

Hope for Harmony Surprise Excerpt: Soulmates

Hope and Tom sat next to each other on the sand, facing the ocean and talking. A faint light came from the hotel building far behind them, but not enough to compete with the stars filling the sky. The moon had set and there was no sign of dawn.

Through the haze in her mind, she was having a hard time classifying the man sitting next to her. He was definitely different. She was still trying to decide if it was different as in “odd” or as in “fascinating.”

Minutes ago she'd been convinced that he was an adorable big kid with no chance of scoring with her. Then, he'd given her his jacket to wear when she shivered against the ocean breeze, and the casual touch of his hands when helping her putting it on felt so pleasant, she started reconsidering him. The jacket was dry inside and warm from his body. It smelled of him, wonderfully.

Was his prudishness an act? Could his funny-guy attitude be a cover up for the fact that he was an experienced seducer?

And now the story he was telling her confused the few ideas she'd managed to gather about him even more. She'd finally got him to explain what he'd meant earlier saying he was out celebrating “Gregg's Double Birthday.” He talked about the promise he'd made to his friend on his deathbed.

Tom spoke about Gregg with such contagious devotion, she almost felt like she'd known him. Gregg had been his childhood friend, then had turned into college-adventures companion. Gregg was the friend who showed him the first picture of a naked woman he ever saw and the one who gave him his first beer. The friend who got him out of his pathological shyness and forced him to play music in public.

Gregg had been the handsome and popular one, who really knew how to have fun. Maybe because of that, Gregg had refused to settle down. He had no wife, steady girlfriend or family when he was diagnosed with an aggressive form of acute leukemia at age thirty-

five. Tom had put his life on hold and had taken off from work to take care of him. He'd been with him until the end, which happened less than three months later, on Gregg's thirty-sixth birthday.

Too touched to talk, Hope had remained quiet, listening. Now that he'd turned silent, she moved closer to him and held his hand. He had beautiful, yet surprisingly large hands. No wonder he could reach the keys on the piano with such ease.

Playing distractedly with his fingers, she said, "It must've been hard to lose Gregg."

He nodded. "At the same time, with his death he gave me the best gift anyone could've given me: He made me touch bottom."

He stopped talking.

She 'd learned through the night that he was a reserved person who didn't like to talk about himself. Now, she could sense he was speaking almost against his will, hypnotized by the magic of the moment and the place. She searched for his eyes, encouraging him.

He finally resumed. "I was stuck in a dreamless, joyless life. I was married to a woman I didn't love, who didn't even like me. I was letting my life go by, in a job I hated. Losing Gregg shook me to the core. It made me realize I could be next. I asked my ex for the divorce, I quit my old job, I started playing again, traveled to Europe for the first time...If I'd been resigned before to a mediocre life, now I felt it was my obligation to be as happy as I could be. I owed it to him."

She gasped. "*We owe it to them.* I like that."

He looked at her more attentively. "Have you lost someone close too?"

"Not recently." Silence fell for a moment. Then casually, with no inflection in her voice, she commented, "My mother died when I was eight...then my father died six years later."

He blinked rapidly. “Wow. That must’ve been hard, especially losing your mother being so young. What happened? An accident?”

Shaking her head, she replied, “She had breast cancer. And, hard? I’m not sure. I can barely remember.”

He remained quiet, as if inviting her to say more, but as it usually happened when she talked about it, the thick numbness inside her started thinning and she felt the urge to change the subject.

Forcing herself to recover her cheerfulness, she inquired, “But tell me more! I’m dying to hear some of the adventures you’ve had on Gregg’s Double Birthday.”

With the expression of a little kid remembering mischief, he chuckled and shook his head, but it was clear that he had no intention of telling her anything.

“Come on! Don’t leave me empty-handed! Share at least one little thing you’ve done!”

He considered it. “Okay. One thing.”

