other room. Ahmed and Archer

wheel the walls outside and round behind the building so they can deconstruct them and load them onto the truck without destroying the arrangements. Archer assured me he had a plan, strapping his toolbelt on as we walked in, and I was simultaneously reassured and turned on.

From here we need to drop the walls off at the two restaurants Jude made the deals with. I'm grateful it all gets a second life, but the idea of now doing two more installations makes me want to fall over in a heap. I grab the last of my gear and start walking it out to Archer's ute in the carpark, where I startle one of Glen's aunts who is smoking next to her car. I am transfixed by her enormous false eyelashes as she looks me up and down.

'Do you do weddings?' her thickly accented voice is scratchy.

Farida overhears this and appears with one of the new business cards she had made.

The woman looks at it. 'I'm gonna call you,' she says. 'Something like this, but bigger.'

I smile. 'Whatever you need.'

She nods, stubs out her cig and walks off.

Farida and I look at each other. 'Bigger,' she says.

I shake my head. 'I am both excited and terrified by that prospect.'

Archer and I sit outside my house in his car, exhausted and enjoying the quiet. The two installations went relatively seamlessly, and the restaurateurs were all happy with their new flower walls. They had no problem with Farida's addition of clear business-card holders attached to frames; she even left extra cards with them in case they ran out, and had the gall to ask if they could keep them filled up. I would never have been brave enough to ask someone else to help me. Which, I'm learning repeatedly of late, is something I need to change. *Why do I find it so hard?*

'Thank you for today.'

'I kind of enjoyed the high stakes. I'm exhausted now, though,' he laughs.

'Me too.' We sit in silence for a moment, then I look at him and, without thinking, I say, 'Do you want to have dinner?'

'Of course. Just let me know when you're—'

'I mean now. If you can with Freja?'

'Her mum has her tonight.' Archer smiles. 'Everyone's home, right?'

I nod, and Archer takes a big breath in. 'Yeah. I'd love that.'

'I need you to put that knife down because I'm so tired, and the idea of spending the next eight hours in emergency actually makes me want to vomit,' Jude says, walking into the kitchen when she gets home with Perry close behind her.

'Hey bud,' I say.

'Aunty Cleo.' He pats me on the leg and walks straight outside.

'He missed me, apparently.'

'And Ash?'

'Was furious.'

I pull a worried face and Jude shrugs before poking me. 'Why didn't I hear from you this afternoon? I sent you messages. Did it go shit?' She looks panicked.

'Archer is here.'

'Where?'

Jude stands next to me and looks out into the backyard, where the kids are bouncing on the trampoline and Mum and Dad are sitting at the table having a beer with Archer.

'What is happening?' Jude stares at me, clinging to my arm.

‘I’m freaking out.’

‘I can see that.’ Jude takes the knife out of my hand. ‘Spill.’

‘This morning was an actual nightmare, and everything went wrong, and he came and saved the day, Jude, like a knight in shining high-vis, and then we’re sitting out the front and I was just like, come in for dinner, like it’s nothing. Is this stupid? Especially as I practically had a panic attack when he asked me the same thing the other night.’

‘It’s dinner,’ she says, and I look at her, pleading with her to be serious. ‘No, it’s not stupid. Does it feel right?’

‘Yeah,’ I nod, meaning it. ‘It’s fine if he meets them like this, isn’t it?’

‘They already met him at the shop, remember? It’s fine.’

‘Jude this is different. We weren’t dating then. This is symbolic or something,’ I fret. ‘I feel so protective of them, and I’m second-guessing my judgment and feel like inviting him in is stupid.’

‘They will go by you, love, and how you feel.’ Jude puts the onions in a bowl and washes her hands. She looks at me. ‘You’re not a shit mum.’

Sprung. ‘That’s what this is. I feel like a shit mum.’

‘But that’s not true, and you know it’s not true.’

‘It’s just dinner,’ I say, matter of fact, forcing a smile.

Archer pokes his head through the screen door. ‘Want me to do anything?’

‘Keep me company,’ Jude smiles as she picks up the tray of food ready to be barbequed.

‘I can cook it if you—’

Jude cuts him off. ‘Cause only men can barbeque sausages?’ she says sarcastically.

‘God, no, I just want something to do with my hands.’

‘Make us all g and t’s then.’

‘That’s within my skill set.’ He goes to the fridge for the tonic, and I point out where the lemons are, and when he’s done, we look at each other.

‘So, I’m not nervous at all. How about you?’ he says earnestly, which makes me laugh and shatters the anxious energy I just created, and I walk towards him and kiss him on his cheek.

The kids show off at dinner, talking loudly, trying to impress Archer. He asks great questions about what they like, and the kids are amazed that he knows the books and TV shows they tell him about. He talks to them like they’re people and seems genuinely interested in what they have to say.

Multiple times during the evening I catch Jude's eye and for seconds we revel in how calm he is, or how good he is with them. He isn't trying hard, though. He is himself.

Very quickly my nerves calm and I actually begin to enjoy myself. Dad is in fine form telling elaborate stories, and Mum tells him off for his enthusiasm, which everyone thinks is funny.

When I walk them out neither of them says anything about Archer, Dad just winks and says, 'On your way to the grand final, huh Tiger?' and I laugh.

Archer sits on the couch watching the night-time routine and I head off to put Andy down. When I come back into the lounge room Perry, Frankie and Archer are watching TV together, totally engrossed.

I smile at him. 'You good?'

'I'm good.'

'Perry! Bed. Now!' Jude bellows from up the hallway and he gets up and runs.

'Do whatever you need to do,' Archer says calmly. 'I'm hanging out to see what happens to Peppa in this episode.'

'Come on kid, bed,' I say.

'Goodnight, Archer,' Frankie says patting him on the leg affectionately.

'Nunnight, Frankie,' he says with a soft smile.

Later we lie facing each other on my bed. 'I'm fatigued just watching your evening routine,' he says.

'Yeah, it's a bit of a mad house, but we make it work.'

'I love what you have here. Your family is brilliant. And Jude and Perry are hilarious.'

'Aren't they? Perry cracks me up. He's so bold, he's just like Jude. He's having a shit time at school at the moment, though. Kids being awful.'

'God, I hate that. Freja had a rough time when she was in grade one and it broke my heart. Kids can be so shit.'

'And cause Perry stands out, he just...Well, you know.'

'I don't care what she's into, or what she wants to do with her life, as long as she's not an arsehole, you know? I just want to raise a good human.'

'Yeah, she sells crack but she's so good-hearted.'

'I mean, if it makes her happy...'

'You make me happy,' I say, without thinking about it.

'You make *me* happy.' He leans in and kisses me lightly on the lips. 'I better go,' he says.

‘You don’t have to. You could stay?’ I ask, biting my lip nervously.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

Cleo! What are you doing?

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I wake up to Archer's arm gently hugging my waist, as he pushes against me and nuzzles into my neck. I blink my eyes open: still dark. I press my hips against his waist, and feel his hand on my stomach, my thighs, and I'm rolling over and kissing him, then we're sleepily, quietly having sex and it's like our brains had nothing to do with it.

My alarm starts blaring a few hours later and I'm startled awake.

'Morning,' Archer says his eyes still closed. 'How's our form?' He stretches, and I take a good look at his beautiful body.

'What do you mean?'

'Waking up in the early hours to fuck each other, that's the horniest thing ever,' he laughs.

'I liked it.'

'Oh, not saying I didn't enjoy it. I'm just saying, sleeping in the same bed is clearly a hazard.' He yawns sleepily and I like the croak of his voice, and the brightness of his eyes first thing in the morning. I like learning these things about him.

I hear Frankie pushing on my bedroom door handle, which she can usually open herself. I was sure to lock it last night.

'Mummy!'

'Hey, Franks, give me a second?' I say, my heart thumping. I don't have a plan. I think my plan was that Archer would have left before they woke up or...I don't think I thought that far ahead, but now we're here, my hands suddenly get clammy.

'Mummy!' she yells again.

'What do you want to do?' Archer asks calmly.

'Um. I don't think I want them to see you here. I don't think I'm ready to have that conversation,' I blurt quickly.

'That's okay,'

'Mummy!' Frankie knocks again.

'Hey Franks! Breakfast!' Jude yells from the kitchen, and I hear her little feet run up the hall.

I sigh, relieved. 'I know this is a bit shit, but do you mind just staying in here until they've left? Jude's doing drop-off so—'

'Yeah, that's okay,' he says.

'Are you sure?'

‘What did I just say? It’s fine. If it wasn’t fine, I would tell you.’

He means it. He says what he wants, and he’s honest about what he thinks. It’s going to take some getting used to.

*

My car is still at work thanks to the battery debacle yesterday so Archer offers to drive me. He holds my hand as he drives and I like the calm feeling it gives me. We talk casually about work, about yesterday, and I just feel an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

When we pull up outside the shop, I smile at him, ‘Thank you for being so lovely,’ I say.

Archer shifts nervously in his seat.

‘What?’ I ask.

He inhales quickly. ‘Fuck.’ He looks me in the eye. ‘Cleo, I wasn’t going to say anything because I know you’re not...’

He pauses. *Is he breaking up with me?*

‘Cleo, I don’t want to be your mate.’

‘What?’

‘Or I do, I want to be your mate. But also your...boyfriend. Which feels stupid and adolescent to say out loud, actually. But I think we’re a good team. And I’m starting to feel...Some big feelings.’

He smiles, vulnerable, looking at me, and I smile and take a deep breath. I don’t know what to say. I feel a bit shocked, I open and close my mouth, but nothing comes out.

So Archer continues: ‘But I also don’t want to put any pressure on you. And if you need things to stay casual, then um, maybe we might need to cool our jets because...why am I saying things I’ve never, ever said in my life? God!’ He chuckles nervously and takes another deep breath; grabs the steering wheel like he’s bracing. ‘I really like you. I want to be with you. I want to commit to seeing where this goes, and of course we can set the pace of that, if that has to be slow, I’m okay with that. But I’m not okay with non-monogamy. It doesn’t work for me, I don’t think, and yeah, I’m a one person at a time kind of person.’

I nod. Still no words, but an image of Gabe pops into my head. ‘Archer, I —’

‘You don’t have to tell me what you want now. But think about it. Message me when you’re ready. When you know what you want.’ He nods. ‘Whenever you’re ready.’ He smiles his beautiful smile, and I get out of the car, smiling too, and walk a little unsteadily into the shop.

Shit.

As soon as I get inside, I dial Jude.

‘Archer told me he wants to be my boyfriend.’

‘Holy shit. What did you say?’

‘Very little.’

‘Are you okay?’ I hear her heels clacking against tiles and I wonder where she is.

‘Yeah. I mean, he’s great,’ I say, leaning on the front counter and glancing at the Joy Doxiadis disaster zone that is the shop. ‘And I really like him.’

‘But?’

‘But I really like Gabe, too, and this all feels very fast. Is it fast?’ I’m fully aware that I’m speaking quickly and I try to slow down, catch my breath.

‘It is what it is,’ Jude says, sounding like my dad. I wonder what he’d say about all of this. *Trust your gut and your heart and your stomach, Tiger.* That’s what he’d say—I already know—and I start laughing.

‘I don’t *know* what it is. Or what my gut says, or my heart or stomach, come to that. It’s like they keep changing their mind,’ I say.

‘That’s okay. Take your time. Was he okay with you not instantly leaping into his arms?’ I can tell she’s whispering something—instructions, maybe—on the side. I wonder if she’s pitching today.

‘Yeah, actually he was. He’s so calm, Jude, and he just said this is what I need and let me know when you know what you need.’ I exhale loudly. I really like him. And I want to open my heart to him. I want to see what being in a relationship with him would be like. But...It’s like every truth in my head comes with a but...and I’m so confused.

‘Well, shit. For what it’s worth, I think he’d be a great boyfriend.’

‘He would, wouldn’t he?’ I say, feeling a giddy pulse at the suggestion.

‘But you need to trust your gut,’ she says. ‘You know what you want.’

Do I?

‘Okay, let’s unpack those boxes now,’ I say to Farida, ‘otherwise they’ll just sit there forever.’ Andy’s asleep on my chest in his carrier, which he is getting too big for, and we’re both sweating up a storm, but it’s what he likes and he’s sleeping, and it means my hands are free to straighten up the chaos left by the funeral.

I haven’t stopped since Archer dropped me off. There was a call from Andy’s day care telling me he has a temperature, thankfully the roadside mechanic just replaced my battery so I was able to dash over and grab him, and then came back to the shop to help Farida. It’s actual mayhem.

The bell rings on the front door and I turn. *Gabe! Shit. Gabe. Our date. We had a post-funeral lunch date planned.*

He smiles, then clocks Andy on my chest and his face changes slightly. ‘Sorry to barge in,’ he says, looking around the shop.

‘Oh my god! I’m so sorry I completely blanked on our plan.’

‘I messaged and didn’t hear from you so...’

I pull my phone out of my pocket—I put it on silent when Andy fell asleep in the car. There’s a message from Archer which I don’t read.

‘He’s sick and this morning is chaos and I completely...It’s on silent Gabe, I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s okay. All good. I assumed something must’ve happened, so I thought I’d just pop in. Is that weird?’ He looks nervous.

‘No. Shit, I feel terrible.’

‘Well, do you need food?’

‘She does,’ Farida smiles.

‘Farida, Gabe. Gabe—Farida,’ I say, watching Farida smile wide. She’s loving the drama of being the reason we matched.

‘Nice to meet you,’ Gabe says awkwardly. He looks around. ‘This place looks great.’

‘Thanks, yeah. If you want to...we can, um. Cool,’ I mumble, as I reach around Andy to open the front door.

We go to the café just up from the shop and sit in the quietest spot we can find, as Andy is still sound asleep on my chest.

‘How did yesterday go?’ he asks. He looks smart in his work clothes, a button-down shirt, slacks and nice shoes. Very handsome.

‘It ended up being brilliant, but it was a complete fucking comedy of

errors.’ I give him an in-detail run-down of the whole day. He smiles, he laughs, and he stares, mouth agape, when I tell him about the hearse running over the timber legs. He asks the right questions and seems genuinely impressed by the things I’m proud of—as excited by it all as I am.

