



Challenge Accepted

Mikey and Snicker have been friends for a long time, later came Graham, Yana, Fern Gigi and Pat. The group has stayed in touch and helped each other through many of life's happy as well as not as happy events. Mikey took on a challenge 20 years ago, the time has come to call out the person who made that challenge. Along the way, secrets will be revealed as well as deep rooted feelings.



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Mikey has been waiting 20 years for this time to come. It all started from a stupid high school challenge, now that he has done some investigating on the person who proposed the challenge, he is even happier that he has won. It will be interesting to see how this will be received.

The young man who made the challenge so many years ago, hasn't grown up much since then. He still thinks he owns the world and that everyone should bow to whatever he says simply because he says so. A bully in the playground, a bigger bully in the boardroom. This man has a horrible reputation and yet he has made himself a lot of money somehow. Well, to be fair, he started off with a lot from his father. Mikey hasn't done too bad for himself either but bringing this man down a few rungs on the ladder will make a lot of people happy. Especially when it goes public, and he knows it will, but not from his side. He is sure that the ignorant, egomaniac pig will do it himself. Trying to make a spectacle of the whole thing, when in reality, it is as legal as any of his other contracts, well, actually, maybe more so, knowing who Mikey is dealing with. Mikey checked with his own lawyer, he is setting things up for night after his close friend's wedding. He wants to make sure he has nothing on his mind except the happy couple.

"So, Mikey, you're really going through with this aren't you?" Snicker, his oldest and dearest friend, asks.

"You know Snicker, after this, we should find you a new nickname. How about laugh your damn ass off? Because I know I will be doing so after we finish with the jerk." Mikey says.

"Very funny, but seriously Mikey, why have you done this for so long? Revenge of a teenage challenge? I mean for goodness sake I was challenged all the time in high school but I never took them so seriously as you took this one. Let's think about this for a moment, you accepted every challenge in high school and you worked your ass off to prove everyone wrong for some reason. I was there for this one and I still don't know the answer to that burning question. Say, and maybe since we're turning 35 you can start calling me by my real name instead, huh?" Snicker asks.

"Let's sit, this isn't a stand at your desk kind of conversation." Mikey says as he walks to his desk to sit, Snicker following him closely behind.

Snicker closes the door behind him and sits in the chair in front of Mikey, he has known his friend since they were 12, they've been through a lot together, the usual teen angst as well as college but with Mikey, nothing was ever really ever usual.

Mikey takes a deep breath and looks to his friend, its about time he tells him. "Life wasn't a bowl of cherries in my house back then." He begins

"I know that." Snicker says.

"No, you only know what I let you see then." He holds up a hand for silence, "It's about time you knew the truth, if I can't tell you, than how will I ever tell a prospective wife why I'm so messed up, huh?" Mikey looks to his friend who silently nods at him.

Mikey takes another breath and begins, "I'm going to say everything, all at once, then you can ask questions." Another nod. "When we met, all hell had broken loose in my house. My father had left us for his latest fling, this one had his full attention and convinced him leaving us was for the best of everyone. You would think he read this scene in a book or saw it in a movie, he came home for dinner kissed us all on the heads, looked at my mom and told her he will deliver

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divorce papers soon. Then he said to her the sooner she signs, the sooner she will receive her settlement.

My father thought he was worth a million dollars or more, in fact he was worth zilch. He had tremendous debts, all in his name but the house was my mother’s, from her parents, and he knew the truth, so he had to be the one to leave. That is the last time I saw him. Ever. We were informed of his death by the latest bimbo, not the original one who took him away. Us kids showed up at the funeral for our grandparents, not for him. Then, when no one was looking, my brother pissed on the grave. Yes, I’m not kidding. We laughed and headed out with him still zipping his pants, kissed our grandparents and said goodbye to them. They’ve never contacted us since. We thought they liked us which is why we went in the first place, guess not.

Well except for the time their lawyer called us in after their unfortunate deaths in that car accident. You were there for that. Apparently, they left us all a college fund. My mom never knew. Good thing for us, most of us were still in high school at that time. Knowing I could go to college was a really big deal and my mom fully expected us all to go so that we wouldn’t turn out like our father.

Back to my story, shortly after my father left, Mom’s brother and his family moved in with us. His kids were brats, still are probably, I couldn’t stand them. They acted as if the place was theirs. Soon after the adults left out one night, leaving me in charge, I told them that in no uncertain terms are they to ever consider this their permanent home, it is a place for them to live otherwise they’d be out on the street. I told them I knew the truth about why they were with us and if they ever challenged me I would prove it to them. Sure enough, the oldest one got up to punch me and I had him on the ground with his face down in seconds. Dominance shown, my brother and sister and I walked out of the room.

