

LOVE, HUNTER

October, London 2016

“So, why are you still here?”

The question hung between us like a blob of glue. I hesitated, trapped, confused. My underarms itched. Damp. A buzzing pitched in my left ear, B flat or possibly A. Outside a dog barked, and a door slammed. Silence. The airless, shabby room rammed with dark furniture pulsed a claustrophobic beat. At some point, Prue gave up.

“No time like the present, love, is there? It’s up to you, of course,” she added kindly, tapping The Lovers card. “If you don’t go, you’ll never know.”

Dumbly, I watched as she gathered the tarot spread and housed the pack in an embroidered pouch. The session was over, my questions unanswered. The inner ear hum dimmed and died.

“Trust your instincts,” Prue advised, drawing tatty strings together. Rolls of colourful bracelets jangled a dance down both arms as she placed the pouch to one side and leaned forward. Bead-black eyes scrutinised mine. “The journey will be the same whichever route you choose. But they’re telling me you’re a light worker. And that matters.”

I clung on. “A what? What do you mean? Sorry, what do *they* mean?”

LOVE, HUNTER

Prue sighed and eased her largesse out of a sunken, battered armchair. “You’ll work it out,” she said knowingly. “Just forty today please, love. You can leave it on the table.”

And if I don’t? Four ten-pound notes laid on the lacy cloth I shrugged on a puffer and hurried to follow the unhurried sway of Prue’s hips lumbering down the corridor towards the front door. Healer, clairvoyant, and soothsayer for the past eleven years, Prue’s accuracy and predictions had always been bang on. Yet after today’s reading, none of the optimistic bounce and relief comforted me. Instead, planks of panic swung like a see-saw on speed.

“Thanks, Prue.” I swallowed and smiled uncertainly. “Probably won’t see you for a while. If I go, that is.”

Prue cackled gently. “You can thank my guides. I’m just the messenger.”

Her matter-of-fact tones held no clues. I was just another client. A cruel blast of early October chill slipped through the gap as she fiddled with the chain. Dismally we squinted into the greying afternoon, thick with the promise of thunder. I shivered and rummaged in my bag for a scarf, before hurrying down the garden path to a low gate barely discernible beneath a bushy hedgerow. Hitching up the rusted mechanism I scraped warped wood over choked debris, glancing back for a final wave only to find the pale green door to Beacon Cottage was shut.

I hastened to my car, a twenty-year-old Mercedes sports, and flung myself onto the driver’s seat, eager to fire up some heat. Damn this horrible British weather. A light was flashing from my bag. That could wait. I wasn’t ready for the real world.

LOVE, HUNTER

Not yet. With the engine running, I sat in the car on a run-down estate west of Watford and allowed Prue's predictions to sink in. My head spun with possibilities, none of which felt ready to land. Yet I couldn't deny the pressure forcing me to face up to a better future, the unknown, no matter how scary or uncomfortable.

The cabin slowly warmed as scattered thoughts drew me to my phone. The usual junk emails, an invite to an artist's launch at the Serpentine Gallery, a request for casting and a text from Cosmo saying he'd be back late. He must have a date.

I cruised down the M1 in a trance. Cosmo. An album of memories had downloaded since returning to live at his place. Nine years ago we'd split the rent and bills on a run-down, Fulham duplex before his charming parents had chipped in with mortgage funds and friendly aid in the shape of retired builder pals. The place had been chaos for a while but everyone had muddled through. Cosmo and I had always fused like moths to a flame so we carried on the same arrangements as before, except that now he was my landlord and I lived in a converted, upgraded ensuite under the eaves.

Back then, life had been carefree. Cosmo and I were working in media we loved with little future focus, furniture or permanent partners. But eighteen months after the Fulham renovations, everything changed. Nash came into my life. Floppy ginger-mopped Nash. My hands tightened around the wheel. We'd met on a three-day shoot in Edinburgh for a drinks campaign. Confident, joke-loaded and ambitious, Nash was freelancing as a lighting assistant yet after day one it was clear to everyone in the studio that his passion was music. He wasn't like the others, he'd tell me in his Geordie accent in between breaks. I couldn't have cared less, merely flattered by his boyish pursuit. He was like a puppy begging for attention and before I could stop the

LOVE, HUNTER

tide, the puppy won me over and we were dating. Never in a million years had I imagined myself to be coupled with a tubby northerner with a bad haircut and aspirations to be the next Ed Sheeran. Yet with Nash, appearances had never mattered. He was cool, funny, sexy, popular and loved evenings in, exploring new recipes and strumming his guitar. I quit Cosmo's Fulham hide-out and moved into Nash's Kingston flat overlooking the river. For many years, we were in love, at least that's what I believed. I thought we had a solid future together, I'd confided about my panic attacks at the start, surprised when he wasn't put off. I was ready to trade in the Mercedes for a jeep for the dogs we'd buy, and the babies we'd make. Until one gut-wrenching afternoon after a commercial casting, I was discreetly informed that he'd been clambering aboard my media contacts to further his musical career and had bedded a converted fan or two along the way. The red flags unfurled along with utter rage. Lies lies lies! How had I not seen this coming? I'd trusted him. Never thought anyone else would be interested in him. Of course, he'd borrowed hands-up innocence during a particularly nasty row and claimed my paranoia was to blame, fluidly manipulating versions of *his* truth to support *his* agenda in true narcissistic style. It was in his interest to keep my attention drawn to fill his well. Some would call it selfish, others a betrayal. I called it Hades.