Putting his hands in his pockets, he searched for something. The first things he found were two flattened paper cups—she’d given them to him to hold at the waffle house—and set them on the sand. He found his wallet and fished something out from one of the card slots. She wondered if it was a photo; instead, he extracted a yellowish piece of paper which had been folded multiple times. He unfolded it and handed it to her.

After one glance, she realized, gasping, what it was. “A bucket list!”

He assented. “Right after Gregg died I rescued it from my childhood journals and started adding to it.”

“I can’t believe this! You heard me joke about bucket lists all night and you weren’t going to tell me you have one of your own!”

As she read it, he smiled half with shyness, half with the pride of a kid who'd just been dared to do a stunt on his bike and had succeeded.

She read off the items that had already been crossed out. "Own a Harley-Davidson, visit Paris, visit Rome, visit Salzburg..." She raised her eyebrows. "Fly a plane?"

Proud, he nodded. "A flight instructor friend of a friend did me a favor and took me for an informal lesson."

She was impressed. He was getting harder to categorize the more she learned about him. She read some of the items still uncrossed. "Ride in a helicopter, sky diving..."

"I'm leaving that one for last, just in case."

"Visit Japan, visit Australia. Hey, I've been in both places!"

His eyes widened. "Really? That's awesome!"

She handed him the list. He folded it carefully and put it back in his wallet.

"How about you, Hope?" he asked. "What's on your bucket list for real? Is there *anything* you have yet to do that you'd regret not having done if you died tomorrow?"

A sudden faint sadness settled in her and a sigh escaped, against her will. She answered with a weak voice, "I used to say I wanted to find my soulmate before I died...I'm no longer sure that exists."

He seemed surprised. Silence fell between them and, finally, he said, "I see. You're heart-broken too."

Shaking her head, she sighed and started peeling the foil off the wine bottle, then began fussing with the cork. "At least being heart-broken has a magic on its own. Soul-tearing sweet and sour pain is almost pleasure, but it's not even that. I'm more kind of...*heart-worn out*."

He looked at her in silence, inviting her to talk. When she didn't, he took the wine bottle from her hand. She saw his hand moving toward her chest and held her breath.

He carefully extracted a pen from the front pocket of the jacket she was wearing. He used it to push the cork inside the wine bottle. He served two paper cups of wine, then put the bottle back on the sand, between them. She thanked him.

After taking a long sip from her cup, she said, "I'm done believing in relationships. Mine last shorter than the flavor in my chewing gum."

He chuckled. "You're too young to sound that cynical already! I disagree! I do believe in relationships and I can't wait to be in one again."

Narrowing her eyes, she turned to look at him. "*You can't wait to be in a relationship? Is that your line to sweet-talk girls?*"

He answered with a head-shake. "There's nothing romantic about it. I'm just a *lousy single man*. My married friends say they envy me for having a chance to be single again, but *I hate it*. I think I was born to be paired up."

She looked at him with attention. He continued. "Being single feels as if I have a big pending item on my to-do list constantly bothering me." He paused, then straightened up and added. "Besides piano, when I was a kid I was obsessed with large, complicated puzzles. Nothing unsettled me more than being almost at the end of one and realizing some pieces were missing. Well, that's the way I feel right now, as if there were a big piece in the puzzle of my life missing...and it drives me crazy."

She raised her eyebrows, impressed. He could say whatever he wanted, but she'd found his last example quite romantic.

For a moment, she wondered if he was sincere; then, she remembered the women at the bar and her inner cynic rose again.

“Oh, please!” She snickered. “If you're single, it's by choice. After what I saw at the bar while you were playing, you're not going to make me believe you have any trouble getting lucky with the ladies!” She finished her cup in one sip and served herself another.

He grimaced. “I admit that I rode on that during my rebound. When I'm playing on stage is the only moment of my life when I don't have to do anything else to get women's attention. But it doesn't end well. I gave up using music to get hooked-up after Gregg's double birthday last year. You were wondering about my adventures on that holiday?” He grunted. “Well, let's say one of those adventures scared me straight.” He shuddered, as if remembering something unpleasant, and took another sip of wine.