It makes my heart swell. Doug always felt threatened by my success. When good things happened, I’d often avoid telling him because I couldn’t be bothered with the aftermath: either passive-aggressive sulking, or a painful-looking effort to be happy for me. My wins never really felt like they were wins.

But Gabe is engaged—buzzing with ideas for all the ways I could build West Side Honey. At one point he literally cheers, and people look over at us and I laugh. Doug never did that. Literally or figuratively.

‘Oh, god, Cleo this is full-on,’ he smiles. ‘All it’s missing is a lovelorn swain and you’d have a Victorian melodrama.’

And of course my brain diverts back to this morning and Archer, and what he wants, and I stop myself; I can’t think about it now. But when Gabe gets up to order the food I quickly check my phone.

Cleo, I’m sorry if I overwhelmed you. I want to talk about this stuff with you. To be honest, I want to talk about everything with you. I’m not going anywhere. Let me know when you want to talk.

Those words. *I’m not going anywhere.* A little intense, but also...like a balm to my heart. A balm I didn’t even know I was craving.

‘What about you? How’s work?’ I say, pulling apart my sandwich and trying to eat it without getting it all over Andy’s head.

‘We had our first teen pride book club last night.’

‘Oh my god, Gabe, I completely forgot about it. How did it go?’ He told me on our first date about the LGBTQIA+ book club he’d been wanting to run for years, and about the hurdles he’d had to jump to make it happen. He’d partnered with a local youth mental health organisation and had created a social media campaign to engage interest.

‘It’s okay. It was great. Six kids showed up. They all said they knew someone else they wanted to bring, and everyone involved was thrilled, so the feedback was great,’ he speaks coyly, but I can tell he’s proud. ‘I was shitting my pants.’

‘Oh, I’m so pleased.’

‘One kid had said they’d been feeling like they were in a pretty dark place and then their English teacher had emailed their whole class a link to one of

the posts we did, and so they bought the book and loved it, and then said they had something to look forward to which they hadn't had for a really long time.'

'Oh, Gabe, that's incredible. Doesn't that make all the bullshit worth it? Especially when you think this is just the first meeting.' I'm moved, and so happy for him. 'You're amazing.'

'Thanks. Cleo, you are—'

Andy wakes up and pushes against my chest with a sleepy grumble, I look down at him as his eyes adjust and he works out what's going on.

'Oh, hey baby, hi. How are you?' I stroke his forehead and unclip the carrier so he can stretch and look around, while I reach across to my bag with my other hand and rifle through for his water bottle. He takes it, blinking rapidly as I brush his sweaty hair out of his face and feel his forehead with the back of my hand.

I glance at Gabe, who's staring at me with a face I've not seen before.

'What?' I'm self-conscious, envisioning Andy's snot smeared across my cheek.

'Nothing. Makes it um, very real.'

'What?'

'That you're a mum.'

'Well, yeah.' Andy hands me back the bottle and lies back against my chest again. I hug him, kissing his forehead.

'I've never had any, ah...impulses in that direction myself,' Gabe says, softly. He smiles sweetly at Andy, who turns his head away.

'You don't want kids?' My heart's going a little quicker.

'It's not a huge negative; just never had that urge, you know? Obviously I'm open to...Actually, the three women I'm dating right now all have kids,' he says nonchalantly.

That feels weird. I feel weird hearing about him seeing other women. I mean, I knew he was, generally speaking. But just that little bit of detail makes me feel uneasy.

'Three mums? Woah,' I say.

He catches my tone straight away. 'You're okay with talking about who we're seeing, aren't you?'

'Yeah. Of course! Yes.' Do I sound a little too enthusiastic? 'I mean, I think I am.'

'Sure.' Gabe smiles calmly.

‘It’s a bit...’ I pull a strange face I have no control over.

‘I just thought... You mentioned candlestick man, and so that was a thing we were doing.’

‘I think I’m okay with knowing. I think I’d like to know. I think that feels more honest to me.’

‘Yeah. Good.’

‘It’s just new. It feels a bit strange, like I should be freaking out, or like it’s naughty or something, you know?’ I say, feeling silly.

‘I know what you mean. Like it’s something we’re not meant to do because it’s forbidden. Or the expectation of how you’re meant to feel is different to how you actually feel and then that makes you feel wrong.’

I nod, and Gabe tells me about the other women he’s dating, who all sound like deeply impressive, lovely people.

I don’t feel jealous. It’s not jealousy. More... I feel competitive. Like I want to know everything about them so I can win. Win what, though? I don’t know. Maybe I want to be his favourite? That’s not good. But I also really like the feeling of being truthful with each other; not keeping difficult things under wraps. The transparency and respect feel new, and... quite calming.

I tell him about Farida being my dating broker and he laughs loudly, impressed by our set-up. I tell him about Archer, too, and how much I like him.

‘He told me he wants me to be his girlfriend.’

‘And what does he mean by that?’

‘I think he means in a traditional sense.’ I watch him, trying to read him, trying to see how he feels.

‘And how do you feel about it?’

‘I don’t know.’

Gabe pauses. ‘Can you explain?’

‘Well... obviously I’m enjoying what this is. And if I decide I want to pursue that with him, this would have to end.’

Gabe’s energy shifts completely. ‘So, isn’t that your answer?’

Oh god, I’ve fucked up. I want to fix it.

‘I didn’t mean to upset you,’ I say. ‘I’m trying to be honest with you.’

‘So, honestly, what do you want?’ he asks, his eyebrows furrowed.

I open my mouth and for a moment no sound comes out. Then: ‘I don’t know.’

‘I call bullshit on that, Cleo. I think you do know.’

‘I don’t. I like you both, and I don’t even know if this non-monogamy thing works for me, and that is all that you’re going to want, and he doesn’t want it, and I don’t know what this can even look like if everyone’s going to be happy.’

‘I don’t think the goal here is making everyone happy, Cleo, I think you’ve got to do what you want to do.’ A quick movement of his hand through his hair. He’s frustrated. ‘And you don’t know what I want, actually, because you haven’t asked.’

‘Well, what would you want?’ I put my hand out and touch his, thinking that will make it better, but he pulls away.

‘I feel a bit shit about this, actually,’ he says. ‘Like this is some kind of test or something.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Like I’m some kind of performing monkey and you’ve got to choose which one of us you like more.’

‘No, Gabe, that’s not what I meant at all.’

He’s still annoyed. ‘I wouldn’t want monogamy, you’re right.’ He looks at me and shakes his head. ‘I like you, Cleo. But clearly monogamy is what *you* want.’

I shrug. ‘It’s what I’m used to.’

‘But is it what you want?’

I feel attacked and uneasy and I don’t like how pushy Gabe is being. I’m hot and my skin feels clammy, and the room feels really loud.

‘I think you don’t even know me,’ I say, my voice raised. I stand up, and Andy stirs groggily and starts to cry. I turn away from Gabe to comfort him.

Gabe whispers, ‘Hey, can we talk about this?’

‘We are talking about this, but you don’t like any of my answers. I don’t know what I want, and it’s okay to not know.’

Neither of us says anything. He stares at the floor, and I stare at him, desperately wanting him to look at me. But he doesn’t.

I stretch out on my bed, thinking about the fact that there's nowhere I need to be. I've given Farida and me the day off to recover from the last fortnight, so I plan to stay in bed all day and brood; work out what the hell I want to do about Gabe and Archer.

Doug is picking the kids up from school and taking them to his mum's for her birthday dinner. He sent multiple messages asking if that was okay and when I asked the kids if they wanted to go, they both said yes, so I told him it was fine. The thing was he messaged, and he wasn't a complete dick about it. The last message I sent him was telling him to do better. He listened. Maybe I don't need to lose all hope.

Jude appears in my doorway, 'You need to pack an overnight bag, Novak,' she says.

'What?'

'We're going away.'

'Away where? What?'

'I'm not telling you. Just pack a bag. And bring your swimmers.'

'But the kids?' I ask.

'Ash is taking Perry and your parents are going to stay here and do school drop-off tomorrow.' She places a coffee on my bedside table and winks at me. 'We're leaving in half an hour.'

'What? Jude, this is nuts,' I say, sitting up. Her eyes glint mischievously as she walks out of the room.

An hour later we're in the middle of the city at the fanciest designer art hotel I've ever seen, and a valet is taking Jude's keys.

'Wait here,' she says, sashaying away to reception.

I look around. Circular peach-coloured lounges without legs, mirrored surfaces and huge purple blooms everywhere. I wonder who does their flowers because they're sublime. I'd love to do installations like this one day. If you'd asked me and my suburban blooms a month ago whether something like this felt possible I'd have laughed. But after this week, I feel like one day? Maybe.

'Come on.' Jude takes my bag and walks it to the elevators.

'Jude, what are you up to? And why aren't you at work?'

'Technically I am at work.'

'What?'

‘It’s a reconnaissance trip. Word on the street is within the next six months they’re going to be looking for new national advertising—and guess who wants the campaign?’

‘This guy,’ we say together, as she points two bright pink manicured nails at herself and I point at her.

The elevator dings and we get out and I follow Jude through a glass door. The lights are dim, the essential oils are wafting and a pan-piped version of Adele is playing.

‘We need to chill out,’ Jude says, and I don’t think I’ve ever loved her more.

We are sitting under an umbrella next to a giant infinity pool with a mojito each, newly exfoliated, massaged and moisturised. Floaty versions of our past selves.

‘I don’t think I actually know how to relax anymore?’ Jude says.

‘I’m having no problem,’ I say. I’m lying on my stomach and only moving my head to sip my cocktail from the long straw. The sun on my skin feels fantastic.

‘That motherfucker,’ Jude mumbles.

‘Jude, if you’re on your email I swear to god I will throw your phone in the pool.’ I look up at her, ‘You need to approach relaxing like you do any other project.’

‘How’s that?’

‘With maximum control.’

She laughs loudly and whacks me on the leg.

I sit up, raise my glass and take a long slurp. ‘Look at us on a staycation.’

‘How you feeling?’

‘I feel like I keep messing up, Jude. Like I have no idea what I want. Like, the easy thing would be to just tell Archer I’m in and forget about Gabe and the twenty dates, and that feels totally possible, but I don’t know. I don’t want easy. I want the truth.’

‘Easy is why people stay in shit relationships, or don’t do the things they want to do.’ Jude hands over the bowl of bar snacks she’s been munching on. ‘But you feel good about telling Archer you’re in, yeah?’

My phone dings. Gabe. I read his message then hand the phone to Jude.

I know this isn’t what you need, but also want to say, I feel really connected to you and it’s overwhelmed me. Yesterday sucked. I’ve really enjoyed meeting you and talking to you and getting to know you. You’re

great, Cleo, and I want you to be part of my life. Whatever that looks like for you. That's good enough for me.

Jude reads it and nods. 'Well, that's bloody self-aware and lovely, isn't it?'

'Jude, he's so nice.'

'Do you want to be his friend?'

'Yes. No. I want more than friendship. But being with Archer...feels right.' I wait to see what that last sentence feels like in my body. It feels true.

'What have you told him?'

'I just said I need more time and I don't want anything to change right now and that I need him to be patient, and he said okay. I don't know what to do, Jude.'

'Well, you don't need to decide right now.'

'Yeah, you're right. I'm just going to turn this on silent and relax.' I put my phone down and pick up my cocktail.

'Good.' Jude points her cocktail umbrella at me. 'I'm proud of you.'

'Why? I haven't done anything.'

'Um, excuse me? Because you're standing in your power like a goddess and you're valuing your intuition. Even if you don't quite get why it doesn't feel right, you're trusting yourself. You're not settling.' Jude smiles. 'It's impressive.'

'Never again, Jude. I'm never settling ever again,' I say.

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We wear the lush hotel robes, order room service, yell at an early nineties thriller on the TV and both fall asleep by seven. I wake up hours later, startled by the sound of gunshots coming from the TV. I flick the remote off and check my phone and there's a couple of messages.

I open Archer's first.

Trying to think of a clever way to tell you I'm thinking about you that doesn't sound lame. Will let you know when I come up with it.

Sweet dreams, beautiful.

I take a photo with a hint of cleavage and send it back with the message, *Thinking of you*, and hit send with a quiet giggle. Jude's still snoring.

Then I read Dad's. *Kids all tucked in. Mary dropped them off. Love you Tiger.*

That's weird. Why did Doug's mum drop them off? He probably got pissed with his dad and couldn't drive. Fucking typical. Dad will be asleep by now so I don't reply.

Then a message pops up from Doug. Then another, and another.

fuckin dog act, Cleo

Can't believe u

U doin this to get back at me?

Fuck u

What? My heart thuds and my breath feels like it's being held hostage in my own chest. *What is he talking about?* My brain cycles quickly through every possible scenario that would upset Doug, and I can't think of anything. Another message appears.

Awesome to find out about ur fuckin boyfriend from Frankie.

Cheers

Jude rolls over and blinks sleepily. 'What time is it?'

'Nine-ish.'

She sits up. 'You okay?'

'Doug...' That's all I can get out. I hold the phone up for Jude.

She reads the messages and rage inflames her. I can see her chest rise and fall as her breath comes short. 'This fucking *prick*. How. Dare. He. You need to reply.'

'I don't want to. I just—'

Who is he?

*If he's around the kids I wanna know who he is
That's reasonable to ask and u know it*

'You need to reply because he's not going to stop,' Jude growls. 'He must be pissed. Where are the kids?'

'They're already at home. Mary dropped them off.'

'Okay. Good. Just say, *Fuck you motherfucker, what I do with my time is none of your fucking business.*'

'That'll just make it worse, he'll freak...I hate this. I fucking hate this, Jude.' Tears spring in my eyes. 'I really thought he'd changed and things were going to be different. I'm an idiot.'

'You're not an idiot. Let's just tell him *You need to stop*. You want me to do it?'

I nod. Jude sends the message and waits with the phone in her hand.

'You got a message from Archer,' Jude hands the phone back.

You are stunning. If I was there my hands and lips would be all over that beautiful body. I feel so lucky to be getting to know you, Cleo.

The delight is short-lived because there's another message from Doug.

Fucking this guy without a thought about ur kids Sum mother u are
I sob, 'He knows...He just knows how to...to twist the knife.'

Jude's crying too. Furious. Sitting next to me.

