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THE MISSED CONNECTION

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QUERCUS

*Chapter 1***MIGHT AS WELL
HAVE A GIGGLE**

What nail shape would you like, miss?" asked the manicurist, inspecting Sasha's left hand. "Square? Round? Almond-shaped?"

Distracted, Sasha glanced up from the phone nestled on her lap. "I'm sorry?"

"Almond?"

"Thank you, no, I can't eat almonds," she said, smiling sweetly. "Allergic."

Physically, Sasha Cruz was getting a manicure. Mentally, she was inside her phone, working. She'd just landed the splashiest commercial in her career as a casting director—and so scrolling through audition clips was top priority. She was so distracted, in fact, that she was about to miss a Pivotal Moment.

To be fair, no one expects a Pivotal Moment to happen at an airport mini spa.

It was odd enough that Sasha was getting her nails done professionally. She was damned good at doing her *own* nails. And assessing her own stock portfolio. And rewiring her own kitchen. And

silk-pressing her own hair. What couldn't she do? Very few things; namely 1) drive, and 2) confront life without antidepressants. Sasha was raised to be self-sufficient by her single mom, a deadly practical electrician who played no games. "You handle your business! No crying and no suffering!" she'd tell Baby Sasha. Years later, she discovered that her mom hadn't invented this quote. It was paraphrased from an old Juvenile song. But it stuck.

Sasha had arrived at New York City's Fiorello Airport with a flawless, bloodred manicure. But sitting at her gate a full three hours early, she noticed a chip on her thumb. This wouldn't do. She worked hard to cultivate her "minimalist upscale baddie" veneer. Even her casual airport ensemble made a statement. Razor-sharp bob. Winged liner. Impeccable jeans. Tiny tank. Diamond studs (fake). Cashmere throw (real). She looked impenetrable, unruffled, unfuckwithable. A chip in her nail polish was a kink in her armor. After all, as a casting director, she was known for her eye.

It's why Seraphina, the international beauty emporium, had hired her to cast their Autumn Kisses commercial. It was a huge departure for Sasha, whose specialty was popcorn rom-coms and thrillers. But after a yearlong sabbatical—where she did little but hole up in her Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, condo, living off DoorDash and YouTube Pilates—she was a tad rusty. The great news? Seraphina was flying her to their international brand summit in Paris so she could get a "feel" for the Seraphina vibe. Just her and over one hundred execs from all over the world.

To be honest, this was an unnecessary trip. Every girl, gay, and they was familiar with Seraphina's vibe. Where else does one find the world's most covetable perfumes, eye creams, and hydrating-fluffing-smoothing shampoos? But Sasha welcomed the trip. A weekend in Paris was a gift from the heavens, especially after fighting her way back from hell. And her flight phobia was no match for Xanax.

But first, nails. Luckily for Sasha, once she noticed the chip, she also noticed B-Relaxed Spa across from her gate. Its neon cursive sign beckoned to her. The salon was a tiny, hot-pink space with one nail station and two massage chairs—and it was blessedly empty. When Sasha walked in, a freckled, caramel-skinned twentysomething wearing thigh-length braids called out, “Heyyy! I’m Maxi.”

Accent via Staten Island, thought Sasha. Slight lisp via Invisalign. Gorgeous girl. I wonder if she’s ever thought about acting?

Sasha was never not casting.

Maxi led her to the nail station, where they sat across from each other. After deciding that almond was, indeed, the shape in question, the manicurist got to work. And Sasha got back to scrolling. Less than a minute had passed before Maxi said, “Hey, can I ask you a question?”

Sasha glanced up from her phone. Her eyes were blurring from studying the self-tape submissions of dozens of models and actors. It was a lipstick commercial, so she was looking for luscious lips. But “luscious” was so subjective. And the only real direction she had received was via the marketing VP, a fiftysomething dude in leather jeans. “Think cute girls, hot boys who’ll agree to wear lipstick, real bodies, all ethnicities. A buffet of diversity. But a *fuckable* buffet.” In other words, find models who were “inclusive” enough to score culture points, but sexy enough to please investors.

