

Chapter 1

May 31, 2016. Orlando, Florida.

From ten feet away, across the conference room table, Hope's text message reached Tom's phone.

Are we good, then?

He texted back. *Yes. I remember nothing. This is the first time I've ever seen you.*

Her eyes met his across the long table. Her look communicated gratitude. A memory of kissing at the beach under the stars reached him and he felt like a liar, because he knew that for as long as he lived, he would never forget Insanity Night.

Standing two feet away from Tom, mother of four Paula was ranting at Yuppie Louis. “*You, 'child-free people',*” she made air quotes with her fingers, “*you* are the ones who ruin people's nights. Throwing us indignant looks and coming over to my table to complain every time one of my kids makes a noise. Chill out and loosen up! Kids are kids! They're going to make noise and make messes! What's your problem?”

Louis gasped. “*I have a problem? Just because I want to eat a meal without indigestion? Lady, if you bring your kids to a restaurant for civilized humans make them behave like one. If they can't, that's what McDonald's is for.*”

Paula sighed. “What do *you* know about controlling children? You probably spend your nights lounging around at home wearing silk robes over sexy pajamas, having champagne after your long...bubble baths. You have no idea about our lives, lives of fifteen second showers and surviving on baby food leftovers. *Your* lives are all about yourselves and no one else. *It's all about you!*”

Louis' eyes seemed about to pop out of his dark face. He emitted a high pitch guttural sound and clapped his hands, then yelled, “So, you Breeders say we're selfish? Well, I have news for you, my friend! *Having a kid is the ultimate act of selfishness in the world!* What is it but wanting to perpetuate your legacy and making a new tiny version of you? What is it but making someone to impose all your dreams on, giving yourself another chance to live life? Yes! *It's all about you!*”

Paula looked at him, speechless. Her face was turning red. Looking at her now, Tom feared she was about to whistle like a boiling teapot, or worse, explode like an old pressure cooker, burning them

all.

He reached for her hand and looked at Louis.

“Everybody take a deep breath. Let’s rewind and start from the beginning.”

Chapter 2

March 14, 2016. Ocean Beach. San Diego, California.

Hope had started last month in LA, advising a fashion boutique on imagery to target wealthy customers; she then ended it on a pig farm in Utah, implementing software to keep track of runt piglets and available sow nipples. As a consultant for companies in distress, she liked to call herself “The Chameleon Expert,” but she had had many nicknames in her life – some of them good, some not so much. Her favorite ones were “The H-Bomb,” for the energy she impossibly packed in that compact 5-foot-4 body, and “The Heavyweight,” for the way she could drink with her toughest guy friends.

Her least favorite names came from her ex-fiance, Eric – “The Blow-up Doll” and “The Castrated Woman.”

But today, the only name she longed to be called by was *Baby*.

Another breakup, darn it! She admitted she wasn't crazy about Sean, the latest guy in question – when a man has more brands of self-tanning lotion in his bathroom than books in his entire house, you know his shelf life will be short. But still, maybe there was such thing as “death by a thousand cuts,” or in her case, death by a thousand small disappointments.

That afternoon, Hope had biked six miles down the San Diego River path, then ran four on the beach. Not much, compared to her usual routine, but she cut herself some slack for being off triathlon training season.

When you lost your ovaries by age thirty and your estrogen comes from a daily tablet, you have to be neurotically careful not to let the pounds creep up. But fitness was not the only reason Hope ran triathlons. There was also the paradoxically soothing adrenaline, self-medication for her low grade ADHD. There was also the numbing effect that came after passing the peak of severe pain, the only time where her body and her soul began to align. Numbness was Hope's survival mechanism for as long as she could remember. Her sister Joy, a psychiatrist, called it dissociation.

Joy also claimed that Hope's complaints about not finding lasting love were just a bluff because now, well into her thirties, she was too set in her ways and could not tolerate a messy, hairy man cluttering up her impeccable apartment. “You don't really want a boyfriend,” Joy would say, “You want a designated person to text when you're bored, go out on dates with when your friends are not available, and call for sex as needed.” Joy had a point a few years back, but things had started to

change lately. Maybe Hope had just grown weary of *so much silence*.

Thank God for music, the only thing that prevented Hope from losing it in that ocean of silence her nights had become. Her short-lived childhood music lessons did not make her a musician, but a more appreciative listener. She had quit piano and picked up the electric guitar as a teen, refusing the mold of the perfect lady, but later on quit that too. It seemed to be the story of her life, learning a little bit about everything without getting deep into anything.