'That miserable cunt. You? You are perfect. And he's been triggered thinking of you with someone else. Made him realise how shit he is and so he has to make you feel like shit. It's what he always does. He's known all along that you're too good for him, you just being your incredible self has always been too much for him.'

'Yeah, right.' I breathe loudly, trying to stop the tears.

'You're a brilliant mum, Cleo. And you can spend your time with whoever you please because you are an adult.'

'He can just...' I gulp. 'You know I keep my mouth shut to keep the peace because if he actually knew how angry he makes me he'd unravel. He'd have no idea what to fucking do,' I start to pace. 'And I do it because I want what's best for the kids. But he's so...*How dare he*. Why am I always trying to make things easier for him?'

'You know what I think would actually be best for the kids?' Jude says. 'If he died. I just want him to die.'

'Me too,' I sob from a deep, suddenly affirmed place. My hands move to my face. 'I think that all the time, but I don't say it because it's so awful.'

‘It might be awful but it’s honest. Your life *would* be easier if he was dead.’

‘It would. And the kids could just have this image of him in their heads—*My dad was great*—cause they’re little and they won’t know. But they’re going to realise for themselves soon enough that he’s a fucking drop kick. He’s going to disappoint them again and again. I mean, Frankie’s already realising it and—’ I stare at Jude. ‘Are we terrible?’

‘No. Fuck that. Fuck him. I’m so angry.’

‘Dad didn’t say anything, so I bet Mary was all pleasantries pretending like everything is fine. Meanwhile what was Doug doing when he found out? Why did she have to drop them off? You know? How? How can she be so oblivious that her own son is a giant piece of shit?’

‘Because her old man’s a creepy, controlling motherfucker too. She thinks this is normal.’

*

Later, when we get back into bed, I lie facing Jude, ‘Thank you,’ I say.

‘What?’

‘For being my person.’

Jude smiles. ‘You’re welcome. Thank you for being mine.’

I nod.

When I roll over and close my eyes I feel Jude rest a hand on my shoulder, exactly like she’s done every other time she’s known I was worried or scared. Except this time I don’t really feel either of those things. I finally feel ready to tell Doug to fuck off.

I didn't hear from Doug again but unsurprisingly I still slept terribly, waking up and checking my phone every two hours. In the morning I facetimed Mum and Dad so I could see the kids, and that helped. Dad said Mary seemed fine and didn't say anything out of the ordinary, and Frankie and Andy were okay, so that helped ease the tense feeling in my stomach.

'He'll be hungover and feeling like shit today, that's for sure.' Jude's on the sun lounge and I'm hanging on to the edge of the pool, kicking lazily and enjoying the feeling of my legs gliding through the water.

'What a dickhead,' I say, then shake my head. I refuse to let Doug ruin another second of this experience.

Jude looks at her phone, then at me. 'Sorry,' she mumbles, and wanders off out of earshot. I've been half-impressed with her today, at least trying to unwind and ignore her phone, but she can't help herself.

Doug and I need to talk boundaries. We need to talk about the impact his shitty behaviour and his drinking have on me and the kids. I need to tell him what I will no longer tolerate, and if he doesn't like it then he can take me to court, because there's no way in hell that a judge wouldn't see the truth about who is doing all the heavy lifting in our parenting. The bastard can't just try his hand at a couple of weeks of full-time parenting and then suddenly think he can manipulate me.

How dare he.

He needs to know his behaviour is unacceptable. See, that's the thing: I've let him get away with so much because it's just not worth the labour of having to deal with the fallout. Now I'd rather deal with the fallout than have to cop shit like last night ever again. I'm telling him. I've got to.

Jude looks weird when she comes back. The phone's still in her hand.

'You good?' I say.

'Yeah. Can we go back to the room, though?'

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'You want me to come with you?' I scan her face. Shit must have really gone down at work—her energy has completely shifted.

'Please,' Jude says, packing up her things and throwing them into her bag.

'Was it the Golden Fuck Beasts again?' Jude doesn't reply. I get out of

the pool and wrap a towel around my waist, staring at her. ‘Jude?’

‘Just...some shit has happened. It’s all really—’ She stumbles as we hurry towards the elevator and my body tenses. *I’m worried about her.*

When we get back into the room I watch closely as Jude very deliberately puts her things down. She has her back to me, but I see her shaking her hands, pumping them open and closed, like they’ve lost feeling.

When she turns to look at me her face is wet with tears—they’re streaming down her cheeks. She touches them and it’s like their dampness surprises her.

‘What?’ I ask.

She stares at me. ‘You need to—’ Jude stops. She tries again: ‘That was your dad on the phone before, and something has happened.’

I am stunned still. ‘The babies—’

‘The kids are fine. It’s not the kids.’ I feel her squeeze my shoulders. *THE KIDS ARE OKAY*, my brain yells, but the confusion is thick like fog.

Jude speaks through it very clearly. ‘It’s Doug.’

I grab at Jude’s hands. ‘What? What’s happened?’

‘An accident, a car accident, he crashed his ute and—’

‘That stupid motherfucker,’ I shake my head pushing past Jude and pacing. ‘It’s one thing after the other. How bad is it?’

‘He’s dead, Cleo. He’s—’

‘What?’

‘He didn’t...Your dad didn’t know all the details but apparently it was really bad and he had no i.d. on him and the police came to Mary’s and—’

‘He died?’ I sit slowly on the edge of the bed. I can hear my heart beating in my temples. ‘The kids...?’

‘Are with your mum and dad.’

I stare at her face. She’s being serious. More serious than I think I’ve ever seen her look before. Her face...it fascinates me. The shape her lips and eyes make are shapes I’ve never seen. Isn’t that perplexing? I thought I’d seen her face make every possible combination of shapes that it could.

But then Doug has never died before.

An hour later we’re in the lobby of the hotel. Jude got me changed, packed our bags and bundled me into the elevator. I haven’t really said anything at all. It’s like I’ve forgotten words. And my body feels...numb. And confused. But as she helps me into the passenger seat of the car something clicks inside my brain. I am going home. I am going home to see

my babies. I am going home to see my babies because their dad has died in a car accident. I am going home to see my babies because Doug is dead. I gasp suddenly for air and the tears collide heavy with panic.

I can't breathe.

But then Jude is here. I know Jude is here. In front of me. Wrapping her arms around me tightly as I howl into her stomach, clinging to the fabric of her shirt in clumped fists. I know Jude is here because she is grabbing at my face with both her hands. Whispering into my ear.

‘Breathe, Cleo. Breathe, my love. Just breathe.’

‘Mary keeps texting me telling me to go around there and I’m...I don’t want to sit vigil in her shitty house while they all...’ I pace back and forth in the kitchen. Jude rubs her eyes waiting for our thousandth coffee to come out of the machine. ‘It’s like she’s completely forgotten we’re not together. She wants the kids there. She *wants them to be with their family*—’ I pull myself up. Stop myself mimicking Mary’s mild tone. ‘Anyway, there’s no way I’m taking them around there to wallow in all that.’

We went straight home after the hotel and mum and dad brought the kids around so I could see them. All I wanted was to see them. I didn’t tell them about Doug, not yet. In the afternoon Dad and I went over to Doug’s parents’ place. I felt like I had to, but I also wanted to see Mary, to hear what they knew. I think I needed it to feel real. And my god it was real the second I walked in the house.

‘His dad was so bloody drunk he could barely talk,’ I tell Jude, ‘and Mary was frantically making sandwiches, and her sisters were there trying to stop her but...’ I gulp. ‘I don’t want to go back there.’

‘Then you don’t have to.’

‘It’s not that simple though, is it?’

‘Yes. It is exactly that simple.’ Jude’s lack of sleep has cancelled any of her few remaining filters.

I rub my face and squish my temples, trying to find any release on the pressure in my skull. I’ve barely slept. And the weight of having to tell Frankie and Andy about Doug keeps punching me in my chest, making me nauseous. Twenty-four hours ago, we were by a pool drinking cocktails and giggling, and now I feel trapped in my own body.

‘Did we somehow manifest this, Jude?’

The slightest snicker escapes her lips and she rubs her temples. ‘I did think that too. *Fuck*. But we are not that powerful, my love, this is just...’ She stops and we stare at each other. Jude being speechless scares me.

‘Your gut is all you can go by right now.’ She shrugs.

‘I’m so fucking tired, Jude. I have no idea what my gut is saying.’

‘Well then: next best action.’

‘Yeah.’ This makes me cry. Again. When my entire world crumbled around me when Doug left, I felt so weak and distressed and disconnected from myself that I couldn’t work out what to do. Jude gave me this piece of

advice then and it repeated in my mind like a mantra and made me capable of getting on with things.

Next best action.

I decide that having a shower, eating something and talking to my dad are the three next best actions. Jude's next best action is to stick the coffee she just made in a keep cup and take Frankie and Andy to the park so I can have a minute on my own. Then give me time with Dad before we tell them.

The nausea is instant. I throw up in the shower the second the water hits my back.

Telling the kids is anticlimactic. I really didn't know how they'd react, but Andy didn't take any of it in and Frankie... she understood, but not really. She could definitely sense that Dad and I were being weird. That the energy was serious. I talked about it in terms of movies we'd seen and that made her kind of get it, but still: not really. She nodded and thought about it. And then she asked if she could go on the iPad and I said yes and she strolled into her room like nothing happened.

I suddenly realise this is going to be an ongoing conversation. I'm going to have it many, many times, and I glimpse the burden of being the keeper of Doug's legacy in my babies' eyes. It hits me with a wave of nausea; but then everything makes me nauseous right now.

'What's happening in that head of yours?' Dad asks from the floor where he's constructing a train track with Andy.

'I don't know,' I tell him. 'I don't know how I feel.'

'Try.' Dad's tone is soothing.

I rub the bridge of my nose with my index fingers and think.

'I'm just so furious with him.' I send Dad a look that says I'm fully aware how selfish this sounds. 'As per usual. It's just so *Doug*—the whole thing. That we all have to deal with this now, forever, because of him.' I watch Dad's face carefully to see if he reacts, to see if there's a look that confirms I'm the terrible, awful bitch I think I am. But his face doesn't change from his constant listening face. 'And I know that that's messed up and selfish and—'

'It is what it is,' he says. I swallow hard. 'You feel what you feel. It's not good or bad, it just is. Let it be, Cleo Franciska.'

I sigh and bite the inside of my lip. 'He was drinking because of me.'

'He was drinking because he's an alcoholic.'

I nod. I know intellectually that he's right, but it doesn't ease the guilt wedging its way like a log splitter into my stomach. 'I don't think the kids

should go to the funeral,' I announce, matter of fact.

'Then they won't go.'

'It's a lot for them, too much. We can do something ourselves at their level. I don't know. What do you think?'

'I think you are right,' Dad nods. He's worried, and trying hard to hide it.

My phone beeps for the four-millionth time today. I ignore it. People have been messaging their condolences and it feels totally unwarranted. I'm not a widow. I'm something else. It beeps again and I pick it up, groaning loudly. 'I wish they'd all just fuck off.'

'Put it on silent.' Jude comes in with tea and biscuits on a tray. Her eyes widen slightly as she looks out the screen door at someone walking up our front path.

'Ahh, hello?' The look on Jude's face is confusion.

'Who is it?' I whisper.

'Archer King!' Dad stands up and opens the door.

Archer is holding a ceramic dish with aluminium foil over it and a bunch of flowers balanced precariously on top.

'G'day Jakov. Sorry, I was just going to leave these on the doorstep,' Archer mumbles as I jump up and barge past Dad to let him in.

'Hi.' My body wants to leap into his arms, have him wrap me up and hide me from the world. My head's racing: I look at Jude and Dad, at Andy on the floor, and I think about Frankie in the other room and I don't know what to do.

'These are for you,' he says. 'I was going to leave them. I didn't think you'd be... Sorry to land on you like this.'

'No, no, it's okay.' I take the dish out of his hands.

'It's a lasagne. A vegetarian lasagne because I didn't know what else to...' Archer steps into the house, shaking Dad's hand.

'Nothing for me?' Dad says.

'Those flowers are for you, Jakov,' he says, without skipping a beat.

Dad laughs loudly and Jude takes everything out of my hands, smirking as our eyes meet and I flail.

My stomach tenses. I want to kiss his face and take his hand and drag him into my bedroom and go back, all the way back to the other night. Rewind everything or shut everything else out so I don't have to deal with text messages and guilt and Doug's family. But I can't do that. Instead we all *ooh* and *ahh* at the lasagne and Jude swears loud exclamations about how great it

looks, and I stay quiet.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ Jude asks Archer.

‘No. Thanks Jude, but I’m going to head. Just wanted to drop those off.’

‘I’ll walk you out,’ I say.

‘Thanks for all your work, Archer, giving my girl what she wants,’ Dad says, and Jude makes a noise under her breath. I can hear the two of them laughing as I walk Archer outside.

‘Sorry if that was awkward,’ he mumbles, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

‘No, that was lovely. Thank you.’

We stand silently next to his ute, staring at each other and then looking at the ground. It all feels very adolescent. Then he steps closer and I lean my head into his chest, and feel him wrap his arms around me, squeezing me tight. I put my arms around his waist, cling to him like he’s a life raft, and then I get overwhelmed by that feeling, the too-muchness of it.

Eventually I look up at him. ‘Hi.’

I feel his body relax. ‘Hello. You doing okay?’

‘No.’

‘Stupid question,’ he says.

I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him lightly on the mouth, and he reciprocates and hugs me tightly again, resting his chin on my head.

‘Whatever you need, okay, Cleo? Just...whatever you need. I’m here.’

‘Thank you, for saying that. I know this is...you didn’t... it’s okay if you don’t want to—’

‘I want to, okay?’

I smile, even if I don’t quite believe it. ‘Okay.’

I rip a dress over my head and throw it on the floor as Jude appears in the doorway. 'Nothing feels right,' I grunt, stamping my feet.

'Okay. What have you tried?'

I point to the discarded pile on the bed.

'What about those high-waisted, wide-leg black pants I love that you never wear?' Jude says, shifting the pile to sit on the edge of the bed.

'Doug hated those pants.'

'Exactly.'

This makes me chuckle. The sound of it feels weird in my ears. 'But what with?'