How I'd wrenched myself out of his airy, Thames-side apartment was a painful miracle yet no matter how deeply the scythe sliced, misery cramps kept popping up like pissy weeds. My insides clenched on automatic. When would the roots of our toxic relationship just fuck off and let me be? Fast forward five years and I was ensconced once more in Cosmo's attic, a very single thirty-four-year-old about to shake up her life for good.

LOVE, HUNTER

Flashes of Prue's reading came and went as the north circular mocked my fear. I drew instead on a whimsical connection to the familiar greyness, the run-down terraced houses, the metallic footbridge leading to Ikea, the 1970's factory buildings and tyre shops. You don't fool me anymore, I told them. I'm leaving you for sundowners, beach parties, star-gazing, yachts, laughter, villas, sea views, bronzed buttocks, art gallery wanders, trips to hillside villages, sandy toes, romance, rosé wine and scallops, and shopping. That felt better already. Would life be as magical as I dared to dream? I'd saved enough from modelling jobs to keep me going for a while, hoping to be taken on by agencies in Nice, Lyon and Paris.

Still, worries lurked. Would the French bookers jeer at a five-foot-seven mannequin with 'Marilyn' curves? I'd never be one of the tower-and-glower leggy brigades; more girl-next-door with dimples and feminine allure. I couldn't grow any taller and I couldn't lose any roundedness, yet loved performing for the camera. London agent Tricia always had my back. 'It's all about proportions,' she would encourage. 'Don't fight it, own it.' That was another hurdle. What would I tell her if I left? An extended holiday would hardly cut it. She'd go crazy. Head booker, ex-runway knock-out, Tricia was a tough nut terrier, a brilliant negotiator but hardly one for an understanding chat.

Even so, I reasoned, London castings had morphed into cattle calls forcing our trade to splinter. Jobs were harder to win now that recessionary values had laid claim to the advertising industry. It hadn't all been bad. At the beginning of my career, I'd swung from a tender branch for as long as it cradled me, revelling in the attention, dining out on a frail ego and skinny diets. Back then, my life must have appeared enviable to outsiders. I was young and magazine famous. The flip side was a dark lonely secret. I was hungry. All the time. And paranoid. Work was either full-on or

LOVE, HUNTER

anxiously quiet. During slacker spells, I'd often skip public transport and walk home from a casting to my over-priced studio in Parsons Green via London's finest streets where I'd enviously gaze through dressed windows into a world of luxury - a world I craved to inhabit. Perhaps Mother was right. If I'd have worked up the ladder at Channel 5 in my twenties instead of having my head turned by a model scout, I'd be a proud Clapham homeowner by now with a husband, kids, and a gadget-stuffed kitchen with doors leading onto a decked terrace. Suddenly, a transit van blasted its horn and cut into my lane. Cursing, I braked and swerved. I hadn't even seen him.

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Two weeks after Prue's reading, my closest friend Vix and I were having a drink at our favourite brasserie at the top of Sloane Square. Thank goodness for Vix. She never failed to inspire.

"This is it, Hunter! You've done the hardest part. You've made a decision! Oh, I wish I could be as brave as you. It's so exciting, girlfriend! You're bound to meet someone." Vix's Disney eyes sparkled. "I mean just look at you! Blonde hair, fabulous skin, an hourglass figure that works out in your sleep and everyone I know wants your shapely legs. As for those." She jabbed a breadstick at my tits before biting off the end. "Two natural puppies. People pay a fortune to get fakes tucked in like yours. You're perfect darling and super sexy, even if you don't agree!"

I grinned. "That's probably the wine talking, Vix! Besides, who are you calling gorgeous, Miss Argentina!"

LOVE, HUNTER

Four years my junior and closest ally, Buenos Aires-born Vixanna possessed striking facial contours, a pout to die for and a supple, honed body, all of which took fashion photography to another level. Even on thin days, I felt like a bloated lump next to her.

“Well, all I’m saying as someone who loves you, is don’t worry. Allow the Universe to guide you and I swear the perfect man will turn up. And believe me, they’ll be nothing like Nash!”

“Oh God, please,” I groaned. “No one could be as awful as that smooth-talking idiot. I still can’t believe how naive I was. Five years Vix, five years. Such a waste.”

“Not all of it. The best parts are what matters.” She knew Nash still affected me, the topic of many an alcohol-fuelled chinwag. “He made you laugh, he was a good cook, he was great in bed, he was ...”

“... an egoist who cheated on me. More than twice. Anyway, let’s not go there. If Prue says it’s okay, then that’s good enough for me.”

“Exactly!” Vix grabbed my hand. “I’m so excited for you but I’m gonna miss you too! So much! What time’s kick-off tomorrow?”