She stole a glance at Maxi. She had a cute, Kewpie doll-shaped mouth. Her energy was like a bouncing beam of sunlight. Perfect for Seraphina.

Hmm, is she about twenty-three? she wondered. Maybe younger? Black-girl freckles, caramel skin... Wait. WAIT. Is Paramount still developing that Sade biopic?

“Sure!” Sasha put on a friendly expression. “You can ask me a question.”

“Are you feeling anxious right now?” asked Maxi.

“No, I’m, like, ridiculously relaxed. Why do you ask?”

Sasha couldn’t remember the last time she was relaxed. She was high-strung as hell. In general, she felt like the first kernel primed to explode in a microwave popcorn bag. She usually hid it behind self-deprecating banter and a breezy smile. Though right now, after downing a glass of airport bar rosé, her smile was more boozy than breezy.

“Your hand is warm,” noted the manicurist. “That’s a tension indicator.”

Damn. Maxi was right. Nothing got by nail techs and hairstylists.

“Oh, that’s just me.” She shrugged airily, eyes drifting back down to her phone. “I run hot when I’m in work mode. Like when you have too many apps open and your phone overheats.”

“But you’re not a phone, you’re a person,” Maxi pointed out. “You *must* unclench.”

Unclench what, exactly? Her brows? Jaw? Butt cheeks? Everything was clenched. Sasha let out a small laugh. “Oh girl, I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“How about a hand massage?”

“I’m good, really. But thank you.”

“I have an idea,” persisted Maxi. “Can I do a palm reading?”

Curious, Sasha abandoned her phone for good. She squinted at Maxi, assessing whether she was serious. “I...don’t know. *Can* you? Is it on the menu?”

“I’ve been studying palmistry,” she said proudly. “I’m just an apprentice, but I’m good at it. Come on, you got nothing to lose.”

Sasha thought about this for five seconds. “You know what? My New Year’s resolution was to be more whimsical. Let’s do it.”

“Yeah?”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “The horrors persist. Might as well have a giggle.”

“That’s the spirit, diva.” The manicurist grabbed her right hand,

flipping it over so it faced upward. Lightly, she traced Sasha's palm. "Mmm. Your heart line runs deep. The deeper the line, the richer the love."

"My palm's lying to you, Maxi. I'm poor in love." Not wanting to seem like a sad sack, she flashed a grin. "But rich in vibes."

"Period." Maxi giggled.

Sasha wasn't really joking, though. Dating hadn't been a priority in years. When asked about her nonexistent love life, she always blamed work. She traveled all the time! She was too ambitious! She was the type of woman who intimidated men. "Types" were her specialty. Her career hinged upon finding the perfect person for the perfect role. She was so good at it, she'd typecasted herself.

"Would you consider yourself a hopeful person? Your soul line is showing that you're optimistic."

She couldn't tell the truth, which was that she was chronically depressed, incurably sleepy—and that, on most days, the only thing holding her together was blush. Instead, she said, "I'm optimistic that I can grow to become an optimistic person."

"Love that for you. And I love your bracelet," said Maxi, eyeing the gold cuff on her right wrist. "But I think it's blocking my reading. Here, I'll take it off..."

"No!" In a flash, Sasha clapped her left hand over the bracelet. Her heartbeat quickened and she began to tremble. Abruptly, the oxygen seemed to disappear in the tiny spa.

"My bad! Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so curt." The words tumbled out of her mouth, panicked and apologetic. She took a few deep inhaleds, trying to regulate her breathing. Oh, this was so embarrassing. "Don't know what happened there."

"You're not fine, you're breathing funny. Here, drink this." Maxi hopped up and grabbed a small paper cone of fountain water, handing it to Sasha. Eagerly, she gulped it down.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "I just . . . I never take it off. It's a sentimental thing." Waving her hands in a *don't mind me* gesture, she gave Maxi what she hoped was a disarming smile. Maxi smiled back but couldn't hide her alarm.