'Something you feel comfortable in.'

'I can't wear my pyjamas, can I?' I stare at her before flinging open my cupboard door and pulling out the black pants.

'Mate, you can wear whatever the fuck you want. You don't even have to go if you don't want to.'

I ponder this for a few moments. 'I can't not go. Mary would collapse, and Farida will need a hand with the flowers and I—'

'Yeah, you totally have to go.' Jude pulls out a yellow top from the pile and hands it to me. 'I like that you at least considered it, though.'

I fidget in the car the whole way to the funeral home. My entire body feels tight. I haven't felt physically comfortable since I got the news; it feels like I can't take a deep breath, waves of contradictory feeling crashing into me. I puff air through my mouth like I do when I feel nauseous, but it's not nausea I'm feeling. It's something else entirely, but equally unpleasant.

Jude looks across at me, 'Whatever you're feeling is okay. Whatever you need is okay. Whenever you want to leave, we can. I will not leave your side and you just give me the look and I'll deal with it. Okay?'

'Okay,' I sigh again. 'I don't feel sad,' I say, turning to look her in the eye.

'That's okay.' Jude squeezes my hand, and I place mine on top of hers as we take a second to steel ourselves.

As promised, Jude does not leave my side. We drift through the funeral as though we are one person. There are so many people here who I haven't seen in years. People from our twenties who we'd spent whole weekends with. Mates of Doug's, people from his work, girlfriends who've become wives.

People who have mostly had very little to do with me since we separated, which had really upset me at the time. These people who I thought I was friends with. They look at me sheepishly now, their guilt resonating from their bodies, which exhausts me and infuriates Jude.

‘Where are the kids?’ one of the women asks, innocently enough.

‘Not here,’ Jude cuts in, and gives her a look that stops the conversation instantly.

The service is beautiful. The celebrant that Mary found weaves together all of Doug’s best bits. Mary insisted I sit in the front row with her. Doug’s dad is drunk again—still?—his jaw locked in grief. And regret, I hope. Doug wanted nothing more than his dad’s approval and he never got it. Before we had Frankie, he’d talk passionately about being the kind of father his dad never was.

Mary gives a short eulogy. She speaks about her son, and she is alight with compassion, her grief open and bare like the fresh wound it is. She loves him; he is her baby. My heart hurts for my babies.

The photos in the slideshow of him as a kid make people smile. Doug on a motorbike, in the backyard covered in mud, as a teenager with mates, at the beach, then selfies of us that he’d sent his mum, our arms wrapped tightly around each other. We couldn’t get enough of each other for those first few years. In every photo of us we’re smiling and happy, and we’re drunk. That’s what we had, a good time. We had fun. I loved that Doug was spontaneous and would give anything a go, that he’d wake up on a Saturday morning and be like, let’s go camping, and we’d be on the road within an hour, and both call in sick on Monday. Of course I fell in love with that guy. And of course, it wasn’t sustainable. But the woman I was in those photos—I feel her inside me, and her heart is broken. That woman who was in love with that man, that version of my life, she is devastated.

And then the next photo is one Mary recently took of Doug, Frankie and Andy, and tears stream down my cheeks. One of his best mates—Teddy, who Doug used to play in a band with—destroys everyone in the room by weaving hilarious stories, with bits from conversations they’d recently had.

‘They’re the best thing I’ve ever done—he said to me just last week about Andy and Frankie, and he meant it,’ Teddy says.

This makes me sob. Loudly. From a deeply hurt place. Grief colliding with anger smashing with good memories and the energy of the day cracking my heart. Jude holds me close, sobbing too.

It's real.
He's gone.

Grief is heavy. This grief, for a man I no longer loved, is strange as well. I find myself in the biscuit section at the supermarket, holding Doug's favourite chocolate chip cookies in one hand and crying, thinking about the fact that he'll never see our kids as teenagers. I grieve for the things he'll miss out on. For the things that Andy and Frankie will miss out on. Then I feel fine, like nothing has happened, that life is as mundane as it's ever been.

I'm stringent with our routine. I become so focused on things feeling normal for the kids that I get very tense about schedules and order, and that lasts for a few days, and then I don't care and they're eating a Happy Meal in the car because I think being spontaneous and going for a drive will be good for them. Fun. *I should be more fun. I should take this from Doug. Sometimes your dad was fun.*

I stop sleeping. I get invested in watching fine-fingered mothers with chopsticks making perfect bento-box pandas with rice and seaweed and stay up until the early hours making them until one night a bleary-eyed Jude whisper-yells, 'I will tie you to your bed if you don't go and lie down.'

So, I clean the bathroom.

Things feel fuzzy.

My body feels heavy.

I can't think straight.

I'm ravenous and will order food like a bodybuilder on cheat day, and then take one bite and push it away, because even chewing feels onerous. I feel guilty all the time. Guilty about everything. Guilty that I'm not doing enough. Guilty that I'm sad. Guilty that maybe I manifested this by thinking that all our lives would be easier if Doug just died and I didn't have to deal with his shit anymore. If the kids didn't have to deal with him anymore. Thinking about the moments he'd break their hearts with his shit. I feel guilty for feeling relieved that they won't have to live with the potential disappointment of him being in their lives, and instead just have to live with the fact he's not. Somehow, I convinced myself this would be better. Frankie asked me when she'd see her dad next and I had to tell her—again—that she couldn't, and a penny dropped as I held her and cried. As I sat with her and wrote him a card to send to heaven. As we looked up at the stars and picked out the brightest one that must be him. I realised this is my role now. Keeping him alive for them, when parts of me thought we'd all be better if he died. I

hate myself for thinking it would be better.

This isn't better.

This is a boring suburban hell, and my self-imposed purgatory is taking the kids to Mary's house and watching her make them Vegemite sandwiches with margarine. I fucking despise margarine because it's just chemicals, and she puts way too much Vegemite on, and I watch the kids eat them and their faces squint from the squelching sodium. Even though I bring their lunch with them she still insists, and so I let her, sitting on her back deck as the kids jump on the trampoline that was at Doug's, which she now has in her backyard, while she smokes cigarette after cigarette and cries.

It's holding her hand and telling her over and over again that he knew how much she loved him. And when she asks me to help her clean out Doug's house, I agree even though the idea of doing it makes me feel like my skin is trying to make a break from my body. We spend hours cleaning and sorting his stuff into piles, and I make so many trips to the local op shop that they get to know me by name. It's listing Doug's furniture on Marketplace and having frustrating conversations with people about dimensions, and wear and tear, and times for collection, and making sure I'm there to have small talk with strangers when they pick things up. It's dealing with Doug's real estate and signing paperwork acknowledging he's deceased and can't pay his rent anymore. It's yelling at a woman with tattooed dark-brown eyebrows about them using his bond to get new keys cut because no one knows where they ended up after they cut his body out of his car and it got taken to a scrapyard. It's kneeling in his shower and cleaning every last spore of mould from the grout like my own life depends on it. It's watching *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* in his family lounge room, eating watery frozen vegetables and going to the fridge to get Doug's dad a new can of rum and dry and feeling my skin crawl every second I am there.

When I get home from any of these things and Jude asks where I've been and I tell her, she rolls her eyes and says, 'Cleo, why?' and I say, 'Because I have to,' and she shakes her head, angry at me, and I don't care.

Because I'm angry at me. I yell at everyone. In the petrol station I dropped my wallet and the cards went flying across the floor, and I broke down and sobbed picking them up and then breathed pure fiery rage at the teenage attendant when he tried to help me. I hate people when they're nice to me. Archer and Gabe are too nice to me. I break up with them both. Archer kept sending me beautiful text messages about my strength and resilience,

and they made me feel sick and undeserving, so I tried ignoring him for a while, hoping he'd get the message, but he kept going, telling me, *I'm here when you need.*

So I cracked the shits and replied, *It's too much. Please don't message me again.*

And he hasn't.

Gabe seemed to understand my silence and has left me alone.

In quiet moments I think about when I fell in love with Doug, and I cry. I play out our relationship like a movie and I cry. I feel like I could've done more to help him. I should've called him that night. I should've rung him and told him to calm down and to not get angry. Or I should've gone around there and taken the beer out of his hand, or hidden his car keys. Or called his mum and really stressed to her how bad he was because then *she* could've gone around there. I feel angry that I thought he was changing and that he didn't even get a chance to see it through. Maybe he could've seen it through. Maybe he could've changed.

And then I'm back in the biscuit aisle thinking about Andy getting his drivers licence, or Frankie going to her formal, or them having kids themselves, or how they'll feel on Father's Day every year for the rest of their lives. I think of them having to say the words, 'My dad passed away when I was little.' I think about Andy and how he'll have no memories of Doug apart from the ones I'll tell him, and the ones captured in the very few photos that exist of the two of them together and I feel so sick it makes me dry heave.

I feel guilty all the time. Guilty about the way I treated Archer and Gabe. About pushing everyone away. About yelling at Farida when she tells me I am retreating, and that she's worried; at my dad when he tells me I don't have to do everything, and he and Mum can help.

'I'm not incompetent. He wasn't even my husband. I can do everything,' I yelled at him, and now ignore his calls.

The only person I don't yell at is Jude because when I yell at Jude she yells back.

'I want everyone to fuck off and let me get on with it. I hate everyone stepping on eggshells all the time. It's disgusting,' I spit.

'No. You're disgusting. If you don't get in the shower and wash your hair tonight, I will put the hose on you. You stink,' she spits back.

So, I have a shower. And I wash my hair. Because she's right. I do stink.

And then I sit between her legs on the floor of the lounge room, and she brushes my hair and braids it for me, and we don't say anything else because she knows I'm sorry. About all of it.

And then it's like I blink my eyes and somehow a month has passed since Doug's funeral, and I wonder if this is what my life looks like now. It feels like when you were a kid and you went to someone else's house and their family was a bit better off than yours and they had cable TV and when you went back home to your free-to-air it was fine, but you'd glimpsed an alternative reality that was better.

I glimpsed an alternative reality that was better. My life was better—I was better. And now I don't know how to be better and have the things I want when it's crystal clear to me that I don't deserve them anymore.

I open my session with Dr Tricia by telling her I don't want to be here and the only reason I am here is because Jude made me. And that she drove me. And that she's sitting in the reception area waiting for me to finish. I tell her I really don't want any advice about how to act right now.

She laughs loudly, a 'yeah right' laugh, then she exhales through her nose. 'Why don't you think you deserve help right now, Cleo?'

I do my own exhale and roll my eyes. 'Because I feel... because I'm grieving and so I'm allowed to—'

'...be destructive?'

'I'm not being destructive. I'm getting on with it, and there's so much to do—'

'How are *you* feeling?' She crosses her hands and places them in her lap—on top of her clipboard, which is a totally loaded symbolic movement if you ask me.

'Fine,' I say, and she looks at me with her eyebrows at that particular angle that says, *Try again, asshole*.

I know this face. I pull this face all the time. I fill my air with lungs and try and shake some of the uneasiness in my body. 'I'm so sick of feeling out of control,' I scowl.

'Well, none of it is linear. The clichés are clichés because they're true—one day at a time, et cetera.'

I roll my eyes. 'I hate every single one of the clichés.'

'Mmm,' she smiles. 'Thought you might. What have you been doing for yourself?'

I snort and stare at her, thinking she's kidding, but as I watch her face I realise she's not. 'I've...I have been making sure that...Well, there's been—'

'A lot to do. Yes, you said.'

I get the sense that Dr Tricia is angry at me, and it makes me feel desperately uncomfortable. We sit in silence for a little bit. She asks more questions about what I've been doing and how I've been coping. She asks about the kids. I give her short, honest answers, but I don't want to be here. I hate her spotlight eyes on me. Hate her prodding. It feels like my nerves are all exposed, and even the lightest brush of air feels like a rock-fall against them. I'm overstimulated by everything right now.

'Have you gone on any more dates? Or'—she checks her notes—'what

about your dance class?’

‘No.’

‘So—no more dates and no more dancing in this post-Doug life?’ Her face is soft, but her tone is hard.

‘What do you want me to do, just act like nothing happened? I’m trying my best, okay? *There’s no rule book.*’ I mock her tone. ‘*It’s not linear.* Everyone has an opinion about what I should or shouldn’t be doing right now, and it’s infuriating.’

‘What about *your* opinion?’

‘My opinion is that everything is fucked. I called it off with Archer because he was being too lovely and it was too much, and I’m sorry I haven’t felt like dancing. I don’t think I should be happy right now, and I think it’s kind of sick that you think I should be.’

‘I don’t want you to feel anything other than what you actually feel, Cleo.’

‘I’ve told you how I feel.’

‘No, you’ve told me how you think you’re meant to feel. You’ve told me how everything you’re doing is because it’s what you think you should be doing. You’ve told me about how you’re helping Doug’s mum even though you don’t want to, and how you don’t think you deserve to be happy.’

‘I didn’t say—’ I stare at her. ‘I don’t think it’s appropriate—’

‘Fuck appropriate.’ She cuts me off. ‘If you’re sad, be sad. If you’re angry, be angry. If you miss Doug, by all means miss him. But you don’t owe anyone anything, Cleo. Not his family. Not your friends. Not *your* family. You owe yourself honesty, and you owe your kids honesty. Especially right now.’

I stare at her, biting the skin on my cheek so hard I can taste blood.

‘You don’t have to pay penance for Doug’s death, Cleo.’

‘I’m not...’ I sputter. But I am. I absolutely am. I feel like I must. I feel like making myself feel shit by being ridiculously busy or doing things I don’t want to do will somehow make it okay that there are bits of me, deep down, that feel relieved that he’s gone. And I don’t know how to hold all these shame-filled feelings and contradictory truths at the same time. I feel like I should suffer for feeling this way. Like I should be sadder; I should be hurting more than I am.

‘You’re allowed to be happy, even if it’s only for a moment at a time right now.’

‘It feels wrong.’

‘A smile a day,’ she says, smirking at me.

‘What?’

‘I think the goal right now should be a smile a day. For you. For the kids. It’s easy to let the tsunami of feelings swallow everything whole, but Jesus. Cut yourself some bloody slack. Give yourself some respite. Go dancing, for fuck’s sake.’

