

Nine days before the implosion of the Charlesworth marriage

Alone in the quiet of Wish & Co after closing time, Marnie Fairchild decided to give it a try. With the shop's front door locked and the blinds drawn to shut out Rathbone Street's evening rush, she reached beneath the counter for a magazine of a kind she did not, officially, read. Marnie wasn't the type for crystal healing, moon-phase gardening or the study of tea leaves. But since she'd already done all the sensible, practical things she could think of to do, and none of them had worked, she was now prepared to try anything – even 'Manifestation for Beginners'.

First, the magazine instructed, *make sure you are in a pleasing space*.

Marnie frowned, feeling the urge to argue. The precise problem, she wanted to tell the magazine, was that her shop was not a pleasing space. It was what had brought her to something as airy-fairy as manifesting in the first place; the very reason she had blown her grocery budget by slipping into her basket a magazine with a title like *Celestial Being*.

There was not, and never had been, any beholder alive who would have said Wish & Co's rented premises were any kind of beautiful. Too old to be modern, and too young to be charmingly vintage, the shop had cheap fibreboard walls, flimsy aluminium windows, and nothing interesting waiting to be discovered under the linoleum flooring.

Marnie had done her best with paint, furnishings and taste. She'd had a wall fitted out in nicely battered recycled timber shelves, so that now, when the ladies of the eastern suburbs were hosting the kind of dinners where the candles matched the napkins, they found themselves standing at those shelves, trying to decide between the equally luscious colourways of Wish & Co's quality party supplies. Sea Glass or Rose Quartz? Moonstone or Onyx?

In the section of the shop that was set up as a wrapping studio, Marnie had covered the walls with racks of luxury gift wrap and installed a huge, rustic table to distract from the floor. But despite all her efforts, the shop continued to prove the old saying about sow ears and silk purses.

As a gesture towards making the space more pleasing, Marnie lit a pillar candle from the Rose Quartz range and switched off the fluorescent overheads. The edges of the store softened to a circle of candlelight, and she read on.

Focus your mind. Make sure you have a clear vision of what it is that you want.

Easy. For there it was, in the framed photograph she kept propped on the countertop, in all the glory of its heyday. She could see it only dimly in the candlelight, but Marnie didn't really need to look. She knew the old shop by heart. In her sleep she could have sketched the mullioned front window with its twenty-eight gridded panes of glass. She'd have been able, blindfolded, to draw the three neo-Gothic arches of the top-storey windows, as well as the ornamentations on the steeply pitched bargeboards that framed them.

Fairchild & Sons was still standing, also on Rathbone Street, seven blocks away in the direction of Alexandria Park. But just barely. To Marnie's uncle, who now owned it, the shop was nothing more than a heritage-listed irritation taking up space on a square of valuable real estate. If it hadn't been earmarked by the council for preservation, Lewis Fairchild would long ago have had it demolished.

The place was already in a serious state of disrepair when, two winters ago, it had almost burned to the ground. The morning Marnie had woken to news of the fire, she'd flung a coat over her pyjamas and run up the street. Behind a hastily erected barricade, she'd joined local business owners and

other bystanders, and watched as the brightly clad firefighters rolled away their hoses and the last twists of smoke drifted out of the broken front windows. Arson was the verdict of the investigations that followed, though nobody was ever convicted.

The shop had been saved, but every time Marnie walked past she grieved the charring on the beautiful bargeboards and the graffiti on the hoardings that now covered the main window. Her uncle seemed content to leave the old building in its dilapidated state, perhaps hoping that it would fall down of its own accord, or that a second arsonist would come along and do a better job than the first.

Marnie pulled her sleeve down over the heel of her hand and wiped a fine layer of dust from the glass of the framed picture. In her great-grandfather's day, the store had sold groceries. When her grandfather took over the business, he'd transformed it into a high-end shoe shop, with stock both imported from Europe and handmade on the premises. This photo had been taken on the day of the shoe shop's official opening, and the grandfather she had known less than half as well as she should have done stood proudly in his cobbler's apron, arms crossed, in the doorway.

Archie Fairchild hadn't lived long enough to see the opening of Wish & Co, but Marnie felt sure he'd have been proud of her, for taking the risk of starting her own business in the first place, and also for the way she'd grown it from a simple retail outlet into a diversified enterprise that included custom gift-wrapping, gift-wrapping workshops, and – most profitably – a boutique and highly personalised gift-buying service. All of which now needed a better, more substantial, more beautiful home.

Marnie breathed in the rose scent of the candle and brought her vision into focus. When the old shop was hers, the weatherboards would once again be painted in crisp, fresh white; her gift-wrapping papers on their racks

would be backgrounded by traditional lathe and plaster walls; the wrapping table would stand on the kind of rustic floorboards it deserved. She would no longer have to go out the back at the end of a workday and climb metal stairs to a tiny flat with a cupboard-sized bathroom and a foldaway bed. Rather, she would ascend a circular timber staircase at the back of the shop to find herself at home in a tastefully renovated retreat, with sloping ceilings and pine floors that glowed in light softened and shaped by a triple-arched window.