As she jogged back to her building under the blue sky, perfect weather, and zero humidity of beautiful Ocean Beach, Hope thought her most loving nickname came from her sister, who called her *Sweetie*; actually, they both called *almost everybody* Sweetie. The other one was *Fab*, short for Fabulous. She and her friend Louis called each other that.

Now, Louis, her longterm friend and business partner, was the best example of her belief that the universe had a cruel sense of humor. Louis would have been the perfect man for Hope. They had so much in common – even sharing that Tourette's touch that shocked other people – that she would even overlook his Mickey Mouse phobia. Louis was clever, witty and cool. If “Coolness” ever became incarnate, it would look like Louis Brown. Not to mention he was very good looking. Louis probably had the most perfect male body most people would ever see.

And, of course, he was gay.

Some years ago her list of requirements and dealbreakers for a man was as long as the Dead Sea scrolls. Lately, though, all she wanted was *a straight man without a ton of baggage who didn't mind that she was unable to make babies* – one decently good looking and reasonably cool, gainfully employed, and who lived within a 50 mile radius of San Diego.

Was that too much too ask for?

And then when she found something like that with Sean, and when he had survived those critical first three months when annoying deal breaker habits usually show...

He had to go and bang the dumbest bimbo in his gym.

Hope was starting to think that relationships were like chewing gum. A little bit of flavor, so short-lived it was almost not worth how tired and sore your jaw got. And then, when the flavor vanished, there was no option but to spit them out.

Maybe she needed a sabbatical from relationships. What was the hurry, anyway? She didn't really care about getting married. And she was beyond the biological clock – she had no clock, barely a few springs and bolts left. Maybe she'd take a year off from dating and be like her friend Michelle, subsisting on hookups and friends with benefits. Michelle's fierce refusal to settle down had made Hope roll her eyes more than once and suspect she had been heart-broken in the past. But maybe there was something to say about her strategy.

Having stopped to get her water bottle from the convenience store vending machine, she felt a strong pair of arms grabbing her shoulders and screamed. She was ready to present the stranger her best kick-boxing move when, relieved, she recognized Louis.

“Fab! You almost killed me of a heart attack!” She said, her hand still on her chest. Typical of Louis, knowing her routines so well, to ambush her like that.

Towering over her by a foot, the black man glared at her with a scowl on his good-looking face. His muscular arms and thighs were exposed by the sleeveless gym shirt and bike shorts he was wearing – which, knowing Louis, probably cost a small fortune and carried a designer label.

He clapped his hands twice and snapped his fingers before putting his hands on his hips. “Woman! You have to start checking your messages more than once a day! When you don't show up to the office and then I call you a dozen times and don't hear back from you, I freak out!”

Feigning guilt, Hope narrowed her eyes and wrinkled her nose. Her sister Joy had the theory that her constant forgetting and misplacing her cell phone was a passive-aggressive way to resist being tracked down and assert her independence. “I'm sorry if I scared you, Fab! But *you know me!* After how late your birthday party went you seriously didn't expect me to make it to the office, did you?”

Hope could smell the ocean in the air as they strolled together the remaining block to her building, Louis exuding style in every step of his glide. Only a few privileged people, like her, had an insight on the unrestrained, delightful, flamboyant personality under that coolness facade. As they walked, more than a person turned their head to see them pass.

“I was *sure* someone had murdered you!” he was saying now, as he caressed his shaven head and fanned himself. “I've never been fond of you insisting on living alone just because you're a clean-freak...OCD who can't stand a drop of toothpaste spit on her mirror!”

Hope smiled. Even ten years later Louis was still not over their one failed attempt to become

roommates. “Well, Fab, my so called OCD is my purposeful strategy to fight my ADHD.”

As they reached the building, she barely noticed the male neighbors drooling at the sight of her bellybutton ring. Hope knew she had a knockout body – with some magic help from reconstructive surgery after her bilateral mastectomies – but her far-from-breathtaking face kept her humble. Her Heinz-57 ethnic background had blessed her with plump lips, yet had cursed her with otherwise non-memorable features and an all-neutral palette. She had medium tan skin, dark brown eyes and dark brown hair, which she layered and highlighted with caramel and butterscotch strands. Hope knew she may not be *strictly* beautiful, but *she hypnotized people into believing she was*. With super-human self-confidence, she had learned early in life how to “act gorgeous,” and people couldn't help but treat her like she was.

That was also the secret of her success as a business consultant – she taught people that to convince the customer that your product was the best thing in the world, you first had to – at least temporarily – convince yourself.

