



**A USER'S GUIDE TO  
MAKE-BELIEVE**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Outside the Georgian townhouse where the meetings were held, Cassie hesitated. Scraped her thumbnail against a fleck of rust that had stuck to the sweat on her palm when she'd chained her bike to the railings, and tried to count the weeks since she'd been here last: ten, or twelve, or even more.

She had known it was here if she needed it.

The steps up to the open front door, their smooth-worn stone, were familiar under her feet. Inside, a handful of early arrivals was gathered by the refreshments table – placed, as always, at the point furthest from the door, so as to entice people all the way in. Once they'd made it this far, they were less likely to bolt. That was the theory, at least. She wasn't sure it had ever been tested.

The woman pouring tea was someone she should know.

'Cassie! It's a good while since we've seen you . . .'

A motherly woman, middle-aged. A face that was wide with perpetual surprise. Her name had an *ay* sound, like May, or

Tuesday, but it was neither of those and in the end Cassie fudged it with a ‘Hi there, nice to see you . . .’

‘Tea? Milk, no sugar?’

People didn’t ask, here. If someone disappeared for months at a time, you didn’t ask, *Where have you been? What’s been happening with you?* You waited, instead, for someone to tell; and in the meantime, there was tea.

‘Biscuit?’

Cassie had done the welcomes herself, a couple of times. It was nobody’s job. They took it in turns. She hadn’t been much good. Remembering names and faces: a lot of them struggled with that at the group, Cassie wasn’t alone. The woman on duty today was unusual; she was good, fetching up Cassie’s name with barely a hesitation. But it wasn’t just the memory thing. Though no one had said so, Cassie was distant, too closed, knew that about herself. She was better on washing-up. Still, she’d done her best: always pushed hard on the biscuits, like sugar and fat could make up for a basic lack of human warmth.

*April.* A full minute too late, the name arrived in Cassie’s head. April was looking over Cassie’s shoulder now, ready to greet the next body, so Cassie smiled her thanks and took her tea round the circle of chairs. She’d have gone for the seat nearest the door, but someone else had got there first. No one she recognised. She gave a brief nod, left a space empty between them. She needed company, not talk. She was here for steadiness. For a hit of routine.

She scalded her mouth with tea, then glanced round to check no one was watching her before she placed the mug by her feet. She didn’t want to invite concern, the kind of conversation that could only become awkward. Surreptitiously, she reached into her pocket and drew out the memorial card.

As soon as she had torn the envelope, she’d known what it must mean. A glimpse of black border, and her vision had blurred;

she had leant against the door in her flat, blinking hard, the card half-out of its envelope moulding to the damp heat of her hand. Blinked, till the name had come into focus – and relief had knocked the breath from her.

*In Loving Memory*  
*Please join us for a memorial service honouring*  
*Valerie May Lauder*

Not Alan. Only his mother. It was only his mother who'd died.

The meeting was filling up now, April remembering names like nobody's business. Late afternoon light fell from the tall windows, making slanted squares on pale walls, on the worn Persian rug with its pattern the same as always. The space was strange and familiar both at once, but most of all it felt safe.

Safe: as if the notion had summoned him, in walked Jake, folder under his arm and the old purple piggy bank clutched in his hand. He saw her and smiled, waved the pig in her direction, and she lifted her hand in return. It was Jake who'd been manning the welcome table her first time here, and it was Jake who usually led the meetings, in a calm, quiet voice. Facilitated, he preferred to say. Whatever he called it, people paid attention.

He sat, now, the chair child-sized beneath his bearlike frame. Opened the folder on his lap, and waited. Around him, seats were chosen. Conversations tailed off. There was a moment of quiet: Cassie felt a lift of anticipation, a tide of silent disappointment – a swing of feelings almost too fast to name.

Just as Jake started to speak, the door thumped open.

'Sorry I'm late,' said a young man, looking not sorry at all, looking confident and tall. He glanced round for somewhere to sit, and because the circle was full there was a pause while another chair was fetched, and then they all had to scoot backwards to open up

space for this guy – Lewis – whom everyone seemed to know.