I pulled a face. “Too bloody early. Probably around four. The train leaves at seven from Folkestone. Cosmo’s checking the tyres on my car now.” Instinctively, I reached for my necklace, a double silver serpent chasing its tail in the shape of a lemniscate, gifted from Cosmo for my thirtieth. I’d given him a dog tag chain

LOVE, HUNTER

inscribed with his name, which he promised to wear but kept in a box in his bedroom.

“I don’t know what I’d do without him. He’s so good to me.”

“Oh, lord! Spare me! Heard it all before. Boring, boring.” Vix pretended to yawn then flung out her arms. “What do you mean good? I mean come on! Switch it up a little, girlfriend! When are you going to learn that good isn’t good enough? You need ‘great,’ Hunter! A king! Amazing, top-of-the-world stuff and if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking then no, forget it. This minute! I forbid you to throw your life away on Cosmo. No way, not ever.” She shook her head firmly. “You’d walk all over him. Besides, he’s almost your twin, don’t forget!”

I’d never really thought about it like that. Cosmo and I shared the same birth year, and our birthdays were two days apart.

“Anyway,” she continued prissily. “He might look like Bradley Cooper but do you honestly see yourself long-term with a guy who likes chameleons and all that folk music? You, Miss Hunter Rose, need a dynamic, hot piece of ass who is going whisk you off your feet and spin you along mountain roads in his brand-new Bentley convertible. Isn’t this why you’re going? To find adventure, romance, your husband, and your villa in St. Tropez? You will not settle for less. I won’t let you.”

Damn, she knew all my weak spots.

“Besides, you speak fluent French and ...”

“Bad Italian, average Spanish.” I found languages easy. “Bit of German on a good day.”

LOVE, HUNTER

“Right! And your singing voice is angelic *and* you can act, dammit!” She was on fire. “Lord, if I had your looks and talent I’d been on Broadway! You’re such a catch, Hunter and you’re a lovely, kind human but *I* can’t make you see it. *You* have to. Any man would be a fool not to snatch you up given half the chance. So, don’t forget to invite me to the wedding. And I don’t want you getting hitched overnight or some other quick-fix ceremony. No, it’s got to be a splash-out, classic wedding in a Provencal church with lots of frilly bridesmaids. And a harpist. And a choir! Then barefoot dancing in buttercup fields! You’ve got to make it happen!”

My heart swelled. “Yeah, I know. You make it sound so romantic and easy. But I haven’t even got there yet. What if I’ve made an awful decision and I hate it?”

“Honestly, Hunter! Positive thinking only.” Vix tried to frown through her botox and poured the last of the Pinot. “You know that as well as I do. Think bad things will happen and they will. Talk about what you want with intent and emotion and results will follow. Listen to Prue. Action your dream! I’m convinced this move is the best thing for you. You’ve been talking about it for long enough!”

She was right but I couldn’t help debating that I was about to screw up my entire life. What if the villa stuck out in the middle of nowhere with no nightlife? What if the landlady was a maleficent chain-smoking crabby witch who stank of mothballs? It had been odd though how I’d secured somewhere to stay. Just after Prue’s visit, I bumped into a Channel 5 colleague at a drop-in lunchtime organ recital on Sydney Street. We’d caught up during the interval but before leaving the church she’d mentioned, ‘just off the cuff,’ that a friend of a friend had a spare room to rent in her villa. Would I be interested seeing as I’d been talking about moving? I’d

LOVE, HUNTER

jumped at the chance and optioned my new home without fully thinking things through. Not long after the concert, the villa proprietor, Mags Wilcox, had rung, informing me, in a nasal Mancunian accent, that the basement room was available for six months. Naturally, I'd accepted her rate and prayed we'd get on. After all, she'd be my only contact until I met friends of my own.

Vix tossed a luxurious mane of waves over one shoulder and reached for her jacket, a burgundy lambskin from a Portobello rummage. She had an eye for a bargain, not that she needed to. "I'll get this. Drink up, or I'll be late for the theatre. Jason's treating me to a one-man show at The Royal Court that's had amazing reviews. Not my cup of tea, but he loves that sort of thing."

Vix's long-term boyfriend, advertising mogul Jason Steel, was one of those ridiculously, easy-to-get-on-with, handsome men who made you feel like a million dollars. Maybe because he had it. Lucky Vix.

Outside the warmth of the brasserie, the rush-hour traffic, the Christmas lights, the dirty buses pulling away, the surge of commuters, the hint of rain, and the call of the Evening Standard, all appeared and sounded more vivid than before. And at that moment, an intimacy ached, reflecting a melancholy I'd come to rely on. Vix clocked the change and clutched my arms, her eyes misty then enveloped me in one of her bear hugs.

"Take care of yourself. I love you, soul-sis!"

"Bye, Vixie Wixie. Love you too."

LOVE, HUNTER

Tears prickled and popped. I hugged her back just as fiercely then pretended to notch the belt on my trench as she hastened away, thigh-high boots smartly carrying her up the theatre steps, both of us waving over and over until the first few splashes of rain urged me to take cover under a bus shelter.

It was real. It was happening. For tomorrow I was leaving. For a new life. In the South of France. But first, I had to say goodbye to someone special.