Arriving at her apartment, she tapped on the cell she had left on the living-room's console table and instrumental jazz coming through wireless speakers filled the room. As she crossed the pristine, modernly decorated living-room, Louis followed her with graceful steps.

She entered her potpourri-smelling bedroom, accented with mauve and rose gold. As she gathered the supplies for her sacred bubble bath from her closet – a way to insinuate to Louis it was time to leave – she smiled at him. “So, Extra-Fab, are you done packing for our exciting trip? I know you're *dying* to get to Orlando tomorrow and *hug Mickey!*”

Louis threw her a killer look. “Ha ha! Very funny!”

Hope laughed. She could not resist bringing up the only subject that made Louis Brown lose his cool. “I'm sorry! It never gets old! I mean, who has *a phobia of Mickey Mouse?*”

Frowning, Louis crossed his arms. “It's not a phobia. I *hate him with a passion!* Mickey Mouse is a symbol of everything that's wrong with parenting in this country. On this planet!”

Carrying her armful of bath supplies, Hope pouted. “Oh no, poor little Louie traumatized forever because his cruel parents took him to Disney when he was five!”

He yelled, “He was twice my size and had ears the size of Frisbees. Have you ever seen a black

mouse with a pink face? Why do they even make poor kids believe that's the way mice look like? Why hasn't a zoologist protested? And don't get me started on those white gloves!"

Laughing again, Hope signaled Louis to follow her into the all-white bathroom.

She had mastered bubble baths to perfection. A small inflatable ring to sit on, to eliminate the hardness of the clawfoot tub bottom. An inflatable pillow to support her neck and shoulders. As she opened the faucet, the smell of the steam mixed with the smell of the cinnamon candles she had lit, filling the small, darkened room. In the background, the jazz music played.

Followed by Louis, she walked out of the bathroom and into the small, all-white kitchen. Reaching into the cabinets, she served white wine, then sat on a bar stool next to her friend.

In the minuscule apartment, she barely had to stretch herself from the kitchen bar to reach the black Fender Strat guitar sitting on a stand in the living-room. Unplugged from the amp, the guitar strings barely emitted a sound as she absentmindedly played chord progressions. Hope wished she was good enough to follow the jazz playing through the speakers – jazz was her favorite music – or at least to improvise some reggae, her other favorite. But her repertoire was limited to what she learned while playing in amateur rock bands during her rebel teenage years.

Narrowing his eyes, Louis continued his train of thought, "And here we are, heading up to an excuse of a city built in the middle of a swamp with the only purpose of worshiping that monstrosity of Mickey Mouse! I hate Orlando with all my guts! And to make things worse, the damn city is packed with Mickey Mouse's fans who have traveled there from all over the world! What I hate the most in the world after Mickey – *Noisy children!* Aagh!"

Hope held a smile. Louis and their friend Michelle had a never ending list of grievances about out of control children and their parents, to the point Hope suspected they were a magnet for them. If there was one crying little boy in a restaurant hosting 500 people, he'd invariably be sitting at the table next to Louis. If there was one little girl in the place with hands covered in spaghetti sauce, she would find her way into wiping them on Michelle's designer skirt.

A proud auntie, Hope actually enjoyed children – she was really looking forward to visiting her sister and nephews in her home town on the Space Coast of Florida during this trip; God knew she could really use some sisterly love right now – but it was easier to play along with her friends and pretend to dislike children too. It also helped distract her from any potential regrets about no longer

being able to have them herself.

Chuckling, she shushed Louis. “Fabulous, I don't think that it's politically correct to say you hate children. Particularly not while we're in Orlando, their Mecca.”

Louis waved his index finger. “Says the woman who hates children so much she had her tubes tied *and still* takes the pill every day.”

She did not find the comment funny. Louis was the type of friend who went the extra mile to ridicule your tragedies, so you could laugh at them.

He was also one of the few people in the world who knew that the pill she took every day was *not* a birth control pill, but hormone replacement, and that the surgeries she had four years back *had not* really been a breast augmentation job and a tubal ligation, but surgeries to remove her breasts and ovaries.

Four years back, Hope had opted for preventive bilateral mastectomies and oophorectomies – removing her breasts and ovaries – after a blood test suggested that she had inherited the mutated BRCA1 gene that caused her mother's death from breast cancer at the age of forty.

Deciding it was time to rein her friend in, she put the guitar back on its stand. “Okay, Extra-Fab, take a deep breath and let's focus. We need to save all our brain cells for the challenge ahead. This must be the biggest one yet for *The F Team*.”