I leave therapy feeling shitter than I did when I walked in, but having agreed to go to dancing tonight. I mean I can’t feel any worse than right now, can I? And if anyone can get me out of my head, it’s Mellie Abundance. There’s a glimmer in my chest that even feels like excitement. It’s tiny, but a welcome reprieve. I huff loudly, annoyed that Dr Tricia is right.

‘Doctor Tricia says I should go to dance,’ I tell Jude as we walk back to the car. ‘Will you come with me?’

‘I can’t tonight, my love, I am absolutely slammed at work. I’ve missed a lot of work. But you definitely should go. I think it’s a brilliant idea. Well done, Doctor Bogan.’

My heart sinks. I’m not going without her. ‘It’s fine. I won’t go.’

‘What? Why? Please go. I think it’ll make you feel good.’

‘I’m not going to go without you, I’ll feel like an idiot. Everyone will stare at me and want to know where I’ve been.’

‘Fuck them. Go, Cleo, please. How was therapy?’

‘Therapy was hard. But fine,’ I sulk. ‘And it’s fine about tonight. I really don’t want to go without you, so if you can’t get away, I won’t go.’

I feel bad as soon as I say it. She drives in silence. I know she’s upset, but I’m hurt and annoyed that Jude is choosing work over me again, over the commitment we made. And I’m annoyed that I feel like I can’t go without her because if the tables were turned there isn’t a version of this situation where Jude wouldn’t go on her own. She’s fearless like that. She doesn’t care what people think.

I think about this, and why I’m actually scared to go.

I don’t want to explain where I’ve been because I don’t know how. I don’t want to look stupid. I don’t want to let Mellie Abundance and the group down which I will, because I’m behind by four weeks, and it would’ve been good to have Jude there to fumble through it together. But she’s so stubborn and if she’s made her mind up about something then that’s it.

We drive for a while, then she sighs. ‘Look, I’m sorry if you feel like I’ve

let you down. That's totally fair because I have. I really want you to go to dance, and Doctor Bogan wants you to go to dance and your family will want you to go to dance. As the people who do nothing but wave Cleo fan-club flags with pride, I think you should maybe listen to us and not yourself right now. Because lately, understandably, you've been a bit shit.'

I try to summon the energy to look offended, even though everything she's saying is true.

'I'm fine with you dealing with this however you need to deal with this, but you know what I'm sick of? You treating yourself like shit. So, you're going to put your big girl pants on and be brave. We know you can be brave—you make me brave all the fucking time, just by existing—so please go tonight and be brave and let Mellie Abundance's disco ball vomit make you feel something other than shit.' She looks at me. 'Got it?'

I bite my lip again and my body cries, but there aren't tears, I just kind of shake like I'm crying. I wonder if I've run out of tears. 'Okay. You're right.'

I'm going to listen to the people who love me right now, and not myself. I can be brave. Even though I don't want to be.

People smile and wave when I enter, and Mellie Abundance asks if she can hug me. She squeezes my shoulders, looks me in my eyes intensely and says, 'I'm so glad you're back. Just dance it out, okay?'

Somehow, I manage to keep up. I have to concentrate so bloody hard to learn the new sections I've missed, and to piece it together with old sections I know. I'm astonished by the power of muscle memory, how much my body has retained that my brain hasn't. I can't think about anything other than how to move. And I'm so grateful for the reprieve it's providing. When grief thoughts sneak in, Mellie Abundance's strident voice drowns them out.

'You stand in your full power, you fucking radiant skin-suit-wearing angels! Let me see those hips. Go! Go! Go!' she yells.

I dance and I sob and sob and sob. Every feeling is in these tears—grief, relief and frustration churning with confusion, embarrassment and worry—but now that I've started I can't stop. Mellie Abundance looks over, her eyes asking if I'm okay, and I nod, and so she does the best thing ever. She lets me dance and cry and she pretends like nothing is happening, she keeps the focus at the front of the class on her and she keeps the music loud, and at one point she flicks the lights off to give me even more privacy. We dance in the dark and she yells into her megaphone, 'Feel all the feelings, purge what needs to be purged, we don't need the shit muddying the energetics of our bodies—dance it out. You're shining human volcanos, erupt! ERUPT! This is a dance eruption!'

The tears streak down my cheeks, and I dance and cry and laugh and howl and when the lights come back up, I feel different. Empty. Calm. Present.

Like I've landed back on Earth.

'I got you apology service-station flowers that are in the bin outside because I realised when I got home that flowers are the last thing you probably want to see right now. There's also apology champagne that I *borrowed* from work so you know it's good,' Jude says from the couch when I walk in the door. 'I'm sorry for yelling at you.'

'It's okay. I'm sorry for being so shit.'

'I know.'

We stare at each other for a moment. 'I was really pissed off earlier,' I say, and Jude nods. 'But it's only because I was scared.'

‘Of what?’

‘Of...myself? Of how I feel. Or felt. But I feel different now.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because I’ve just been an emotional volcano turning ash into diamonds,’ I scoff, and Jude smiles. ‘I feel like I’ve been every fucking natural disaster of feelings the last month. It’s like I’m battling what I *should* be feeling as well as what I’m actually feeling.’ I pause. ‘Jude, I feel like I’ve been grieving versions of Doug for the last two years, and now that I’m meant to *actually* grieve, I don’t know how.’

‘You’re not meant to know how. No one does.’

‘I’m sad. I’m sad for my kids, and the impact this is going to have on them. Him not being around is gonna fuck them up, isn’t it?’

‘No more than him disappointing them would have,’ Jude says, watching me carefully.

‘Until tonight, I just felt blocked. Like I couldn’t feel it because it was too much. The funeral was—god, I don’t know what I’m saying,’ I sigh.

‘You need a symbol. You need a goodbye.’

‘Yes. But what? I don’t know what to do.’

Jude shifts so she’s next to me, placing her hand on my shoulder. ‘You need a trash-the-wedding-dress moment.’

‘What?’

‘You know when women destroy their wedding dresses as a closure thing?’

I look at her. I raise my eyebrows, and I nod.

Jude is prodding at a healthy blaze in the old metal fire pit she hasn’t used in years when I come outside with the suit bag containing my wedding dress. I sigh, staring at the fire, and take out the dress. It’s a beautiful lace seventies number that I’ve kept telling myself I’d sell one day but never got around to it. The woman who was excited to buy this dress, to marry Doug—who was Doug’s wife—feels so far removed from who I am now.

‘You sure?’ Jude asks.

I nod, inhale deeply, then quickly throw the dress onto the fire. It starts to smoke. ‘Now what?’

‘Say something, I guess.’ We both stare at the fire pit. ‘Say whatever you want to say to him.’

I puff air through my cheeks and think.

‘I want to tell him I’m sorry he won’t get to see our brilliant babies grow

up,' I say, 'and I'm sorry he was always in such pain that he couldn't heal his shit.' Now the tears start again. 'And I'm grateful he made me a mum, and that I've thought more about the good times we had in the last few weeks than I have done in years,' I sob. It hurts. It hurts in my heart, but I keep going. 'And we did, we had a lot of fun together. And I did love him. I was so in love with you,' I tell the fire, then the sky. 'When I wore this dress, I thought that was it, you know? I really, really did.'

'I know you did.' Jude squeezes my hand as the tears stream down my cheeks.

'I thought I could help you. God help me, I thought our love would be enough and one day you'd work it out,' I put my hands on my hips and breathe heavy. 'I need you to know I don't hate you. Not really. I hated what you did a lot of the time, but not you.' This confession...it clutches at my temples and hurts my head. 'And I'm so pissed off with you for dying, and I'm sorry that I want to let it go, all the bullshit. I want to let go of the pain that's stuck here...' I put my hands on my solar plexus, clutching tightly, and I look at Jude, who's crying too. 'I want to let this sick feeling go. I want to stop blaming him cause I fucking hate the way it makes me feel. I've got to believe he did love me somewhere in there. And he loved the kids and I want to stop feeling shit about the good things that are happening for me. I don't want to feel shit when I think about him anymore,' I sigh. 'It's not him. It's about me.'

The dress has been giving the little fire a run for its money, but the flames are in control now. We watch it burn, and I snake my arm around Jude's waist and rest my head on her shoulder, and I breathe. I breathe in deeply. And realise it feels like I've been holding my breath since Doug and I separated, and then again since he died.

And now I can breathe.

The computer pings and the third online order this morning buzzes through. 'Farida! That's another one,' I say, jotting down notes and turning back to her. 'What is going on? Not that I'm complaining. But can you remember the last time we had three orders out of the blue on a Wednesday morning?'

Farida sighs, taking two steps towards me, and then carefully removes the pruning scissors from my hand and places them on the table. 'I know that you are in a precarious position right now, but I need you to not freak out.'

'Oh god.' I swallow hard. 'Are you quitting? I don't think my heart can take you quitting.'

She looks offended. 'No. I'm not quitting.'

'Thank god.'

'While you've been in your...'—she pauses—'delicate state and otherwise occupied, I've been doing a little creative rearranging with the website and social media accounts.'

'You have?'

'Yes. I mean the new shop is brilliant, and what we had was kinda sad and didn't match our new vibe.'

'You know I'm terrible at it,' I say, flustered.

'We had that great conversation with Jude and I had a bunch of ideas, which is why I thought I'd just try some things and see what happened, and what's happened is we have a thousand new followers.' She smiles proudly.

'Farida! *What?* That's amazing.'

'Plus, I have a heap of ideas for what we should be doing, and there's a course I think we should take, and I am really bloody excited.'

Her energy is catching and I can't help but get swept up in it as she shows me mood boards and trends and the social media training she wants us to do. Her ideas are incredible.

'Farida? If I've ever made you feel...unappreciated, or unseen, or shit in any other way, I'm so sorry. There is no West Side Honey without you.' I'm tearing up again—it seems to be a new core skill.

'What? It's okay. Thank you. I love you, and, um, this place.' Farida fumbles, blushing.

'I think you should be in this business, Farida. I think it should be the two of us—equal partners. We should grow this together,' I say, and it feels

absolutely right.

‘What? Really?’

‘I don’t know what that looks like but we can work it out. Let’s like, really go all in and do it. Together...’

I pause, realising I may be putting her in an awkward position. ‘If you want to. Please think about it, and what you’d want and if not, that’s okay. I just want you to know that I love you and I wouldn’t have gotten through, well, anything without you.’

‘You fucking bitch, you made me cry.’ Farida pulls me into a hug. ‘Of course I want to do this with you.’

We cry and hug and giggle excitedly, and suddenly we’re in the cold room filming each other holding up flowers and dancing to ‘Ice Ice Baby’ because this is apparently what it takes.

I lean over Farida’s phone to look at myself, both mortified and perplexed. It’s the first time in a while I’ve really registered my appearance, and everything about me seems more worn, somehow. My hair needs doing, the circles under my eyes look like sinkholes and my skin is a fetching pale grey.

‘I look haggard,’ I say.

‘You do not.’ Farida whacks me. ‘You look like you.’

‘Oh god, you mean I look like this all the time?’ I look down at my ratty overalls and the T-shirt I cut the sleeves off years ago, and grimace. ‘I just feel a bit yuck. Frumpy, not cool. I want to be cool again, Farida. I used to be cool, didn’t I?’

‘I think you’re cool.’ She’s not really paying attention. Her finger is darting madly around her phone as she edits and giggles and the same chunk of music repeats over and over again. Then she peeks up with a mischievous grin. ‘You need to have some fun. Let’s dye your hair or something.’

‘What?’

‘Just like a rinse, a change. Let’s do it now. I’ll go to the chemist.’ She’s nodding excitedly. ‘What colour have you always wanted to do?’

I go to open my mouth and tell her this is ridiculous because that’s what I think I should say, but I don’t. ‘Pink.’

‘Pink? Fuck yes.’

Ninety minutes later I’m leaning over the sink and Farida is washing pale pink dye from my hair like some kind of baptism.

‘It’s subtle. It’s cute. I love it,’ she claps her hands excitedly at my new

pink-hued towel-dried locks. 'Now, what about, maybe, going on some dates?'

I groan. 'I am not ready for that at all.'

'Just checking.'

I think about Archer and Gabe and I feel like an asshole. They were some of the good things I got rid of as penance for Doug dying, and I hurt their feelings, both of them.

I have no idea how I'd go about fixing it. I don't want to think about it. Not yet.

Fun, though. Some fun sounds great. I grab my phone and message Maverick.

Wanna have some fun?

Maverick opens the door shirtless and smiling, and my breath catches in my throat. They really are extremely attractive.

‘Hello,’ they say, wrapping an arm around my waist, and stepping toward me. Our faces are close, ‘Can I?’ they say looking at my lips and I nod slightly as they lean in and kiss me. It’s soft at first, sweet even, and then passionate. ‘I’m glad you messaged.’

‘I’m glad you were free,’ I say, instantly self-conscious. Feeling anything other than the heavy weight of the last few weeks feels so unfamiliar it makes me nervous.

‘Want a drink?’ I nod and follow them up the hallway, through the lounge room and into the kitchen. I watch as they open the fridge and pull out an open bottle of wine. ‘Finish this sentence: life has been...’

I sigh. ‘Brutal.’

‘Oof.’ They get two mugs out of the cupboard and pour the rest of the bottle between them, then hold out one for me, their fingers brushing my hand as I take a mug. ‘You want to talk about it?’

‘Not really. How has life been for you?’ I say to be polite, but I feel impatient for what I hope is going to happen next.

‘Wondrous,’ Maverick grins, drinking from their mug.

‘Show off.’

They laugh. ‘You need a hug?’

‘Yeah, actually.’

They put their mug on the table next to me and open their arms and I step into their body, head on their bare chest. I like the feeling of their arms wrapped tightly around me. We hold the hug for what feels like a long time. Our breath syncs. Then I feel their arms loosen and their hands are on my shoulders, massaging gently and then stronger.

Maverick keeps massaging my shoulders but leans back so I look up at them. ‘What kind of fun are we talking about here, Cleo? Fun? Or fun fun?’

‘What’s the difference?’

‘Do you want to go get a drink and have a dance and see where the evening takes us? Or do you want to sit on my face?’

I think about it. *What do I want? Really?* I assumed I’d come here and have great sex with Maverick and that would be fun, but now I’m here it feels forced, and I’m still so in my head. I think what I actually want is to have

some real fun. 'Option one.'