He put his cup down and swiped his hands against each other, then raised them up. “I'm done with one-night-stands. I don't want a different woman every week. I want *one* woman so interesting I wouldn't mind spending every night with her for the rest of my life.”

Still trying to figure out if he was playing her, she studied him, squinting. He turned to face her. “You're too young to understand this. How old are you? Twenty-two?”

She smiled without answering. Maybe *that* had been a premeditated play, but he had definitely scored a point.

He continued. “Maybe it comes with age. To me it's no longer only about 'getting lucky.' *It's about company.* It's about having someone to have an insiders' joke with, and to whom I can point out beautiful things. Someone who knows my history. Someone who can hear the thought I'm trying to express, if anything so it becomes more clear to myself.”

She was moved. Nodding, she added. “Someone to bear witness to your life, because if nobody saw it...did it really happen?”

Surprised, he widened his eyes and nodded slowly.

She took another long sip of wine, then cleaned her lips with the back of her hand and sighed. "I wish I could believe that was possible, but the truth is in the statistics, relationships don't last. Definitely not for me." She groaned. "The longest romantic relationship of my life lasted *two years*." Opening her arms in a grandiose gesture, she bowed. "I rest my case." After taking another sip from her cup, she put it down.

He asked, "Now tell me, what is the longest lasting *friendship* you've had in your life?"

She was startled. Michelle had been her friend for six years, Louis for twelve and still going strong. Then she realized there was someone else, her sister Joy. She'd been her best friend for as long as she could remember.

"Decades," she answered weakly.

A sweet and sour smile reached his lips. "Gregg and I were friends since middle school and until the day he died. *Twenty-two years*. Yes, geography separated us a few years in between, but when we got back together it was as if time had never passed. Yes, there were days when he got on my nerves and we argued, but that never made me doubt he was my favorite person in the world."

She nodded. "It's the same with my sister."

He pierced her with his gaze. "Do you see my point? We've all met people like that, people with whom we have an almost instant connection, people we learn to love so quickly after we meet them, it would be easy to believe we've known them from other lives. Loved ones like those *are* our *soulmates*. They prove to us that love that can stand the test of time does exist. If we were able to find those platonic soulmates, why can't we find the non-platonic one to share our lives with?"

His words sounded so logical she was having a hard time finding a counter-argument. It may've also had something to do with her rising alcohol levels.

“You’re forgetting a few things: physical chemistry, compatibility.” She grunted, feeling drunk. “The only male soulmate of my life, my friend Louis, is gay, and so messy we almost killed each other years ago when we tried to be roommates!”

He chuckled. “Well, I never said my theory was perfect, but it’s something to start from.” He served himself more wine.

Hope gaped at him, admiring and envying his optimism. She felt suddenly old, as if he was starting with enthusiasm a path she was returning from, defeated.

She sighed. “I’m actually thirty-four.” He brought the cup down, surprised. “I had my first real boyfriend when I was seventeen. That means I’ve been looking for that ‘romantic soulmate love’ now for exactly half my life. Shouldn’t I’ve already seen it if it really existed?”

“I know *it does exist*. I may’ve never had it, but I’ve seen it.” He leaned forward, speaking with enthusiasm, as if someone relating the day of his UFO sighting. “I’ve seen those couples who are also best friends, and their lives together are like an eternal slumber party. They bring the best out of each other. They’re the ones who are still together and happy twenty, or thirty, or fifty years later and they no longer have to complete each other’s sentences—because by then they speak by telepathy.”

Hope stared at him in awe, and an unexpected feeling of peace settled deep in her heart. It was the certainty of being exactly at the right place she had to be. It was also the feeling of *future nostalgia*, as if she knew that some day in the future she’d be remembering this moment with sweet and sour joy.

Her voice was soft. “Maybe I’ve been chewing gum, when what I really needed was real, nourishing food.”

She wrapped him in her arms and kissed him.