Louis' and Hope's corporation actually had a real, much less interesting name: “Brown, Clayton, Jones, Lee, Inc,” but outside of their bank transactions and tax reports they preferred to call it “The F team.” The name came from homage to the resourcefulness of “The A Team,” in combination with the word “Fabulous” and another F word that was Louis' and Hope's favorite in their daily chats.

“The F Team” was probably the best thing that had happened to Hope in the crazy past five years. When she and Louis had lost their jobs in the recession and faced uncertain future employment in the business world, they had joined forces with two other friends, launching their own independent consultant company to help small and medium size businesses facing risk of bankruptcy.

From a bakery to a tattoo shop, businesses in trouble would call the F team to bring in their fresh eyes and design a tailored recovery plan for them. Michelle Lee, with her MBA degree and Chris

Jones, with his CPA, were the financial scientists who would dissect the numbers – income and expenses – and localize the problems. Then Louis Brown and Hope Clayton were the artists who would give birth to the strategies. Louis with his marketing degree, and Hope with her liberal arts education, Jack-of-all-trades mind and eclectic resume which included having worked jobs in almost every type of industry – a merciful way to say that she had trouble sticking to one thing. Together they would find solutions that nobody else saw. They were the sellers of ideas and the masters of relaunching brands.

Gathering accounts from all over the country, they had soon been so busy they could hardly manage. But business had cooled down lately. The reduction of accounts had come at an inopportune moment, when they had just expanded support personnel and invested in new computers and software to be able to keep up with the demands.

They had been relieved and delighted to be contacted by Courts Inn Resorts, a chain of hotels in the Orlando area and its suburbs and the largest company that had ever approached them. Chris and Michelle had arrived there two weeks ago and had been working on “the teaser,” a low cost preliminary evaluation of the finances to see if the company was beyond repair or not. They were now heading to – hopefully – close the deal and sign the contracts.

While Hope checked on the bathtub, which was still filling, Louis said, “Michelle was trying to reach you. Give her a call. She says the staff at Courts Inn Headquarters is making her life miserable.”

“How can she be in trouble already if she's been there only two weeks?”

“Apparently she hooked up with some guy from the staff on her second day there. He bragged about it to everybody and now the whole office is gossiping about her.”

Hope face-palmed herself. She knew Michelle was a bright business woman and the most loyal friend in the world – she had once jumped in a plane and gone to rescue Hope when she had lost her passport and credit cards and been stranded in Sidney, Australia. But her tendency to gravitate toward jerks made Hope sometimes throw her arms in the air.

“Well, let's call her now.” Hope grabbed her cell phone and clicked Facetime.

After a few rings, Michelle's beautiful face appeared on the screen.

“Hello, Lollipop!” Louis and Hope chanted in unison.

Lollipop was Hope and Louis' nickname for Michelle to make fun of how all the volume of her body was on the top. Except for head and boobs – unclear if real or not – she was insanely thin. What Michelle did have was *a gorgeous face* and lustrous, long, black hair – her bangs lately dyed cobalt blue. Sometimes Hope almost felt like the ugly duckling compared to her three gorgeous business partners.

Rushing to speak, Michelle began, “Guys! I'm counting the hours for you to come rescue me from this nightmare. This place is a zoo and these people are horrible.” Even if she had lived in the U.S. most of her life, her speech still retained a subtle Korean accent.

Hope spoke, “Oh, Michelle. You know better than hooking up with a guy where you're working. Why would you do that...again?”

“You mean Esteban?” Michelle shrugged, then raised her hands and eyes. “But that was only the excuse to attack us. The Courts Inn HQ staff hated Chris and me the minute we walked through the door. They all assume we're here to recommend firing a bunch of them.”

“Which, in their defense, is not entirely false,” intervened Hope.

Michelle continued. “It's turning personal and really ugly. They call me stick figure doll to my face, but I've heard that when we're not there, they call me and Chris 'The Players' and say I'm easy and Chris is a pothead!”

Louis chuckled. “Which is not entirely false either.”

Closing her eyes, Michelle wagged her head. “I think that the main problem with Courts Inn is that they only hire unlikable people. They're all a bunch of stiffs with a dozen children each!”

Louis grunted. “Breeders! Yikes!”

“Yes!” Michelle nodded effusively. “This place is bursting with *breeders*. You're not going to believe the ridiculous stories going on here. Listen to this: *They bring their kids to work when they're sick*. Every two steps there's a snuffling brat sneezing his germs all over the place. Come on. They're so sick even the petri-dish of the school doesn't want them and they're bringing them to where I'm trying to work?”