Now, the magazine article instructed, picture what needs to happen for your vision to become a reality. Be very specific.

Marnie closed her eyes. She would be standing at the wrapping table, wearing her gingham apron, sleeves rolled. Her mobile phone would ring and the sight of her uncle's name on the screen would give her a little jump of excitement.

'Lewis!' she'd say. And he'd say, 'Marnie, how are you?' But they wouldn't chat, Marnie decided. Mostly because she could not imagine anything she and her uncle would have to chat about. Instead, he'd cut right to the chase.

'I'm ringing about Fairchild and Sons,' he'd say. 'It's past time I did something with the place, and I reckon your grandfather would have wanted you to take it on.'

But was that exactly what he'd say? She was supposed to be very specific, and Marnie wasn't sure her uncle would use a matey word like 'reckon'. It was hard to know. She'd been in Lewis's company four or five times in her entire life. One of those was at her father's memorial service, which she had been too young to remember, and another was at her grandfather's funeral, where Marnie and her mother had stood at the back and slipped out before the coffee and Scotch Fingers.

The last two times she'd seen her uncle were when she'd made appointments, through his personal assistant, to visit him at the top-notch financial advice firm Fairchild & Rooke. Both times, he'd leaned back in his big leather armchair, bow-tie askew, and failed – if he was even trying – to hide his expression of bemusement. That the daughter of his black-sheep younger brother seriously thought she was in the market to buy, outright, a property at the Alexandria Park end of Rathbone Street clearly struck him as smirk-worthy.

Both times, he'd told her he wasn't selling. However, she had managed to extract from him a promise that he would contact her if ever he changed his mind. To keep herself in his thoughts she sent an email every month – each one slightly different, but always respectful and brief. By the time he made the phone call she was now manifesting, he would have realised that she was serious. Her persistent emails would have impressed upon him that even if borrowing the kind of money the shop would fetch would be a stretch for her, it was not an impossibility.

So, once he'd told her he was thinking of selling, she'd say, 'You want to sell me the shop? Are you serious?'

'Absolutely,' he'd reply. 'I know how hard you've worked to build your business while most people your age were off travelling or out partying.'

And Marnie would feel herself swell ever so slightly, knowing that it had all been worth it. The long, long hours she'd sunk into her first business: a popular coffee van, called Geraldine, that she'd started up on little more than a wing, a prayer, and a third-hand coffee machine. The years she had stuck to a regime of generic brand groceries, homemade lunches, darned socks and public transport, all so she could save or reinvest the lion's share of her profits. The years when she'd put every spare cent into real estate; the nail-biting months when business had slowed and she'd wondered if

she had overextended by buying a new property; the relief when trade picked up again and she was rewarded for holding her nerve. The courage it had taken to sell all her properties and invest, instead, in financial products, and all so that she'd be able to readily get her hands on real money if Fairchild & Sons came onto the market.

'That means a lot to me,' she visualised herself saying.

But would she actually say that? Not on your life. Her uncle didn't need to know – nobody needed to know – how much she hungered for the approval of her father's family. So, on second thoughts, she'd simply say, with cool sincerity, 'This is wonderful news. Thank you for contacting me.'

After which he'd go on to say, 'Look, that stuff with your father . . . it had nothing to do with you. You were barely more than a baby. And, you know, out of all the grandkids, you're really the only one with a head for business. You're a true Fairchild, Marnie.'

Okay, so now she was in fantasy land. Her uncle was about as likely to say any of that as he was to donate half his net worth to Greenpeace, so she pulled herself back into the realm of possibility and imagined him saying, soberly, 'You know I can't let the place go too cheaply.'

To which she would reply, 'Of course not. But I wouldn't be a Fairchild if I paid too much, now would I?'

At this point, her uncle would give an indulgent laugh. And name a figure. She'd counter, and he'd counter-counter, and she'd make a fresh offer, and he'd respond, and this would go on for quite some swashbuckling time, until – at last – they would agree on the perfect price, low enough that even though Marnie would have to borrow a significant sum, she'd not only be able to afford the shop, but to renovate it too.

And Marnie would smile, and sigh with satisfaction, just the way she did right now.

She opened her eyes.

Finally, the magazine told her, *believe that the Universe will provide*.

Believe?

Marnie blinked.

She read the sentence again. She was supposed to just believe? Was believing even a thing you could do on command? Marnie didn't know, but if she was serious about this manifesting business, then she supposed she was going to have to give it a try.

And so, as the homeward-bound traffic dwindled to a slow stream along Rathbone Street beyond Wish & Co's closed blinds, and a new moon ascended into the ink-dark sky over the city, Marnie leaned on the countertop and did her best to believe that her arrogant, entitled, wealthy arsehole of an uncle would one day, quite out of the blue, ring her up and offer to sell her the old shop for a price she could afford.

But what did Marnie's manifesting have to do with the Charlesworth marriage and its implosion, which was by now just nine days away?

Perhaps nothing at all.

Or else, everything.

It's impossible to know.

What is certain is that on the late August evening that Marnie manifested her perfect future, two identical cardboard boxes sat – quite harmlessly – on the undershelf of her table, waiting to be wrapped.