'Done. Drink up—let's go up the road. My friends are having an exhibition and there's a DJ. We can have the date we never had.'

As we walk to the bar where we (briefly) had our first date, I give Maverick the broad strokes of the last few months. They put their arm around me and kiss my forehead.

'Babe, this is all really shit. I'm sorry.'

'Yeah. Thank you. It's um—'

'Come on.' They cut me off, which I'm grateful for. 'Let's drink cheap wine and make them play Stevie Wonder. No one can be sad when Stevie Wonder is playing.'

Maverick knows everyone, and I quickly feel like a new shiny object as their friends fawn over me, pay me compliments and make me laugh. Maverick's friends are all highly artistic, incredibly intelligent, fashionable queers. So cool. So effortless. And somehow no one is alerted by my presence which means I must be fitting in—it must be my new pink hair—and I even begin to genuinely enjoy myself.

I love the art; large, beautiful portraits of people dressed up in suburban locations—in their backyards, at the train station, under street signs. My favourite is a couple dressed in beautifully tailored tuxedos with sequinned heels, giant glitzy earrings, and neon-coloured fashion mullets standing in front of the milk fridges in a brightly lit supermarket. Jude would love this, I think.

Maverick keeps my glass full of wine and introduces me to people and I feel lighter.

'Let's dance,' they say.

Everyone on the makeshift dancefloor is moving recklessly, spinning each other and singing, and I get swept up in their joy, hands entwined with one person, then twirled into the next, and then jumping. And at that moment I watch Archer walk through the front door.

His friends, who are sitting at a table in my direct eyeline, start to cheer and he smiles. He doesn't notice me hidden among the bodies on the dancefloor. I swallow hard.

'What do you think?' Maverick asks.

'Sorry, pardon?' I shake my head and knock back the rest of my wine quickly. I haven't heard anything they said.

'I said, you should get Maisie to take some photos with your flowers.'

‘Yes. Yeah, great idea.’ I’m conducting this conversation on autopilot, all flailing limbs and robot tones.

‘Another?’ Maverick points at my glass, and I nod. They dance to the bar, and now I’m in full view of Archer’s table. I stare down at my feet. I don’t want to know if he notices me; he is not going to want to talk to me. I should leave.

Then he does. I can feel it. I feel his eyes on me and my heart races. I raise my head slowly like someone is pulling a string. *No. No. No. He’s going to see me on a date. He’s going to see me here acting like nothing is wrong. What is he going to think? This was such a stupid idea.*

We make eye contact.

Archer bites his lip, grinning with his whole face, and I start to laugh. I shake my head apologetically and throw my hands in the air: *What are you doing here?* And then Maverick is back with the drinks and Archer nods, and smiles with pained eyes.

At least I think they’re pained. Maybe the nod just means *Thank god I dodged that bullet*. I don’t know.

I try so hard to stay in the dancefloor conversation with Maverick and their friends, but I can’t focus. I go to the bathroom to compose myself, and when I come out into the hallway Archer is waiting for me, leaning on the wall directly in front of the door.

‘I like your hair,’ he says. I touch the strands around my face. ‘Are you on a date?’

‘Kind of. Not really. I can—’ I was going to say ‘explain’, but something stops me. The intensity in his eyes, maybe. ‘Are you?’

‘Yes,’ he smiles.

I feel a pang in my chest. He’s on a date. He’s dating. He’s moved on. So he should.

‘I knew I was going to see you tonight,’ he says.

‘No, you didn’t!’

‘I had a feeling.’

A woman turns the corner and I have to step out of the doorway. Towards Archer. We’re so close. We could touch each other if we wanted.

‘Did you really?’ I say slowly, and Archer nods. ‘I’m really, really sorry for how I behaved.’

‘Cleo, I get it—’

‘Archer, I was...things were...I treated you badly and I know that.’

‘Thank you for saying that.’ The pause is long. We take each other in like we’re studying for an exam. ‘You are so beautiful.’

I blush, and his fingers reach out and trace my chin as he places a hand on my hip, guiding me gently towards him. Everything goes slow except for our quick breath. Everything about this is deliberate. He is giving me every opportunity to say no. To pull away. To leave.

Our faces move towards each other. Our foreheads touch. Our lips are so close, but he still doesn’t kiss me, he is waiting for me. Finally, unable to stand the closeness anymore I lift my hand to his jaw, bringing his lips the final few centimetres to my mouth and I kiss him. His arm wraps around my shoulders, his fingers in my hair moving it away from my neck, where he kisses across my jaw, below my ear and down my neck.

‘I want you, Cleo. I want you so badly,’ he whispers. His hands move to my hips again and he looks me in the eye. ‘It’s all I ever think about.’

I kiss him again, both hands on his face, before he pulls away, ‘Leave with me. Now.’

I go to kiss him, but he won’t let me, not till I answer him. ‘Leave with me?’

I take a deep breath. ‘Yes,’ I whisper, barely audible.

‘Yes?’ Archer smiles.

‘Yes,’ I say loudly. ‘Meet me out the front in ten minutes.’

I walk back to the dancefloor. 'I'm gonna go. I just bumped into a...' I was going to lie, but I don't want to. 'I had fun. Thank you.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah.'

'Okay. I'll see you at the café or, you know, in my bed whenever you want,' Maverick smiles, opening their arms, and I hug them tight, then kiss them on the cheek.

As I'm walking away I see Archer embrace a small, beautiful brunette with bright red lipstick. She's so put together, I'm jealous.

He appears a minute later and starts walking up the street, I follow him, and when we're clear of the bar he grabs my hand.

We walk quickly to Archer's ute and he pushes me up against the car door holding both my hands above my head, kissing me, unbuttoning my top as his tongue runs down my chest. I gasp; his knee presses between my thighs as he finishes the buttons and takes a moment to stare at me. Then he's kissing my neck, biting me, murmuring.

He pulls back. Both hands are braced on the car but his face is still close. 'Is this okay?'

'Yes. Yeah.' Suddenly feeling exposed, aware of our surroundings. Vulnerable.

'Are you okay?'

'Yes...and no. I'm okay with this. Are you okay?'

He takes a step back. I fold my arms across my chest; pull my top closed and try to read what he's thinking.

'I have a rule about drama, Cleo. I think relationships that begin in drama are just destined to be dramatic. But you...' He groans. 'I agreed to go on this date tonight, a set-up. I didn't want to, but I've been miserable and trying to give you space, and my mates thought it would be good for me, then...you're here and you look like that, and...' He shakes his head.

'Maybe this isn't a good idea, then,' I say weakly.

'Come home with me?'

I take a breath. *What do I want? What do I want? What do I want?*

'Yes.'

We make small talk in the car—kids and work—and my heart beats so hard I'm positive he can see it pounding against my ribcage.

At the front door he fumbles with his keys and I touch his arm, wanting closeness, some kind of affirmation that he's real and this is happening. He turns his head as the door opens and he kisses me and we stumble inside.

Our hands are all over each other's bodies, I kiss him deep pressing into his body as close as I can get as we stumble into the lounge room bumping into the back of the couch. Archer hikes up my dress, I grab at his belt and unbuckle it quickly, I reach for the zipper at the top of my dress, but he spins me around, his arm around my waist, his kisses on my neck, and my hands grab for him as we have quick, urgent sex right there against the couch. Then, as we're catching our breath, we look at each other, both startled.

This is real. This just happened.

'We don't have to talk about anything now if you're not ready,' Archer says, once we're dressed and both looking at each other expectantly.

'I don't think I am ready. But I will be. This was not...I just wanted to have some fun and—'

'I had fun,' Archer grins.

I smile. 'I had a lot of fun.' I step into him and lean my head on his chest. Being here with him feels so right. 'I'm really sorry for disappearing.'

'You had a lot going on.'

'I did, but I don't ever want to hurt your feelings.' I pause. I don't know what to say. I look at Archer, my body and my brain feel calm and I take a deep breath. 'I really like you, Archer, I hope you know that.'

Archer nods, but something tells me he doesn't believe me. 'You know how I feel about you, Cleo.'

I nod and we hug for what feels like hours. Eventually, I look up at him. 'I'm going to go.'

'Okay.'

'I'll message you,' I say, meaning it.

'Yes,' he says, and kisses me on the forehead.

My thoughts are messy and loud the entire Uber ride home. *What am I going to do? What feels right? What do I want?*

When I get home there's a wrapped box sitting on my bed with my name on it. I pick it up and flip over the handwritten card.

Thinking of you. Gabe x

I rip off the wrapping paper and hold the box in my hands, then I carefully pull off the lid and pull out a layer of tissue paper to reveal a bright yellow Walkman with a cassette tape already loaded.

I put the headphones on and hit play. Gabe's voice speaks into my ears.
'*The Twits* by Roald Dahl.'

He's recorded himself reading to me. He remembered. What a beautiful thing to do. *Oh, Gabe.*

Tears well. I know what I want. I want to make it right with both of them.
I want both of them.

‘I want both of them,’ I tell Farida and Jude, who is on FaceTime. Neither of them says anything, they just blink, wide-eyed. I mean I did just verbal-vomit the entire evening in detail for them without stopping.

‘Wow. This is not the story I was anticipating...’ Farida pauses, looking at the phone screen.

‘Cleo! Why didn’t you wake me up?’ says Jude.

‘I don’t know. It was a lot. I fell asleep listening to Gabe reading.’

‘What a fucking move, can I just say,’ Farida beams.

‘And Archer’s meet me outside. I mean!’ Jude scoffs. ‘Look, you need to tell them this.’

‘Yup.’ Farida nods. ‘You need to know how they feel about it.’

‘I think Gabe will be into it, and I don’t think Archer will,’ I say, scared. ‘I think I really hurt Archer’s feelings and this will probably do that too. I don’t think he’ll be into it. He said—’

‘Cleo, all you can do is be honest, and it’s up to him how he reacts,’ Jude says.

‘What do I do? Just come out and say it?’

‘I mean you could make a romantic gesture back,’ Farida shrugs.

‘Like what?’

‘I don’t know.’

I look around the shop. ‘Like sending them flowers?’

‘Hah!’ Jude nods. ‘Fuck yeah.’

‘What do I say?’

‘I don’t know, whatever you want,’ Farida says quickly. ‘I’m sorry I acted weird and hurt your feelings when my ex-husband and the father of my children died, can I take you out because I’d like to date you but also another guy. Cool?’

‘Bit wordy,’ Jude jokes.

‘Do it, Cleo.’

‘I’ll think about it.’ I turn away, already crafting in my head what I’ll write on the card.

I pull into the library, park the car across two spaces, jump out and start running. The double electric doors open and I rush inside quickly looking around for Gabe. An hour after deciding to send them flowers, I made two bouquets, wrote two cards and sent one with a courier to Archer’s. I decided

on a whim to bring Gabe's to his work and deliver it in person. Mainly because Farida and Jude, cheerleading enthusiastically, were telling me to go big or go home.

A tiny woman approaches me. 'Hello, can I—' but I don't hear what she says because I see the back of her very clearly, standing in the corner.

'Gabe,' I say loudly. '*Gabe!*' again, louder, and I'm greeted by a cacophony of shushing as the scene in front of me reveals an entire roomful of adults in chairs listening to a guy talking excitedly at a PowerPoint; a poster by the door announces him as *Author of the Month*. Everyone turns and looks at me, and I watch Gabe's face try to make sense of what the hell is going on.

Sorry, I mouth, my hand raised in apology, feeling my cheeks flush red and I hide behind the bouquet. The author looks confused but keeps going, as Gabe steps towards me and walks me a couple of paces away from the group.

'I'm so sorry,' I whisper.

'What are you doing, Cleo?'

'I have to talk to you and I brought you these. I'm sorry. I can go. You're at work...' I turn and head for the door, so embarrassed. *What was I thinking?* I wasn't.

'Hey.' He grabs my arm, his eyes trying desperately to read my face.

'What is happening?'

He walks me towards the front door—it's like he's physically marching me out of his library—and I feel even more embarrassed as everyone peers at me. He doesn't say anything until we're around the corner, and then he starts to laugh. 'Cleo, what are you doing?'

'I got your present and it just...I'm so sorry, I fucked up,' I mutter.

'Okay.'

'I'm sorry I yelled at you and then disappeared and was bad at communicating and these are for you...' I thrust the flowers into his hands.

'What?'

'I loved your present. Thank you. These are thank-you flowers and I'm-sorry flowers, and...I'd-like-to-date-you flowers.'

'Cleo, what is happening?' Gabe laughs. 'These are beautiful. Thank you.' He stares at me. 'Look, I know you had shit going on. It's okay.'

'Yeah, but...' I pause. *Just be honest.* 'Gabe, I like you, I'm trying to tell you I like you and I'd like to date you, if that'd be okay.'

'We talked about this, though. We want different things.' He sounds

confused.

‘We don’t. I don’t want to be your friend,’ I say. ‘I mean I do, but I also want to touch your penis sometimes.’ I fumble and cringe and try to fix it.

‘God. You must think I’m—’

He wraps me in a hug.

‘I loved your present so much,’ I say, wrapping my arms around his waist.

‘I’ve been worried about you, Cleo. You’ve been on my mind a lot.’

‘I have?’

‘Of course,’ Gabe pulls back and kisses me. And kisses me. And kisses me. Arms around each other, needy kissing in the middle of the lawn out the front of the library.

I look at him. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah. I reckon we can work it out.’

He kisses me again and I start to laugh. ‘You shushed me in your library.’

‘Well, you came in like a crazy loud person.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m sorry too,’ he says. ‘I disappeared. I can do that when things feel too hard. But that’s shit. Let’s just be honest with each other—that’s the only way any of this is going to work.’

‘I want it to work.’

‘Yeah. Me too.’

I look at him and smile, and we kiss again, and it feels right.

Archer makes tea and we sit on the couch clutching our mugs like they're lifebuoys. He'd texted me thank you when he got home, and I asked if I could come round.

'No one's ever given me flowers before,' he says.

'That's terrible. Everyone deserves flowers,' I smile.

'You still don't know what you want, do you Cleo?'