Hope covered her open mouth with her hand. “Why do the managers allow that?”

Michelle waved her arms. “The manager is the worst. Chris and I call her Paula the Alpha-Cow. She has her own litter she brings along all the time. She claims that the founder of the company wanted to make it a place 'welcoming for working parents'. They're super proud of some award they got as one of the most family friendly places to work in the country. It's like a joke.” She threw her arms up and looked at the ceiling. “They have more breast-milk pumping rooms than bathrooms.”

Hope laughed. “Oh, dear. Sorry you're having such a hard time. But at least now we have a sense of what we need to change to make that place more efficient.”

Closing her eyes again, Michelle quivered and announced, “Change of subject.” She rubbed her hands. “Don't make any plans for Friday night. We're going out. I overheard some people here talking about an Open Mic bar that's ranked as one of the most 'It' places in Orlando. I want us to all go there for drinks and snacks, then we'll hit the clubs. Text me your hotel information, so I can pick you up in my rental car.”

As the youngest member of the F team – she was twenty-nine – Michelle was the sentinel of their social life. Nodding, Hope remarked, “You know you can always count on me. Especially since I am back on the market...again.”

When Michelle and Louis did not acknowledge her comment, Hope sighed. She had had so many breakups in the past couple of years it seemed her friends had stopped keeping track.

Bath time had arrived and Hope said goodbye to Michelle and politely kicked Louis out, sending him off to his gym. They said goodbye as usual, with a kiss on each cheek.

The moment she was alone, Hope's smile disappeared and her face was taken over by a gesture of exhaustion and unhappiness.

The music had stopped and the silence in the apartment was deafening again. Just now, her back had started itching exactly at that spot where she couldn't reach and she couldn't find the plastic hand on a stick she used as back scratcher. She looked around her impeccable space. She had given up roommates and live-in partners defending that order, but some nights, she would gladly trade in a little mess in exchange for someone to scratch her itchy back.

She turned the music back on and started undressing to get in the bathtub.

Chapter 3:

March 18, 2016. Crystal Palms. Winter Park, Florida.

If death were as sweet as the dreamless sleep in which Tom was suspended, he wouldn't have minded dying. He was floating in a warm, pleasurable darkness in the deepest, most delightful unconsciousness. And yet, somehow he was conscious of it because one – only one – of his brain cells had just awakened. It was one of the brain cells connected to his inner ear, and was registering a distant high pitch sound, like the yelp of a small dog. That one brain cell was enough to register the sound, but not equipped to interpret it.

A repetitive tapping on his right cheek activated a wave of other nearby brain cells – like a domino effect – to also wake up. He was finally able to make up the sound. It was a A-flat note falling to an E, then rising again. And it was actually a word being chanted over and over.

“Daddy. Daddy. Daddy. Dad. Daddy...”

He opened his eyes. Eight year old Liz was staring at him with her big baby-blue eyes –eyes which she got from him. Her heart shaped face was so close to his he could smell her morning breath. She was barefoot, in her short Hello Kitty pink pajamas, her light blonde hair a mess. He thought for the ten thousandth time that she was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

“Good morning, Princess. What time is it?”

Her voice had the nasal ring of chronic allergies. “Daddy, it's 7:00. You overslept.”

Tom whipped his head and looked at the time displayed on his cell phone, which he was still holding in his hand after he had hit the snooze command – or so he thought – an hour ago. He sprang up, sitting on the bed.

“Oh, shoot! Oh shoot! Princess! The school bus is going to be here in twenty-five minutes! We need to get ready!”

Jumping off the bed, he ran his hand over his messy and shaggy dark blond hair. After straightening his gym shorts and white undershirt, he grabbed his heavy frame glasses from the night stand and put them on. “Please, go wake up your sister!”

Liz grimaced. “Ella's going to yell at me if I wake her up!”

“Please, Cupcake! Daddy needs some help today!”

Sighing loudly, Liz rolled her eyes, then stomped away, obviously dreading the task assigned to

her.

Tom walked around the king size, dark cherry, sleigh bed toward the little boy sleeping under the blankets on the edge of it. He knew it had been a mistake to let Tommy Junior get in bed with him for the last three nights. He knew he would pay for it later when the boy started refusing again to sleep in his own room, but when the four year old was having one of his bad asthma attacks it was the only way to keep an eye on him during the night.