Two weeks later, the oldest brat had my sister pinned on the ground and I saw she her underwear was next to her, I took a picture, then I beat him off of her and tied him to the banister with his own belt until his father came home. I sent my uncle and my mom the picture at the same time and told him to come pick up his trash or I would call the police. Mom and her brother came running into the house a half an hour later. My mother took one look at my sister and knew the deed was already done. She walked over to her own nephew and kicked him in the balls while still tied up, yes. As he was screaming for his life, she looked to her brother and said, ‘hospitality is over.’ Then she ran to my sister and took her immediately to the hospital.

We were 13 at the time, which makes my sister 11 and a half. Yeah you heard me right. Thankfully, nothing came of that. I would have definitely killed him if there was. I mean you and I didn’t even know what to do with the changing of our bodies, and we were educated well. Who knows how he learned. Her brother had cried and cried while he was in the house packing. He apologized to me and promised me that one day he will make this up to us.

I felt bad for him. I wished him well. He looked at his other son and asked him what he wanted to do. He knew this one had potential. My cousin told him that he wants to stay and live a normal life, not live with his father and his brother. I told him he could stay until Mom came back from the hospital and we made a plan. My uncle gave me an address to send him to if things didn’t work out.

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Well, as you know, he stayed. He hated his brother from his earliest memories. Apparently, they have two different mothers. Mom began to date a guy who treated her well, or so we thought. He had this feeling that she was hiding money somewhere and he was always trying to find some, I caught him one day searching the house. He stood up to me and challenged me who I thought my mom would kick out first, me or him. I told him he best pack his bags and leave before she comes home.

He thought I was kidding, when Mom came home, I showed her the pictures of him snooping in the private areas of the house, places even I was not allowed to go in to. She turned to him and in a quiet voice, told him to leave.

Then we both cried. I remember her asking me why she always picks the losers and I said not to worry because I will always be here to protect her. Ok, yeah, I know what you’re thinking. I wasn’t that big of a person but I sure had brass balls to stand up to all of these supposed adults. No, I think it stemmed from me being overly protective knowing I was the head of the household, well, oldest male which I was always told meant you were the head.

Mom worked two jobs then, she wanted to make sure we never asked for anything, still, she paid bills, basic food and clothes, everything else I had to buy for me and my sister and cousin from working after school jobs. Remember? I had you working with me doing lawn work and errands for all the older people on our block. We made very good money. You saved yours, I used mine for the family.” Mikey fiddles with a pen a few moments.

“Mic, he is your cousin? You told me he was adopted, a real brother of sorts. And Sissy? Holy hell, no wonder she hated being alone with me in any room in your house. Damn, had I known I never would have teased her the way I did. And yeah, I remember, we were young and making tons of money in my eyes. I bought myself a bike so I could take a newspaper route, you always told me that you were saving yours. Aw Mic, by the look in your eyes I see there is more. Ok. I’ll be quiet now.” Snicker slumps back into his chair.

Mic looks at his friend. “Which brings me to high school, if middle school didn’t teach me how to be a man, high school sure did. I watched, I saw how so many of our classmates treated the girls around us as if they were objects. Every time I told them they were being stupid, they challenged me to get a date with the girl they were speaking of. So, I walked up to the girl and started a conversation, by the end of the day, we were going out on a date. But then, when I picked her up I always told her the truth about why I was there to begin with and gave her the choice to go or not. Many still came out with me thinking that my honesty would lead to something good for them, like a long-term boyfriend, or at least a better reputation. Some of them did become my friends, you remember Pat, right? Yeah, she was a challenge to see if I could get her in a bathing suit. When I went to pick her up to go swimming and told her the truth, she told me she has the perfect thing and ran upstairs to get an old fashion swimsuit she had in her stash of costumes, full body coverage 1920s style. We laughed our heads off that whole afternoon as each one of the guys showed up at the pool and saw her.” Mikey takes a moment to laugh at the memory.

“I was there, I remember that, wow, that was a challenge? She is still one of the few people we still speak to from high school. Wait, let me think who else. Ok what happened with Gigi, Yana, Fern and Graham? Yeah, that covers them all.” Snicker looks to his friend, the smile, now

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gone away from his face. “Oh damn, I don’t think I want to know now.” He says. “One thing before you start. I was near you almost every day, how did all of this happen without me being around and why did you never tell me?”

“Not my news to tell most of the time, and we weren’t always around, if you think back, we either had morning classes together or afternoon, but we never had the whole day. Except for last semester senior year when we secluded ourselves to be away from everyone.” Mikey looks to his friend who is still waiting for answers.

