

Chapter 1

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

Hope had started the previous month in L.A., 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'd had many nicknames in her life—some of them good, some not so much. Her favorites were “The H-Bomb,” for the energy she impossibly packed in that compact five-foot-four body, and “The Heavyweight,” for the way she could drink with her toughest guy friends.

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

But today, the only name she longed to be called 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 he'll have a short shelf life. 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 run four on the beach. Not much, compared to her usual routine, but she cut herself some slack for being off triathlon 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 on. But fitness wasn't the only reason Hope ran triathlons. There was also the paradoxical effect of the adrenaline that served as self-medication for her low-grade ADHD. And also the numbing relief that followed the peak of severe pain—the only time her body and her soul began to align.

Numbness had been 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 couldn't 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 if your friends aren't available, and call for sex as needed." Joy had a point a few years back, but lately things were changing. Maybe Hope had just grown weary of *so much silence*.

As she jogged back to her building under the perfect blue sky of beautiful Ocean Beach, Hope pondered. Some years ago her list of requirements and deal breakers 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 fifty-mile radius of San Diego.

Was that too much to ask for?

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

He had to go and hook up with 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. 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 often made Hope roll her eyes and suspect

she'd been heart-broken in the past. But perhaps there was something to say about her strategy.

Having stopped to get her water bottle from the convenience store vending machine, Hope felt a strong pair of arms grabbing her shoulders. With a jolt, she screamed and spun around, ready to present the stranger her best kick-boxing move. Relieved, she recognized her friend Louis.

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

The black man’s scowl contorted his otherwise good-looking face as he towered over her by a full foot. His muscular arms and thighs were exposed by his sleeveless gym shirt and bike shorts—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 check 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?” She and Louis called each other *Fab*—short for Fabulous.

Hope could smell the ocean in the air as they strolled together the remaining block to her building. Louis exuded style in every step of his glide; if “coolness” ever became incarnate, it would look like Louis Brown. Only a few privileged people, like her, had an insight on the delightful, flamboyant personality under that coolness façade. As they walked, more than one person turned their head to see them pass.

Louis, her long-term friend and business partner, was the best example of Hope's belief that the universe had a cruel sense of humor. Louis would've been the perfect man for her. They had lots in common. He was clever and witty—not to mention stunning. He probably had the most perfect male body most people would ever see.

And, of course, he was gay.

“I was *sure* someone had murdered you!” he said 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 an OCD clean-freak who can't stand a drop of toothpaste spit on her mirror!”

Hope smiled. 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 mastectomy—but her uninteresting face kept her humble. Her Heinz-57 ethnic background had blessed her with plump lips, yet 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'd 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 the cell phone she'd left on the living-room's console table and instrumental jazz, coming through wireless speakers, filled the room. Thank God for music, the only thing that prevented Hope from losing it in that ocean of

silence her nights had become. She'd 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.

Louis followed her across the pristine, modern living room 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 the closet, 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 couldn't 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 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, she dropped her supplies in the bathroom.

She had mastered the art of bubble baths in her clawfoot tub. Besides Jazz music, aromatic candles and wine, the recipe included a small inflatable ring to sit on, and an inflatable pillow to support her neck and shoulders..

Returning to the small white kitchen. She poured two glasses of white wine and sat on a bar stool next to her friend.

In the minuscule apartment, she hardly had to stretch 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 were good enough to follow the jazz playing through the speakers. But her repertoire was limited to what she learned while playing in amateur rock bands during her 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 five-hundred 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'd find her way into wiping them on Michelle's designer skirt.

A proud auntie, Hope actually enjoyed children—she looked forward to visiting her sister and nephews in her hometown on the Space Coast of Florida during this trip; God knew she could 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 regrets about no longer being able to have them herself.

Chuckling, she shushed Louis. “Fabulous, it's not 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 didn't 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 something more serious.

Four years back, Hope had opted for preventive mastectomies and oophorectomies—removing her breasts and ovaries—after a blood test suggested she'd 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, let's focus. We need to save our brain cells for the biggest challenge The F Team has ever faced.”

Louis and Hope's corporation 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 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 they'd joined forces with two other friends, launching their own independent consultant company to help businesses risking 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, 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'd give birth to the strategies, powered by Louis' marketing degree and Hope's 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'd find solutions which nobody else could see. They were the sellers of ideas and the masters of re-launching brands.

Gathering accounts from all over the country, they'd 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'd just expanded support personnel and invested in new computers and software to keep up with the demands.

They'd 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.

Hope signaled Louis to follow her into the white bathroom and opened the faucet—a way to insinuate to him it was time to leave. As she let the hot water run, steam mixed with the smell of the cinnamon candles she'd lit.