Those sixty minutes he had stolen by accident that morning had been the longest stretch of deep sleep Tom had had in the past three days. His last three nights had been a haze of nebulizer treatments and waking up every hour to check on the boy, sleeping in between with only half his brain. Last night the boy slept better, yet Tom did not, being elbowed and kicked constantly.

Tom felt his heart melt with love for a moment, looking at Tommy's sleeping face – his thick, dark eyelashes against his mocha skin, his little open mouth, his tiny chin. Tom was so relieved that the worst of his illness was over and the pediatrician had cleared him yesterday to return to school.

Gently, he caressed the child's jet-black hair to wake him up. How much longer would he stay like that, little and innocent? How much longer until he started asking questions about why it was that he looked nothing like his sisters? Tom knew he couldn't hide from him forever that he wasn't his biological father, but he was hoping to delay it for as long as possible, until the boy was old enough to understand and forgive his mother, like he had.

Little Tommy stretched in the bed keeping his eyes closed. Finally, he batted his eyelashes, opening his big black eyes.

“Wake up, Champ! We have to get ready for school!”

The boy resisted his dad's attempts to pull him up and get him out of the bed, too sleepy to move or talk. Finally giving up, Tom carried him. Gosh, he was getting heavy!

With the boy in his arms, he walked across the beige family room and open concept kitchen to the other side of the split plan house. He knocked on the door of Ella's room, his twelve year old, with a quick reminder to hurry up, then continued into Tommy's room, decorated with glow-in-the-dark stars, planets and moons wall and ceiling stickers.

The next seventeen minutes were a proof that parenthood comes equipped with the emergency power of bending time and space. Dressing Tommy up with his tiny plaid shirt and khaki shorts. Rushing Liz – in her Disney Princess theme decorated room – to put on her jeans and pink top. Rushing through mahogany kitchen cabinets to make three cereal, milk and banana slices breakfast bowls.

Morning medications. Attacking the jungle of knots in Liz's hair with a hairbrush while she ate. Rushing to finish Tommy and Lizzy's lunchboxes – too finicky to accept the school cafeteria food. Last minute field trip permission forms to sign for the school...Bizet's *Carmen's Overture* was playing in Tom's mind while he worked.

Ella was the last to come out for breakfast. She had just sat at the golden granite counter when the sound of a horn blowing outside got Tom's attention.

“That must be aunt Paula!” said Tom. “Ella, put your breakfast in Tupperware and finish it in the bus, would you?”

In between cereal bowls preparations, Tom had texted an “SOS” to his friend and neighbor Paula. It was their usual signal when he was running late and needed her help. He usually walked his kids to the Crystal Palms neighborhood gate where the bus stopped. Paula, living farther at the end of the street in the cul-de-sac, usually drove hers. On days like these, the five minutes of walking they could save made a big difference.

Tommy and Liz ran with him to the van and greeted “Aunt Paula” and their three “cousins” as she was hitting the button to slide open the van door.

Through the open car window, Tom planted a kiss on her tanned cheek and handed her an overnight bag. “Thank you so much for saving me again, Paulie! And thank you for taking Tommy tonight. I'll be happy to split the babysitter pay.”

She patted his shoulder. “You're Welcome, T.J. I'm glad he's feeling better. Mario Junior and Lily are really looking forward to the sleepover with him. And Mario Senior doesn't shut up about tonight.” She rolled her brown eyes.

Looking back at him, she now asked. “Who's going to watch the girls?”

There was a brief pause. “Their grandmother is picking them up from school to spend the night.”

Paula gasped, widening her eyes. “Kate *The Be-header*? I thought she still wasn't talking to you!”

Tom chuckled. Paula was not an easily impressionable woman, but his mother scared the crap out of her – and most other people he knew.

Tom's ultra-conservative mother had never recovered from the “devastating shame” his divorce had caused her two years ago. She still swore her church friends whispered about it behind her back –

honestly, did anybody really care? He'd enjoyed the brief time his mother disowned him. Unfortunately, his ex-wife's departure to start medical specialty training nine months ago, leaving him trying to balance full-time kids with a full-time accounting job, had forced a reconnection out of necessity.

He now shook his head with a sigh. "I'd rather not ask for her help, but what else could I do? You know that March 18 is a sacred holiday for Mario and me."

"I don't like it when you go out, Daddy," interjected Liz, sticking half her body out of the open van door. "Why can't we just stay home like every night?"