'I do,' I say. It surprises me. 'I want you.' I take a deep breath. 'But I also want to keep seeing someone else.' I hear him take a sharp breath in. 'I want both of you.'

'Okay.'

'I want to be your girlfriend. I want to build something great with you. But I want to keep seeing him. My gut is telling me there is something unfinished with him.'

'Right.' A pause. 'I don't know what this means, Cleo.'

'I don't know either. I'm hoping we can work it out together.'

Now that I've started being honest, it's like a champagne cork popped and all the words come pouring out, some deep truths I didn't even know were there.

'I don't want more kids. I don't want to ever get married again. I don't even know if I'll ever want to live with you. Right now, I love where I live. I am happy there. And I think I would be happy if you wanted to see other people too, if that is a thing you wanted, because I think you and I could be so solid, and I can't imagine anything ruining that. It may be ridiculously naïve, I know, because we haven't tried it yet, but...But here I am. This is what I want.'

A new kind of confidence is flushing through me; something I've not felt before.

Archer nods, his face trying to take it in.

'I know this is a lot,' I say. 'I've just kind of vomited it all out there.'

'Is that everything?'

'I don't know. I feel like now I've started talking I can't stop.' My hands are flapping around in front of me with the same energy that my body feels, which makes Archer laugh.

Then he sighs loudly and rubs at his temples. 'Cleo, I don't know.'

'All you can do is trust your gut,' I say, willing his gut to say he wants to

try.

‘Do you feel about him the way you feel about me?’ he asks, and suddenly I see him in a new light. He’s scared. It’s always felt like he’s so sturdy, while I’ve been the one that’s flailing, but I see it all over him now. He’s terrified too. Of course he is.

I move close and grab his hands. ‘I want you. You are... you’re one of the most incredible people I’ve ever met, and you are enough, Archer. This has nothing to do with you.’

I pull back so he can see my face. ‘The way I feel about the two of you is completely different. Like they’re separate—barely the same species. I wish I could explain it. These feelings aren’t in competition with each other. My heart just feels like it knows it’s meant to be with you both. I know that makes no sense—’

‘I really like you, Cleo. I feel like this is...something. And I believe you. I do.’

Archer clenches his jaw. He pauses for a long moment.

‘But I can’t. It’s not for me. And I want you to be happy, and I’m not going to get in your way, okay?’

I take a deep breath, I want to cry, but I don’t. ‘Okay,’ I say. I put my hand to his face and look in his eyes. ‘Thank you. For being brilliant and honest and this sucks.’ I’m smiling as my eyes start to well.

‘It sucks so fucking bad.’

‘Being friends isn’t an option is it?’ I say, just to be clear.

‘I can’t be your friend, Cleo. Not now; one day, maybe.’

‘You mean when you’re shackled up with some hot new girlfriend,’ I joke, but Archer doesn’t laugh. I swallow hard. ‘Sorry.’ I look at him. I can’t believe I’m going to walk away from this excellent human. But I am. I’ve got to. ‘I loved getting to know you, Archer. So much.’

‘I really, really want you to be happy, Cleo,’ he says, and I know he means it.

I squeeze his hand, and I stand up and Archer walks me to his door. ‘Just...’ I start.

But there’s nothing left to say, so I leave.

I feel sad about his. And happy about Gabe. And proud of myself for trusting my gut. I wish Archer wanted what I want, but he doesn’t and that’s okay.

I’ll be okay.

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‘Okay so next Saturday is Gabe’s library thing, yes?’ Jude has her phone out and she’s madly punching details into her calendar as we stand at the edge of the park watching the kids play in the sandpit.

‘Yes. And then Sunday is—’

‘Is your dance concert. Because you’re a dancer. You best believe that is already highlighted in the fucking calendar.’

My stomach fills with butterflies at the idea of performing in the concert, and Jude reads this feeling on my face. ‘You’re going to be fucking brilliant. I can’t wait.’

‘God, Jude, I’m so nervous. What if everyone thinks I look like an idiot?’ I say, and immediately wish I hadn’t. I jump in before she can, because I’m trying really hard to catch these kinds of thoughts. ‘But I didn’t sign up to be lovingly yelled at by Mellie Abundance so I’d know what everyone else thought of me; I did it because I wanted to do it.’

Jude stares at me. ‘Um, what have you done with my mate?’ she says, her face flushed with pride.

‘Shut up.’

‘What did you and Gabe do last night?’

‘He took me to an escape room and we had the most ridiculous time trying to crack these puzzles and codes to save the world from nuclear destruction. It was hilarious.’

‘Oh my god, I love this. I want to try one, but I think I’d get too stressed.’

‘You’d hate it,’ I assure her.

‘And it’s good? You’re good?’ She sips from her coffee and takes a motherly step towards the sandpit, where Andy just fell on his butt. We wait; then he gets up and looks over at us and we cheer, and he laughs.

Jude turns back to me. ‘You’re feeling okay about everything?’

Over a week has passed since the weekend of romantic declarations and goodbyes, and I’m sitting in a bittersweet place. Proud of myself. Happy that Gabe and I are continuing our thing; sad that Archer and I are not.

‘You know what? I feel like, and this is going to sound weird, but I feel like nothing can fuck with me, Jude.’ I try to explain: ‘I feel like I can deal with anything and I’ll be okay.’

‘Yes, you will.’

‘Life is always going to be messy, there’s always going to be shit, but I

know I can deal with it, with anything. I feel like I've got my own back now and that's enough.'

Jude smiles and nods.

'That as long as I keep trusting my gut, then I'll feel like this, which is...' I don't know what the word is to describe the feeling that's settled right at my core. '...It's like, calm. Or more than that, Jude. It's like peace.'

Jude bumps her shoulder into mine and then wraps her arm around my shoulder. I exhale. The peace I've felt the last few weeks hasn't made things any easier objectively. It's just made me better equipped to ride out the storm.

I still feel overwhelmed by everything. By the surprise shocks of grief, of establishing new boundaries with Doug's parents, and what that looks like with the kids. With my parents, too. By the changes Farida and I are making with West Side Honey, which feel terrifying and exciting all at once. It's all hard. Showing up honestly when I'm so used to editing or filtering myself is hard. I second-guess everything. I especially second-guess Gabe and his intentions.

The small stuff is the most triggering, like the other day he offered to get dinner on his way over to mine, he showed up with food without asking me what I wanted, and I made it a thing. Talked about consultation, talked about checking in, talked about not being in his head, and he pushed back hard.

'Cleo, I made the decision so you don't have to. This is about shared mental load. Doing things for each other to take off some of the load. I don't have two kids and a small business. I've got more space to make decisions. Let me take care of you. Also, it's dinner; don't assume I'm incompetent.' And he was right about everything, and I cried.

And when this happens, he holds me and tells me I'm beautiful and that he's sorry I've not had anyone care for me like this before, and that makes me want to curl up in a ball on my own, but also latch on to him like a baby koala, all at once.

So I feel weird all the time. But I've realised it feels weird because it's new, not because it's wrong. I realise Doug was my normal. The men before Doug, who were essentially proto-Dougs, have been my normal. Feeling unsure or unattractive or like I had to edit myself—that felt normal. Not knowing where I stood, second-guessing, playing small—all of it.

These changes, this thing with Gabe, calling it off with Archer, it's not normal to me. But I'm happy making a new normal. The peace is worth it.

'Can you imagine if you and Doug had tried to do an escape room?' Jude

says.

My face contorts with the idea of what that would've been like. 'We'd have been fucking awful. We absolutely would've been the reason the world ended.'

Jude laughs. 'And you and Gabe?'

'Oh, we saved the world,' I say smugly, 'with a whole minute to spare. You're welcome.'

Jude smirks and then softens. 'Have you heard from Archer?'

'Nope. That's really done. We just don't want the same things. It sucks, but I'd rather that than compromise what I know is right. I spent so much time doing that, and I'm not doing it again.'

'That's really hard,' Jude says, and stares at Perry with a motherly warning, which he sees, and immediately stops doing the thing that was about to injure him fairly seriously.

'Do I wish things were different? Absolutely. But they're not. His circus, his monkeys, Jude.'

'I like your new circus,' Jude smiles.

'Me too.'

Jude, the kids and I all walk up the street to Gabe's library, where the air is filled with music courtesy of a young local folk singer who's singing their heart out, and the carpark is packed with market stalls and small rides. The entrance to the library is decorated with a rainbow-balloon archway, and there's a fairyfloss machine.

Frankie and Perry both spot the stall with curly potatoes wound on sticks and their eyes light up at the sight of two beautiful acrobats on tall stilts blowing giant bubbles over our heads. All of us stare, dazzled.

'This is brilliant,' Jude says, looking around.

'I know, right? He's been working on this all year. It's about total community activation.'

Gabe approaches with a clipboard in his hands, a walkie-talkie on his belt and a look of controlled panic in his eyes. He has a flower face painted on his cheek.

He smiles big when he sees me, and I hug him tight. 'This is so bloody great.'

'Thank you. So far so good.' He notices Jude and opens his arms for a hug. 'It feels like we should do this.'

Jude hugs him. 'Right? We've been through so much already.'

'Nice to meet you, Jude, I'm not at all feeling the pressure of this interaction,' he says.

'Still...' She smirks. 'You didn't have to organise all of this for our first meeting.'

'Are you kidding? Cleo has told me how high the stakes are here.'

'Guys, this is my friend Gabe.'

The kids look up at him and say shy hellos.

'I like your flower,' Perry says.

'Thanks. I can take you all to get your own done if you like?' Gabe says, and the kids nod excitedly.

'All right,' I say. 'Face painting it is.'

We walk around the stalls, buy things we don't need, eat a picnic lunch of overpriced food-truck fare and drink cups of beer from the local brewery. Jude and the kids dance to four dads living their best rock fantasy on the main stage; Gabe pops over to check in when he can, and kisses me quickly when the kids aren't looking, before his walkie-talkie buzzes and one of his staff

need him for something.

Gabe is on top of his shit. He makes quick decisions and problem-solves with ease, and I find it all very attractive. I lie back on the picnic rug and take a deep breath of contentment as Frankie and Perry come running over.

‘Look, Mummy.’ Frankie’s tiny hands grab both my cheeks and turn my head. In the distance people are riding large motorised plush animals around a stretch of the carpark.

‘Can we please go on one? Please, please,’ Frankie begs.

‘Okay, okay.’ I glance at Jude. ‘Let’s pack up our stuff and then you can ride one.’

‘Mama you have to go on one as well,’ Perry says to Jude once we’re in the line.

‘I think my bum is too big, mate,’ Jude says.

‘No, that lady has a big bum too,’ Perry shakes his head and points at a woman riding a brown dog past us.

‘Oh god, Perry, don’t...Let’s not talk about other people’s bodies, huh?’

‘Aunty Jude, please?’ Frankie blinks her big eyes and I think, any time these two combine their powers, they’re going to be trouble.

‘Mummy?’ Frankie looks at me.

‘I’ll do it if Aunty Jude does it,’ I say, and Jude and I look at each other—*we’re doing it.*

‘You are braver than I,’ Gabe whispers when he finds us in the line. ‘I’m not humping the mechanical furry in public.’ Then he leers. ‘That’s a private thing.’

I smile big and genuinely, and I welcome it, welcome the reprieve from what has felt like an icy cocoon. Today I can feel the sun on my face, the breath in my lungs, and I love how close laughter is. I’d forgotten what this feels like.

*

Finally it’s our turn, and Frankie and Andy are put on a yellow triceratops and Perry gets a purple unicorn, and they set off wiggling their hips to make the machines move slightly faster than their pre-set slow speed. Andy clings to the ears of the dinosaur, giggling, as Frankie drives them around the carpark, and my heart explodes with love. Next, Jude is offered a grey fluffy wolf, and I get a comical-looking panda with giant eyelashes.

‘You sure this is going to hold my weight?’ Jude asks the gap-toothed young attendant.

‘Be orright,’ he nods without looking up. Then he whispers, ‘They can go

turbo for adults. You wanna go turbo and impress your kids?’

‘No, thank you,’ Jude mumbles and potters off sedately.

‘Mam? You wanna go turbo?’

I look at Gabe, who leans over the rope barrier, grabs my face in his hands and kisses me passionately. ‘Go off, Cleo!’

‘Yeah, turbo,’ I say to the guy, and right then I see Archer across the crowd, staring wide-eyed, his hand on the shoulder of his daughter, whose flower face-paint matches mine.

The big-eyelashed panda lurches away and I’m so startled by the look on Archer’s face that I don’t hold on properly. The panda is going way faster than I thought it would and I speed past Jude and the kids as they whoop and cheer, and I pull on the brake to slow down but it doesn’t. It doesn’t work.

Are you fucking kidding me? I’m out of control, turning haphazardly to miss kids on other plush animals and veering way too close to the crowd. I yell at the top of my lungs at the young attendant, who’s oblivious. A small child on a fluffy brown cow screams with sheer terror as I speed towards them. *I’m going to run over a child on a sweet-faced mechanical cow. I’m going to maim a child while riding a panda in front of the man I love*, I think.

...What?

Love? In love. *Fuck*. I slam my feet on the ground, trying to stop the panda with the sheer weight of my body, but it slows only slightly and blows gravel up into the air. I see Archer running towards me, his face concerned, as my feet buckle under the weight of the machine and I go toppling backwards. My arse lands hard on the ground and the panda flies out in front of me from between my legs—straight into Archer.

He almost rugby tackles it to a standstill as the young kid sprints over, looking stressed and wailing how sorry he is, and turns it off.

Archer crouches beside me. ‘Fuck, Cleo, are you okay?’

‘I...I...um, it wouldn’t stop, the brakes were—’

‘Did you hit your head?’ he asks, and I mumble no.

But my ankle stings and as I try to get up, my butt sends a shooting pain firing up my lower back. I wince and Archer kneels and helps me sit up.

‘Ow,’ I say; my ankle is bleeding. I look at Archer, his concerned face. ‘What the hell?’ I start to giggle, and he giggles too. I lean into his arm and tears well in my eyes that are both from the ridiculousness of all of this, and the truth I just found out. And the pain.

‘Holy shit, are you all right?’ Gabe materialises beside me. ‘The furry

went rogue and...Oh my god, your ankle.' He bends down and looks at it, touching my leg gently.