The cuff stayed. It was the only thing shielding her scar from the eyes of the world. It was a barely visible, shiny gash—but in Sasha's mind, it was massive, sprawling, all-encompassing. The scar (and its low ache on rainy days) was a constant reminder of that night in October 2022. That night her life turned into a low-budget thriller. A 20/20 episode. An "it happened to me" Reddit post. After that night, she'd learned that the only way to protect herself was to *keep* to herself. Mind her business, not let anyone new into her life, and drown herself in work. Outrun the memories. It worked for a long time—until last year, when her psychiatrist threatened to drop her if she didn't take a work sabbatical.

Your mental health won't improve if you keep running from your past, her doc had said. *Slow down and face it. Feel it.*

So Sasha made some big changes. She stopped working for the first time since high school. She moved from her second-floor brownstone apartment (vulnerable to break-ins) to a high-rise, doorman building (as secure as Fort Knox). Without work to focus on, and nowhere to be, her life became a collection of quiet, unwitnessed moments—played out within the walls of her home. She ordered sushi and binged *Love Is Blind*. She read a captivating book about the history of rats in Manhattan. She installed a claw-foot tub she bought online from Home Depot. And, most significantly, she rarely ventured outside. After a while, friends stopped asking her out. Texts dwindled. But she didn't mind the solitude. It felt healing somehow.

Things didn't get weird till the fourth or fifth month, when Sasha had a terrible realization. She really, *really* didn't mind the solitude. She saw how shockingly easy it'd be to become a recluse

(savings pending). Every day, she got cozier with isolation. And it wasn't scary. It was a relief. In fact, she craved it. There was no one to hurt her. No one to judge. No one for her to annoy with her constant, creeping blues. She created her own world. No shower, no problem. Weep through breakfast, nap through lunch.

Sometimes she'd climb in her empty tub with pillows, a water bottle, and a bag of kettle corn. For days, she'd lay there in the dark, bingeing niche history podcasts. Any topic would do, from abandoned malls to bizarre defunct professions ("funeral clown" was her favorite). By the second day in the tub, she'd begin to dissociate. She was no longer Sasha Cruz, deceptively glamorous industry player. She was a bodyless blob, floating away into the pitch-black cocoon of the podcasts—where nothing existed but fun facts, trivia, and lore about long-ago places and people. Dead-and-gone things.

This was worrisome behavior. This was shut-in behavior. But it was hers. She'd built a safe haven. No one talks about how self-satisfying depression can feel.

But then, Sasha caught an endless cold that wasn't a cold, at all. It was aspiration pneumonia, and it landed her in the hospital for five days. Her doc explained that, if left untreated for a few more weeks, it could've killed her. She would've died alone. Possibly in her new bathtub. And that thought, she found, was *not* satisfying. In fact, it terrified her into rejoining the world. Sasha suspected that it wasn't the healthiest choice, allowing fear to motivate another huge life decision. But whatever. There were worse reasons to yank yourself out of a dissociative bed rot.

Step one? Write an elegant, sane-sounding "somebody hire me, please" post on LinkedIn. Before she had time to panic and delete, Seraphina contacted her. And now, the Paris trip would kick off her fresh start. She was thirty-two, back on her feet, and stronger than ever. Was she seeking guidance from a baby nail tech moonlighting as a fortune teller? Sure! But Sasha was a savvy woman.

And savvy women know that wisdom sometimes comes in unconventional packages.

“Got it, your bracelet stays on,” said Maxi, as she continued to trace the lines in Sasha’s palm. Abruptly, she stopped. Frowned. And then, she pulled a tiny magnifying glass out of her apron pocket. Closing one eye, she held it above Sasha’s palm.

Sasha was alarmed. “What happened? What do you see?”

“Nothing, I’m just processing your palm map.”

“Is it bad?”

Maxi shook her head, slowly. And then, with a huge smile, she looked up at Sasha. “No, it’s great news. You’re gonna meet a man.”

“A man,” repeated Sasha flatly. “That’s the great news?”