Arriving at that time with her packed breakfast, Ella elbowed Liz to climb into the van and took a seat with the other kids adding, "Yes, why? It feels weird." From inside the van, she pierced him with her aquamarine eyes and whispered. "You're not going out *with a woman*, are you?"

Also whispering, Liz added, "Or to drink alcohol?"

Paula tapped the top of the van with her hand. "Hey, hey, girls! Give your Dad a break! The poor guy hasn't set a foot out of the house or work in forever! Gosh!" She pushed the button to close the van door.

Tom knew Paula was right. His last night out had been June 21st last year. He remembered it exactly, not because the night had been memorable – it had been yet another online dating fiasco– but because it was the last night Leia, his ex-wife, had the kids before she left for her orientation week as a non-conventional age medical intern at Detroit Medical Center.

Yes, of course he missed having a social life. But having the kids go with their mother and rarely ever seeing them was absolutely not an option. Not to mention there was no way she could take care of them while working the brutal hours that a medical intern had to work.

Paula now turned to him. "Ignore them. I don't know what else can they ask from you, short of you letting them eat you alive. Plus, Mario and I are dying to see you play like in the old days.

At that moment, Tommy – finally fully awake – exclaimed, "Look. The bus is here!"

"Shoot. Okay, T.J. See you later at work." Paula waved goodbye and hit the gas, taking off way above the speed limit for Crystal Palms gated community.

"Bye guys, I love you. I'm really going to miss you tonight." He yelled his goodbyes to the kids even as the van was rapidly shrinking from his view.

Later that afternoon, a loud tapping on his bedroom window woke up Tom abruptly from his attempt of an after-work nap. His heart jumped and started racing. He put on his glasses, got out of bed and walked toward the noise. He pulled open the drapes and saw the protuberant brown eyes and the round, double chin face of his friend Mario. Tom struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. How did Mario get in the backyard? He was signaling him to let him in.

Yawning, he walked to the main door to open it.

Mario had walked around the house and was waiting for him. Overdressed for Florida, as usual, he was wearing an elegant charcoal suit, seemingly in disconnect with his messy, receding mane in need of a haircut.

“Man, you almost gave me a heart attack.” Tom said as he was letting him in. “Why were you in my yard knocking on my window?”

“I called and you didn't answer your cellphone. Are you okay? Paula told me you were sick and went home early from work.”

Rubbing his eyes, Tom yawned. “I wasn't exactly sick, just exhausted after the last few nights taking care of Tommy. I turned the phone off to take a nap before heading to Al's bar. What time is it?”

“It's almost five. You better get ready. Mike and the guys want you to rehearse with them a little before they go set up.” Mario chuckled and slapped him on the back of his head. “I hope you stocked up on sleep, my friend, because you're going to party all night tonight.” Clapping his hands, Mario cheered.

Tom chuckled. March 18, which he called Gregg's Double Birthday, was the only night of the year when Paula would let Mario party without her. This year falling on a Friday, she had announced she had the intention to join them. Mario was more invested than ever in having at least some vicarious enjoyment through Tom.

Tom took a few steps to the shelf in the living room where multiple family and friend pictures were on display. He took a frame with a picture of three smiling young men hugging. Between a younger, skinny, geekier looking Tom, and a now unrecognizably thin Mario, stood a handsome, dark haired athletic man. Tom touched his image with his index and middle fingers, looking at him with affection. There was no need for the friends to talk.

This was the fourth time Tom would go play music honoring the March 18 holiday. The first

time had been barely 12 hours after Gregg's passing from acute leukemia the morning on his own birthday three years ago. A few days back – when they first started doubting he would make it alive to that day – he had made Tom and Mario swear that, instead of mourning him, they would celebrate his birthday largely and wildly in his honor every year. The following two March 18ths had been the bookends of the wildest year in Tom's life – more accurately the *only* wild year he ever had– the year of his rebound after his divorce.

He smiled. Gregg had joked many times before, saying he would force prude and shy Tom out of his shell even if he had to do it from his grave. Well, his words had been weirdly prophetic.

Tom now spoke with a serious voice, “Today again, we'll let him use our eyes, ears and senses so wherever he is Gregg can come to earth and be alive one more night.” It was a relatively recent accomplishment that they could talk about this holiday with joy instead of sadness.

Mario nodded, then tapped his back. “Well said, man. Deep words. And now hurry and take a shower. We're getting you laid tonight.” Mario clapped once, spun around and waved his arms on a victory dance.