I can hear Jude cackling as she heads over with the kids. 'Jesus, you okay? Sorry for laughing, I'm in shock. Fucking hell.'

'Mummy!' Perry yells over the top of her.

'Sorry, kid. My love, are you all right? You were *flying*...' I laugh more, and Jude laughs; we are all slightly hysterical.

Not Frankie. She looks terrified, and she kneels next to me nuzzling tight into my side, her eyes teary. 'It was so fast.' Her arms wrap around my shoulders. 'Are you hurt?'

'It's okay, bubba, I did get a little bit hurt, but I'm okay. I'm all right, okay?' I kiss her forehead. *She must've been terrified.*

Andy's lip quivers and he starts to cry empathetic tears and Jude kisses his forehead, too. 'She's okay, mate, she's okay.'

I hold my hands out for him and realise my hands are bleeding too. *Shit.* I take him in my arms and cuddle him into my body with Frankie.

Don't hurt yourself in front of the grieving children, Cleo. Shit.

'It's okay, babies. Mummy's okay. I'm okay,' I soothe, and then become very aware of both Gabe and Archer looking at us.

Then, exactly as I take this in, Frankie puts her little hand on Archer's knee. 'Archer, do you have any band-aids?'

'Nah, Franks, I don't.' He puts his hand on top of hers. 'But we'll find one and we'll patch her up real good, okay? She's gonna be good as new,' he says, smiling his sweet smile for her.

'Archer,' Gabe says to himself, but he looks at me.

I stare at them both, dazed. Then look from one to the other. Gabe to Archer. Archer to Gabe. Trying to work out what to say.

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Then Archer holds his hand out and Gabe shakes it and they both say hello and I want to get up and run. I want to get up and jump on that mechanical panda and drive far, far away from the too-muchness of here.

I'm lying on the couch feeling sorry for myself with a heat pack on my arse and my hand and ankle bandaged up. Doug's mum has the kids for a sleepover. She's been messaging me a lot about how much she was missing them and I've been making excuses about being busy, but I finally agreed to it. She was going to meet us at the library, but ended up coming here instead while I got cleaned up.

Mary was so excited to see them, but now they've gone, I feel unsure. I know rationally they'll be fine; they've stayed at Mary's a lot. But it's the first time she's had them since Doug died, and it feels different. I'm worried that her grief will somehow rub off on them.

I lie there feeling sick as I twist every possible scenario and negative impact on them, trying to talk myself down, when my phone dings. A message from Archer, who, in the chaos of first aid and Gabe's expert problem-solving, slunk away without saying goodbye. I just turned around and he was gone.

Wanted to see if you're okay.

I'm okay. Ego bruised worse than my butt. A couple of grazes.

I'll be fine. I'll still be able to shake my arse tomorrow.

That's right, the concert. I'm glad to hear it. Sorry I didn't say goodbye.

Another message comes through: *Can we talk?*

Of course, I type, my heart racing. I'm not too busy next week.

I'm outside. Is that okay?

Pause. *Okay.*

I slowly sit up and shuffle to the door. Archer is standing outside the gate, looking serious and scared. I signal for him to come in, and he looks surprised. 'What about the kids?' he says in a low tone as he moves towards me.

'They're at Doug's mum's.'

'Right. You okay with that?'

I'm startled that he knows I'm not really okay with this. I slowly move back to the couch and he follows me, but he doesn't sit down.

'It's the first time since Doug and...The kids seemed happy to go there and she was just stoked to see them,' I say, trying to make a smaller deal of the whole thing.

‘And how do you feel?’

I grin weakly. ‘A bit worried. And I feel stupid for worrying because I know they’ll be fine. Like, physically, but I worry about their...spirits.’ I feel stupid saying this. *Is he going to think that’s a weird thing to say?*

‘That house is so sad,’ I say, but then I feel bad about it—like I’m saying I don’t think their grief is allowed. ‘Which is understandable of course, I’m not suggesting that it shouldn’t be—’

‘You don’t have to do that.’

‘What?’

‘Justify how you feel. Sometimes you add on all this extra stuff to how you feel as though I’m going to think you’re a bad person or something.’

‘I don’t do that,’ I snap.

But I totally do that. I take a breath. ‘I’m just trying to say what I think.’ I look at him. *What is he doing here?*

‘Yeah, you do. And you know how I know? Because I used to do it all the time too. We inherent people-pleasers need to pull each other up.’

My anxiety softens slightly. ‘I can’t imagine you ever saying anything you didn’t mean.’

‘All my shit, Cleo, is around not upsetting people. I used to over-accommodate a lot. I’d hate the idea of people thinking I was an asshole or a shit guy, and that’s cause of my dad.’ He pauses, slowing down, paying attention to his breath, like he’s bracing himself. I know that Archer’s dad was absent for most of his life and when he was around, by the sounds of it, he was hugely toxic. ‘All I’d ever hear from my mum and my aunties was how shit he was, right? And he was. But what I took that to mean is *I* could never be the problem. I could never upset anyone.’

His openness, his self-awareness, his willingness to share like this—it’s beautiful.

‘And so I had to—and I have to, over and over—learn that I’m allowed to make mistakes and fuck up and feel how I feel. I see it in you, too.’ He pauses. ‘And I think I fucked up with you.’

‘What?’

He paces back and forth. ‘I’m sorry to just barge in and dump this on you, but I wanted to see you and tell you...and fuck, are you okay? Is this okay?’

‘I’m okay, just tell me.’

‘I saw you today, saw you laughing and happy. You looked so genuinely happy, and I saw you with Gabe and I loved seeing you like that, look like

that. I mean, I didn't love seeing you make out with him, but, god, I just feel shit that I'm not part of it.'

'So, what are you saying?'

'I'm saying, I want you in my life, Cleo.' He looks at me. 'I want you.'

I try to make sense of what he's saying, and what this means. 'I want you too.'

He moves over and sits next to me on the couch.

'Okay, good,' he says, looking me in the eye. 'I'll try. I want to try. And I'm not promising anything, Cleo. I'm really not, I don't know if this will work for me. But how can I know if I don't try? I'm willing to trust your gut. I'm willing to trust you.'

'You are?'

'That's what I can offer you right now. If that's enough for you and I get it if it's—'

'It's enough.' I hold my hands out, and he takes them in his. 'I promise I'll look after your heart. I promise,' I say, meaning it, and I see tears spring to the corner of his eyes too.

I grab him and hug him tightly.

'We'll just work it out together,' he says.

'Yes. We can do all of this on our own terms. Our way.'

'Our way,' he kisses my forehead. 'I like the sound of that.'

I kiss him, and my heart beats quick and I feel so incredibly happy, and we don't stop kissing for a really long time.

'So, does that mean we're a thing now?' Archer teases.

'A thing?'

'Like are you my girlfriend now, Cleo? Is that a thing we're doing? Or that you even want to do? Are we using labels?' I giggle, I can't help it, and Archer laughs too. 'Do you want to be my girlfriend?' he asks with a dorky adolescent tone.

'Yeah,' I say. I do want to be his girlfriend. I want that a lot.

'Cool,' he smiles, and my heart flips.

'I don't want to need you, Archer, I want to choose you,' I say, and then worry it's too harsh and not as romantic as I thought it would be. 'I want this to be active, and not just something that happens, you know? Intentional. I want to make my circus the prettiest, best circus and for you to do that too, so our circuses sit side by side and complement each other and we're like—fuck, yeah; two circuses!' I look at him, worried that he'll have no idea what

I'm saying.

'I get it.' He squeezes my hand. 'That makes perfect sense.'

I step tentatively out of the dressing-room toilet and catch my reflection in the long mirror. I look like an eighties aerobics instructor, all neon and covered in glitter like a human disco ball, and I feel radiant.

Mellie Abundance appears in the doorway, ‘Okay, west side group, you bodacious bitches, are you ready to fucking dazzle?’

The whole room cheers loudly, and I cheer with them, my heart thudding in my chest. *Yeah, I think. Yeah, I am.*

We move quickly through the back of the venue and line up side stage in the dark, and I feel so nervous, my heart is beating quick in my chest, and my mouth is sandpaper dry. But I feel ready. *Just enjoy it*, I tell myself.

There’s a blackout and we all walk hurriedly onto the stage, and I get into my starting position. *Don’t overthink it, Cleo. Be in the moment.* The music thuds, the lights beam, and I shimmy, twirl, strut and relish every second of this five-minute routine, knowing I’ve earnt every second of it.

As I move on the stage, I catch glimpses of my cheer squad applauding me at the front of the room. Archer clapping, smiling wide, sitting next to Dad, who has Andy propped on his lap, the three of them clapping to the music, with Mum cheering next to them. Farida sits next to Gabe—they turn to each other, laughing, and then back to me, wooting loudly. I see Perry and Frankie in matching tutus, dancing in the aisle, and Jude standing behind them, cheering louder than anyone else in the room, tears absolutely streaming down her cheeks.

I dance, and mess up, and do my best, and I nail the bits I was desperate to nail and as I stand in my final pose receiving the full glory of a standing ovation, I feel a new level of peace unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.

I know now—it’s a truth that feels as real as the breath in my lungs—I *will be okay*.

Even if everything isn’t, I will be. I will be okay as long as I listen to what I want, and I go for it, and I stay true to the promise to not minimise or abandon myself and my needs ever again. Even if everything blows up right in my face, I’ve learnt that I can deal with anything. *So why not go all in?*

If Doug’s death has taught me anything it’s that your whole world can change in a second. So why wouldn’t I dance, mess up, do my best, love with my whole heart and do it all on my own terms? Live the way I want my babies to live.

I laugh, I laugh with my whole body, unable to contain the elation of this moment. Of how I feel right now.

Free. I feel free.

EPILOGUE

Jude and I sit on the perfect pink couch drinking gin and whisper-shouting at the TV.

‘What the fuck were they thinking with this rewrite?’ Jude bitches. ‘I hate this weird woke angle. It’s so forced.’ She drinks the rest of her gin, puts her glass on the coffee table and looks at me. A smile crosses her face as she stares at me until I start to feel self-conscious.

I put a hand up to my face. ‘What?’

‘Oh, just sitting here marvelling at my brilliant best mate, with your mummune, your thriving femme-led business and your two boyfriends.’

‘One boyfriend,’ I correct her.

‘Right. What do we call Gabe?’

‘I don’t know. My lover?’

‘Your paramour?’

We both laugh, and Jude stares at me, her eyes glinting.

‘*What?*’ I ask again.

‘I just think you’re the best,’ she says. ‘Like it makes me emotional.’ I see the tears in the corner of her eyes.

‘You know I wouldn’t have gotten through any of it without you, don’t you?’

‘I know.’ Jude smiles. ‘But I’m so proud of you.’

‘You know what? I’m proud of me too,’ I say. And I mean it.

‘You’ve totally inspired me,’ she says.

‘Oh yeah? What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know yet. Everything. I feel like I can do whatever I fucking want now. You did that.’

‘All right, take it easy, you.’ I inhale deeply, feeling Jude’s excitement, because it’s mine too.

I feel like I can do anything. Like I can do whatever I need to do.

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Sid and Ziggy, Auntie Claire loves you. Always.

Jacq, my wonderous best, my most brave, I will be by your side on every mountain. Thank you for being my safest harbour. I think you're the best best, the bonnest of bonne. I love your FACE.

Finally, to you, glorious reader, thank you. I wish you the peace to hear the longing in your heart and the courage to act on it. May you trust yourself to fuck off the 'rules' and do life on your terms. You are worthy of your desires. The biggest of big loves to you.

Tell your people you love them. Tell them now. Do it.

Love Claire.

ALSO BY CLAIRE CHRISTIAN

Beautiful Mess

It's Been a Pleasure, Noni Blake

CLAIRE CHRISTIAN is a storyteller: a writer, theatremaker and facilitator. She has had four plays published by Playlab, including *Lysa and the Freeborn Dames*, which debuted at La Boite in 2018. She has also had the great joy of directing Michelle Law's smash-hit comedy *Single Asian Female*. Claire's debut novel, *Beautiful Mess*, won the Text Prize in 2016.

PRAISE FOR

Claire Christian and *West Side Honey*

‘This warm, poignant novel is a love letter to what can happen when we take agency of our lives, and to the freedom and joy that waits for us on the other side of fear. If books could talk, Cleo and her charming cohort in *West Side Honey* would say to readers, “You can sit with us, you’re welcome here.” I laughed and cried and loved being in their beautiful company.’

HOLLY RINGLAND

‘*West Side Honey* does to your body what a scented bath, a sweaty sparkly dance session, an electric first kiss and an enormous unexpected bunch of flowers do—ALL AT THE SAME TIME. A thundering round of applause for Claire Christian, her brilliant hot-mess protagonist Cleo and her excellent cast of delightfully written kids, friends and lovers.’

KATE MILDENHALL

‘Claire Christian’s books are a gift to the romance genre. Christian tells big-hearted, super sexy and inclusive stories that leave you wanting more. *West Side Honey* is as flirty as it is empowering, and Cleo’s journey towards wholeness is one we can all aspire to. This is a book about figuring out what we want, and believing that we deserve nothing less.’

MICHELLE LAW

PRAISE FOR

It's Been a Pleasure, Noni Blake

‘Noni Blake is the flirtatious, foul-mouthed and flawed heroine you’ve been searching for.’

MICHELLE LAW

‘Frank and funny...refreshingly, unabashedly, queer and inclusive.’

READINGS

‘Entertaining and effervescent.’

LEANNE HALL

‘A joyous and hilarious romp around the world and back. Sexy in all the right places and squirm-inducing in all the others. Christian is a must-read author for anyone who loves their rom-coms real and utterly bingeable.’

BRI LEE

‘The dialogue is preppy, fun and sharp...I wanted to jump inside the world Christian has created...This is an all-round feel-good read, and utterly charming.’

JESSIE TU, *WOMEN'S AGENDA*

‘Noni’s comic voice is so refreshing, so endearing... I truly felt a bit bolder after reading this book...It felt pleasurable—and we can all do with a bit more pleasure.’

AGE

‘A vibrant story of self-discovery...Both a celebration of pleasure and a dissection of the restrictions people place on their own lives, this is sure to capture readers’ hearts.’

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