“It’s time you knew Snicker, I’m sorry, Samuel. Hopefully we’ve all grown past these things. Gigi was on a date with the big jerk, yeah the same one I’m going to ruin soon or at least publicly humiliate. I saw her at the movie theater, I was with my brother and sister. I never really refer to him as a cousin. Anyway, Gigi was in Sissy’s class, so I knew her beforehand. She looked very uncomfortable so I went over to her before we sat down and I said hi. Jerkface told me to leave his date alone. I reminded him that I can talk to whomever I want. I looked back over at Gigi and she looked scared to be sitting next to him, then I looked at the two of them again, she was sitting very stiff and he was leaning towards her, he had one hand around her shoulder and the other hand was making its way up her skirt already even with me there. Yeah, I see by the look in your eye you would’ve punched him too. But no, I didn’t do that. I simply extended my hand to hers and held on tenderly and tugged her gently to stand up and told her to join us, we had better seats already saved. She came with me especially when she saw Sissy waving to her. That was the night I called my Mom to pick us up because someone had slashed all our tires. Wonder who did that? I told my mom not to report it to police and that I would buy her new tires because we didn’t have enough to pay for a lawyer to take care of a lawsuit.” He says waiting for his friend to remember.

“Ah, painting the Wilk’s house, we made good money on that one. You bought the tires, I used mine for paying for classes to help study for the college entrance exam. Which you too benefited from if I’m not mistaken.” He smiles remembering how Mikey used to study with him the whole summer. “By then we were only 15 ½ but still we wanted to get a good leg up on all things educational. We took the exam early and stopped when we did well enough to get to where we wanted. We were done while all of our classmates were suffering through taking it for the first time.”

“I didn’t want to use up my whole college fund on tuition, I knew books would be needed and I’d need to get a car or travel by bus to wherever I was going. My mom was real proud of how much scholarship I earned. I think it helped steer my brother and sister on the right path too. The college fund was nice but didn’t cover all of it, hence my need to get scholarship.

Anyway, Yana and Fern were in almost all of our freshman classes and some of our sophomore classes too that first semester, remember? People didn’t like them, they teased them all the time about how they had smelly clothes or how they must have rats in their hair which is why they wore hats all the time. They were from the west side of town Samuel, remember that? Of course, you do, sorry. They were bused into our part of town because they won some sort of lottery to be privileged enough to come to our school district. Dumb, yeah, I know. But it is what it is.

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Once I saw they were in our science lab class I immediately made them sit with us. I figured that they would be the best lab partners because, unlike most kids in our school, they actually wanted to learn and make the best of their education. We had a great time with them as I remember. No back story there, but we proved everyone wrong when we aced all the labs and the exams. Then you pushed Yana to try out for a vocal part in the upcoming musical. Once people saw her as a real person, they began making friends but the two of them always stayed with us because we were friends with them before anyone else. The girls told me one day after school that the reason their clothes sometimes smell is because of the bus they are on. Plus, they were on the bus for over an hour each way, so the smells permeated their clothes. I explained this to my mom and she told me to have them bring a week's worth of clothes over and wash it at our house, then they left it by me and when the bus dropped them off, they ran to my house to change each day. That's why you saw them at my place so early in the morning sometimes. They used to claim it was to come and wake me up, remember that?" He smiles.

"As I see things, life always gave us challenges, we have choices to make, to conquer the challenge if necessary or work with it to make things come out properly. Momma always taught me to find a way to make a challenge productive." Mic says.

"Like Graham, we weren't really friends with him. He hung out with the worst of the worst but not because he couldn't make friends, but because his brother was one of that group and he couldn't walk away from them saying he was better than his older brother, especially if he didn't want to get beaten up each day at home. I get that Mic, he became a closet genius. You and I knew he could do it all and some of the teachers began to know as well. But then life changed for him didn't it?" Samuel asks.

"Life changed for all of us that day, if you remember right. Brush fire, all through the row of connected houses. Graham's mom died that day of smoke inhalation and his grandmother became their guardian. His brother, already a derelict, decided to drop out of school and become the bum his father taught him how to be. They were two guys bumming food and cigarettes off of anyone who would give it to them. Enjoyed each other's company. Weird, Momma and I never understood that. Sissy used to think it was a waste, we talked about it a lot at home.

His grandma had other plans, being it was his mother's mother, she kicked the two bums out and then she turned all her attention on Graham. When I say all, I mean all. She was so strict with him, he was bursting for air by the time he got to school, all that energy had to go somewhere." Mic says.

"The big fight, it was the talk of the school for weeks. How big Graham was beaten down by Mic the prick. It had to have been awful for him, but even through all of that he became our friend when no one was looking. What happened during that fight Mic?" Samuel asks.