Cassie kept her irritation concealed behind a neutral face, wondered if everyone else was doing the same. As the meeting got underway with the usual reminder of confidentiality – *What we say here, stays here* – she studied the new arrival. He was wearing shorts, two pairs – Lycra under cargo shorts that looked like they'd been ironed. His naked legs intruded a mile into the circle. Until now, Cassie hadn't realised she had a prejudice against men in shorts. As Jake spoke, Lewis shifted in his seat – and something flashed, making her blink. Unbelievable: his turn-ups were specially equipped with reflective stripes. Cassie priced him in her head: a hundred quid for the shorts. Another hundred, at least, for the top of the range Dutch pannier stowed under his chair. He was one of those guys for whom cycling was a way of life, not of getting from one side of town to the other. He probably owned multiple bikes for slightly varying conditions of road and weather, and he'd never dream in a million years of using a hacksaw to liberate an abandoned frame from the stairwell of a low-rise council block.

She watched him, enjoying her dislike for him. Told herself not to judge, and carried on judging.

And then he lifted his hand, and gently touched his ear.

Cassie stared. The pad of his thumb, the side of his forefinger, rubbing the lobe and the curve of cartilage. She could see he wasn't aware of it; his attention was fixed on the woman who was talking, on the progress of speech around the circle. You might think he was checking a new piercing. But there was no ring, no stud, and that wasn't what it meant, that gesture. Still holding the memorial notice, Cassie's own hand lifted – and she pulled it down again as she realised, suddenly, that he was staring back at her.

She snatched her gaze from his face. Felt her own face hot. It took all her willpower to stop herself checking whether he was still watching – because in the fraction of a second their eyes had

met, she'd felt like she could see straight through to the back of his skull, or the back of her own. Like something was aligned.

He was like her. The same as her. Maybe – probably – had to be—The proof would be if it came his turn to speak – and he chose not to. Wouldn't it? Wouldn't that be a sort of proof?

The purple pig moved round the circle, passed from hand to hand: when it reached you, that was your turn to talk. A woman with a dragged-down face said how tough it was to get a job. The fat man beside her explained how he was trying to rebuild a relationship with his sons. *It's hard*, they said, everyone said. Even the people who'd had a good week. *It's always hard, but . . . right now – today – I'm doing fine*. It was a kindness to those who were struggling, and a superstitious insurance. *This week I'm alright*, they were telling the group. *Next week, I could be you*. Cassie hurried them on in her mind. Watched as the pig came closer. Along with everyone else, she watched as Lewis took it. Shook his head. Handed it straight to his right.

His neighbour began to speak, but Cassie kept her eyes on Lewis. Was still watching when he raised his head and glanced at her.

The card forgotten in her lap, Cassie touched her hand to her ear; deliberately, slowly, holding his gaze all the while. A signal. She saw his eyes widen, then narrow – and she shouldn't be doing this, was going to end up in trouble, in a whole lot more trouble than ever. She bent her head. It felt like she'd peeled off a layer of skin. She stared at the rug, stared so hard that the pattern blurred and danced.

When the pig reached her she didn't touch it, just pushed a little further back into her seat, and waved it past. Didn't look up to see if he was watching. Knew he had to be.

Once everyone had talked, or chosen not to, the pig arrived back at its starting point. Jake stood up, thanked everyone, and gave it a shake.

‘You know the score, as always, donations welcome; whatever you can manage helps keep us in biscuits.’

He set the pig down by the tea urn. People flowed round him with coins ready to slot into its back, and empty cups ready to be refilled. Cassie pushed the memorial card back into her pocket and counted out her change. 50p would mean £17 to last the rest of the week. Which was fine. Which was doable. Without looking, she knew where Lewis was in the room. She knew he’d dropped some coins into the piggy bank. Knew he was ready to go, but not going, fiddling instead with the straps on his bag, on his helmet.

By the time she reached the table, Jake was stuck in one-sided conversation with someone Cassie didn’t know. She made her donation, then waited her turn, hovering till eventually Jake manoeuvred his way round the talker.

‘Cassie, good to see you,’ he said. ‘How’ve you been?’