Putting the picture down, Tom put his hand on Mario's shoulder. “My friend, I know this is going to be very hard for you to hear, but I better prepare you now so your heart is not broken later.” He paused for effect looking at his friend's eyes. “The last two years were exceptional events. I have no intention of picking up a stranger tonight”.

Just as Tom expected, Mario's jaw dropped, his prominent eyes protruded even more and he made choking noises, putting his hand on his chest. Tom let him carry on with his show and walked toward the kitchen. Not finding anything to clean in the – for once – pristine space, he started unloading the dishwasher.

It is universally known that a man going through a divorce has two equally unhealthy paths to choose from. Option A is to dive head-on into a rebound relationship with a woman every bit as psychologically unstable as he is at the time. For Tom that had been the woman he and Mario called “Psycho #1.” If the man is unlucky, he ends up stuck with her for a painfully long while, or even marries her. If he is lucky – like Tom was – he realizes the mistake quickly enough, getting a chance to taste option B.

Option B is a string of casual companionships – so called casual hookups – attempting not to get involved with anybody. For Tom that had lasted about eight months, and ended abruptly exactly a

year ago, when his last one-night-stand had become his stalker. He and Mario called her Psycho #2. It had escalated to letters filled with threats of suicide and murder, and even cost him cosmetic damage to his old car before he finally got a restraining order against her. Tom's mother would have said it was a punishment from God for his immoral behavior – maybe an infantile part of him believed it too. Ever since then, he had sworn off getting in a stranger's bed.

March 18th last year – the night he picked up Psycho#2 – had marked the end of Tom's rebound year. He had promised himself to settle down after that and had even put up with three painful months of friends setups and online dating before Leia moved away and adult social interaction became something of the past.

Finally reacting, Mario rushed to join Tom in the kitchen. “You're obviously kidding, Man! The last couple of years were legendary! Women were literally throwing their panties at you while you played. I seriously suspected Gregg was pulling strings up there for you.”

Tom chuckled. “Well, Mario, thank you for reminding me that the only way I can get a woman to give me a second look is by divine intervention.”

Mario raised his hands. “Stop it. I'm not putting up with your inferiority complex today. Yes, you're not a movie star. But you've kept your hair and haven't put on a seven-month-pregnant beer belly – like some of us. The truth is that every year that goes by the rest of us, men in your generation, are falling apart by the seams and you're looking better in comparison!

Tom dismissed the comment with a head shake.

When people saw a picture of Tom, they usually described him as a “good-looking man.” A strong jaw, a full head of dark blond hair sprinkled with silver strands, baby blue eyes – which he seemed determined to hide behind clumsy thick glasses. But then, when they met him in person, people tended to second guess their first impressions. Years of friendship with Gregg, and those two years of grief-counsel turned to therapy after his death had taken the edge of his pathological shyness, but still, If Thomas Johann Wagner had a super power, it would have been the power of *turning invisible*.

He was of above average height, but his body posture seemed to make him shrink. A tendency to squint after a lifetime of nearsightedness and to grimace when talking, would distract from his pleasant face. He also often irradiated self-doubt, the product of a childhood of verbal abuse – which still haunted him in spite of that therapy he had committed to in an attempt to avoid repeating the same mistakes with his children.

The fact was that, in the end, the jaw that would have looked strong in another man, in his mind

was too prominent. His well aligned teeth were to him just a reminder of all those years tortured by braces. He was convinced that he was funny looking, and the world treated him like that.

Until he was on the stage, playing music.

Then the seas would part, the sky would rumble, and all the fleshly illusions would disperse, leaving people face to face – their jaws on the floor – with the blinding view of his soul in its original, unwounded state.

Thomas Johann Wagner *did* have a super power, and that super power was *music*.

Mario continued with a huff. “But we're digressing. The point is that you've been dating your hands for almost a year, Man! Give yourself a break from the monastic life! You used to be so fun to be around before!”

Tom shook his head, still putting away the dishes. “Well, now I'm back to being me. First of all, hookups are not my style and I can't do that anymore.” He put away the last of the bowls, then took the silverware basket from the dishwasher and started sorting it in the separate compartments of the assigned drawer. “Second of all, don't forget I have two growing daughters. Any younger woman I meet now, who's making a fool of herself putting jello shots in her belly-button, deserves nothing but my pity. Provocatively dressed party-girls hitting on men provoke nothing in me but a strong need to call their parents, so they come pick them up and put them to bed.”

He looked under the kitchen sink for a spray bottle, grabbed a few sheets of paper towel from the roll standing on the holder and started cleaning nearly imaginary stains on the golden granite counter.