“I get it, most men are flops. But your palm’s saying that the right one awaits you.”

“I’m sorry, Maxi, I just don’t believe in the soulmate industrial complex.”

“Better start believing. You’re gonna experience a chance meeting that’ll set off a chain of events—events that’ll end in happily ever after.” Maxi leaned forward, peering into Sasha’s eyes. “The right connection can bridge hearts through time and space. The right connection can change the world.”

Sasha smiled kindly, but was skeptical of Maxi’s overwrought advice. So she changed the subject. “You have an incredible mouth. I’m casting a Seraphina lipstick commercial, any interest?”

“How’d you know I was an actor? I just landed an audition for the new Sade movie.”

I still got it, she thought, happily.

“Let’s stay in touch.” Sasha slid her a business card from her purse. “I’m a casting director.”

“God gave with both hands today!” exclaimed Maxi. She pocketed the card, and took Sasha’s hand, again. “But back to you. Your palm’s telling me you’re hiding from your life. Is that true?”

"Welll...not no."

"Life's too short to hide, sis. Aren't you excited to see what happens next?"

Sasha considered this. Maybe "excited" was too dramatic a word. Excitement required a level of trust in the world that she didn't quite feel, yet. But she was curious about the future. And, for the first time in a long time, she was curious about *people*. At the beginning of her sabbatical, she felt relieved not to have to interact with strangers (or anyone, really). People were too unpredictable. But lately, she'd started peering out her bedroom window; spying on the rush hour crowd seventeen floors down on Grand Army Plaza. Behind the safety of her curtains, she'd wonder where everyone was headed, who they were meeting, and what drove them out of bed every morning. Who was out there? Did anyone feel as unmoored as she did? Had anyone else read and loved *Rats: Observations on the History & Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants*?

Sasha did want to know people again, and be known, herself. What was the point of living a life, unwitnessed? And when it came to dating—well, ever since that long-ago October, she'd rejected men as a species and a concept. But she was exhausted from the effort. She was tired of clinging to fear like a security blanket. It was time to open herself up to adventure. Enjoy some light wining-and-dining. Yes, she was a self-sufficient queen, but, for once—why not let a man sweep in and handle the bill, trash day, her orgasms? In her quietest moments, she fantasized about someone telling her, *Don't worry, I've got it.*

Sasha was tired of always getting it.

"Maybe," she started quietly, "I'm a little excited to see what happens next."

"Of course you are, hon," said Maxi. "And not for nothing? No one wants to die alone."

No one wants to die alone.

In the end, that's what made her believe in Maxi's reading. Somehow, Maxi had read her mind and saw her fears. It was one thing to have the thoughts rattling around in her mind. It was another to hear them spoken aloud by an absolute stranger. Literally, all Maxi knew about Sasha was that she was allergic to almonds.

No one wants to die alone.

That line was still ringing in Sasha's ears, hours later—when she heard it, again. Spoken by a most unexpected gentleman.

*Chapter 2***IN BOCCA AL LUPO**

Sasha used to love flying. At the height of her career, she practically lived on the red-eye between New York and LA. It felt jet-setty, cosmopolitan. But today? Flights were a high-maintenance nightmare.

Flying required the following: 1) reading the turbulence forecast on Turbli.com; 2) boarding with a buzz; 3) enthusiastically pantomiming the emergency instructions along with the flight attendant; 4) and risking credit card debt to upgrade to first class. That last one was important, because first class offered a private pod with a sliding door. Given her chances of hyperventilating, privacy was key. Especially since the flight was filled with Seraphina execs she hadn't yet met.

But, as Sasha settled into seat 1E, she wasn't thinking about Seraphina or tomorrow's wine hangover. The only thing on her mind was Maxi's palm reading.

I have to admit, she made some brilliant points, thought Sasha, as she attempted to close her privacy door. But it wouldn't budge. Was there a button she wasn't seeing? Sasha tried again. Nothing. Was it stuck? She rang the "help" buzzer, hoping a flight attendant