‘Yeah, alright, I mean – you know.’ She shrugged. ‘Just, keeping on. And you?’

He pulled a face. ‘You’re lucky to find us here still. We lost the last of our funding a few weeks back.’

‘Oh, no . . .’

‘Well, we knew it was coming, but . . . We’re on the lookout for a new home, and we’re down to Sunday afternoons and Tuesday evenings.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s brutal out there. But what can you do? I’m glad things are going OK for you, anyway. Will we be seeing you back next week?’

‘Hopefully,’ said Cassie. Without meaning to, she glanced towards Lewis, curiosity pulling her gaze like a magnet. He was waiting by the door, just as she’d guessed he would: waiting to make it seem like they both just happened to be leaving together. *Trouble*. The word sounded inside her head, and when he tried to catch her eye, she stared right through him. Looked away –



and felt herself reddening under Jake's observant gaze. 'Or – soon, anyway,' she said.

Behind her, April was patiently waiting her chance for a word with Jake. Cassie stood aside, raised her hand in a farewell to the both of them.

Head down, she made for the exit. *Keep going. Don't stop. Walk away.* She could feel Lewis watching her as she passed him; it took all her willpower not to look up. When she reached the street, she realised she'd been holding her breath.

Someone had left a bike overlapping hers, on the same stretch of railings. A sparkling clean road bike, double locked; when she pushed it aside to free her rear wheel, with a sharper shove than was strictly necessary, it felt weightless despite its extra-large frame. It had to be his. She felt the ancient rubber of her handlebars sticky against her palms, heard the complaint of her rusted chain, and shoved down hard on the pedals, building speed as fast as she could – till a sudden grating sound made her glance down, just as the pedals locked.

'Shit!'

She jerked to a stop, hauled the bike back onto the pavement and crouched to examine it. The chain, stretched and stiff, had slipped off the worn-down gears, wedged itself between the crank and the frame. She grabbed hold of it and started to pull.

'Oh, come *on*, you bastard . . .' No matter how hard she yanked, it wouldn't budge. If she had a pair of pliers, maybe – but she had nothing with her. She sat back on her heels, swallowing hard. It was a long walk home.

'Need some help?'

Lewis: she looked up to find him towering over her.

'I'm fine,' she said, in a voice that didn't sound it. She gave the chain a heave. 'It's just – a bit – *stuck*.'

‘Here, let me have a go.’

Defeated, she stood up, moved aside. Lewis squatted, turn-ups flashing. He wrapped one hand around the chain, and with a single sharp tug it came free. He looped it back around the gears, and stood back with a smile.

‘No way. How did you do that?’

‘You probably loosened it . . .’ He looked at his palm, striped dark with grease, and used his clean hand to open his pannier.

‘Well – thanks.’

‘No problem. Want one?’ He was offering her a plastic packet: the man travelled with a bumper pack of baby wipes, just in case. He probably had pliers in there as well. Spare inner tubes, plural. A multipack of Kendal mint cake. A sarcastic comment was poised on her lips – but when she looked up at him, there it was again. That dizzying sense of connection, of being aligned. Like the same thought was bouncing between them, back and forth.

She swallowed her sarcasm. Said instead, ‘You didn’t talk.’

He blinked. ‘Nor did you.’ For a moment they stared at each other, saying nothing. Then: ‘Do you want to go somewhere else and . . . not talk?’

She shrugged, thinking, *Walk away*. Thinking, too, of £17 to last her the week.

‘Coffee?’ he said.

‘You buying?’

‘Sure. Yeah. Alright.’

She nodded. Made a silent apology to the card in her pocket, the presence of Valerie, as she put off a little longer the call that was waiting to be made. Reached for a wipe, and started working oil and dirt from her hands.

As they wheeled their bikes back past the meeting house Jake was outside, locking up. She saw him recognise them, saw him stand for a moment, watching. He’d be thinking all sorts, Cassie knew. Making

assumptions. He'd warn them both off, if he could. Intense personal relationships, he'd be worried about – two people in recovery. And he was right about the danger, and he didn't know the half of it. Just how they were the same. Just how dangerous that might be.