“Michelle was trying to reach you; give her a call,” Louis said. “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. Michelle was a bright business woman and the most loyal friend in the world—she had once jumped on a plane and flown to rescue Hope when she'd lost her passport and credit cards and been stranded in Sydney, Australia. But Michelle's tendency to gravitate toward jerks made Hope sometimes throw her hands 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 her head and boobs—which may or may not have been real—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 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.” Despite living in the U.S. most of her life, her speech still retained a subtle Korean accent.

Hope spoke, “Oh, Michelle. You know better than to hook 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 an 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 a 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 them. You won't 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 hands up and looked at the ceiling. “They have more breast-milk pumping rooms than bathrooms.”

Hope laughed. “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. We'll 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 didn't acknowledge her comment, Hope sighed. She'd 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 reflected 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 glanced around her impeccable space. She'd given up roommates and live-in partners defending that order, but some nights, she'd gladly trade 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 2:

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 floated in a warm, pleasurable darkness in the deepest, most delightful unconsciousness. And yet, somehow he was conscious of it because *one* of his brain cells had just awakened. It was a brain cell connected to his inner ear, and it registered a distant high-pitched 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 out the sound. It was an 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 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'd ever seen.

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

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

Tom whipped his head and looked at the time displayed on his cell phone, which he still held after he'd 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 shaggy dark blond hair. After straightening his gym shorts and white undershirt, he grabbed his heavy frame glasses from the nightstand 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-sized, 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'd 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'd stolen by accident that morning had been the longest stretch of deep sleep Tom had enjoyed in the past three days. The 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 didn't, 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 to return to school today.

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 hoped 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 twelve-year-old Ella's room 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 proof that parenthood comes equipped with the emergency power of bending time and space. Dressing Tommy in a tiny plaid shirt and khaki shorts. Rushing Liz—in her Disney Princess room—to put on jeans and a pink top. Rushing through mahogany kitchen cabinets to make three bowls of cereal, milk and banana slices. Morning medications. Attacking the jungle of knots in Liz's hair with a hairbrush while she ate. Rushing to finish Tommy and Lizzy's lunches—both too finicky to partake in school cafeteria food. Last minute field trip permission forms to sign for the school. Bizet's *Carmen's Overture* played in Tom's mind while he worked.

Ella was the last to come out for breakfast. She'd just sat down 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 bowl 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, usually drove hers. On days like this, 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 won't shut up about tonight.” She rolled her brown eyes.

Looking back at him, she 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.”

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

Tom chuckled. Paula wasn't 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 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 had forced a reconnection out of necessity—Tom needed help to balance full-time kids with a full-time accounting job.

He 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 just then 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.

Paula was right. Tom’s last night out had been June 21 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 not an option. Not to mention there was no way she could take care of them while working the brutal hours 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 Tom abruptly from his attempt of an after-work nap. His heart jumped. Putting on his glasses, he got out of bed and walked toward the noise.

Pulling open the drapes, he saw the prominent brown eyes and the round, double chinned face of his friend Mario. Tom struggled to make sense of what he saw. How did Mario get in the backyard? He was signaling Tom 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 wore 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 while letting Mario 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 sick, just exhausted after the last few nights taking care of Tommy. I turned off the phone 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 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 since it fell on a Friday, she'd announced she intended 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 twelve 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'd make it alive to that day—he'd made Tom and Mario swear that, instead of mourning him, they'd celebrate his birthday largely and wildly in his honor every year. The following two March 18s 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 often joked that he'd force prudish 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 spoke in a solemn tone. “Today, we'll let him use our eyes, ears and senses so wherever he is Gregg can come back 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.

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

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's 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's lucky—like Tom was—he realizes the mistake quickly enough, getting a chance to test 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've said it was a punishment from God for his immoral behavior—maybe an infantile part of him believed it too. Ever since then, he'd sworn off getting in a stranger's bed.

March 18 last year—the night he picked up Psycho #2—had marked the end of Tom's rebound. He'd promised himself to settle down after that, and 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 at 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-counseling turned to therapy after his death had taken the edge off his pathological shyness. But still, if Thomas Johann Wagner had a super power, it would've been the power of *turning invisible*.

He stood at above average height, but his body posture seemed to make him shrink. A tendency to squint after a lifetime of nearsightedness and grimace when talking, distracted from his pleasant face. He also often radiated self-doubt, the product of a childhood of verbal abuse—which still haunted him in spite of that therapy he'd 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've looked strong on 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. Give yourself a break from the monastic life. You used to be so fun to be around!”

Still putting away the dishes, Tom shook his head. “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 grabbed the silverware basket from the dishwasher and started sorting it in the assigned drawer's compartments. “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 Jell-O 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.