"If you think back, we were all in gym class, running our usual laps around the field when I saw that he purposely tripped someone. I went over to help the person up, brushed him off and was on my way, the next thing I knew he was on my back yelling at me that I should not have interfered, that he was supposed to get into a fight today, that he needed to. These words were said under his grinding teeth. I had looked at him and said he should take up boxing classes or tai kwon

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do and proceeded to throw him over my shoulder to the ground, he lay on his back a moment or two before the teacher came running over, hearing all the screaming about a fight.

The kid who was knocked down told the teacher that Graham and tripped him on purpose and that Mic the prick is the one who pulled him off and wrestled him to the ground. The teacher grabbed both of us off of the ground and we followed him all the way back to the locker-room where he proceeded to yell at us until Graham looked up at him and pleaded, 'please, can you give me detention so I don't have to go home today.' The teacher stopped yelling and looked at poor Graham, then he remembered who he was.

He apologized and told him, he can stay late any time he needs to get his work done, that he personally stays late for after school sports anyway. His grandmother thought he was becoming a delinquent and called the school to find a solution.

He couldn't get away from her hold on him. The gym teacher worked around the system. He told Graham's grandmother that if she would prefer to go back to her life as before, a life without responsibility, he would be happy to take Graham in as a foster child and look after him until he graduates high school. That he would make things work so she didn't have to be so burdened.

Graham's grandmother looked at him and asked Graham if he would be good with that solution. I heard all of this because Graham had asked me to stick around for this meeting. I was on the other side of the door. We know he took him in, but the part I learned later from Graham was that his grandmother asked that the foster care money be sent to her. Coach agreed. He felt it was better to be without the money than for Graham to be without an education or family.

Everything was a challenge in school. All I ever saw was challenge. If not for myself then for others, we couldn't walk away from any of it. You and I both always stood up when we saw something go wrong. Back to now? One fateful day, a challenge was accepted. As so many others would be throughout high school. I decided the next day that I was going to make him pay because this wasn't his first infraction. Something told me he was never going to grow out of his personality, and judging by who he is today, I was right." Mic finally pauses and the two friends sit in silence.

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Samual spends his night calling everyone, Gigi, Fern, Yana, Graham and even Sissy. He cried with them apologizing for not realizing how hard things were for them. He apologized for always speaking of how much money the two friends were earning and bragging what he was saving for. He felt as if he had been playing the ignorant fool throughout high school.

Gigi, the last one to be called, listens to all that Samual is saying. "Samual, there is no guilt, we were all teens at the same time. Trying to figure life out. None of us were going to escape some sort of teenage torture. Even you, you had that same jerk picking on you throughout high school simply because you and Mic were friends. How many times did he push you around? How many times did he brag about having sex with your sister when we, her real friends, all knew she was gay. We knew and we didn't care, still don't, which is why we are still in touch. I met her partner by the way, she is fabulous. So, why are you really calling?" she asks.

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“I told you already. Gigi, I’m not kidding. I was a jerk to the top of the charts.” Samual says.

“No, Samual, you have it all wrong. You and Mic, you were the only ones us girls liked. Your class, my class and the class in between. Wow, you had a reputation with the girls that said you could be trusted. Do you know what that means to a pre-teen? What that means to a full-blown teen? Everything. You made girls feel safe. Both of you. If you were at a sporting event at school and there were girls around you it was because they trusted you to be there and enjoy the game as much as they wanted to and not to have your hands all over them. Trust, safety, that is what you gave everyone, not the bragging. No one even remembers that about you at all. Then when we were all applying to college and found out you two were staying local? Well, us girls needed to stay too when it was our turn two years later, who wouldn’t want to go to school with the two guys who could protect us from the evils of the world? Samual, Snicker, whomever you want to be now, you guys were heroes to us. Don’t you get that?” Gigi pleads.

“Wow Gigi, that’s a big shoe to fill. Have you ever told Mic this?” he asks.

“I did once and he laughed at me, then when he saw I was serious he leaned down and gave me a kiss to tell me it was his pleasure. You guys taught us what a real man is. Despite all of our crazy lives as teens, we’ve remained friends because it was easy to do and we love you guys.” Gigi says.

“Even Yana? I didn’t get that vibe from her tonight.” He says.

“You called her too? Did you call Fern too?” she asks.

“And Graham. I saved my best girl for last.” Samual says smiling to himself. If only he could tell her the truth, that in his heart she really is his girl.

“Damn right I’m the best.” She jokes back. “Listen Samual. Yana is having a hard time with this pregnancy, she and her husband are going to another doctor tomorrow, one who specializes in high risk. She is afraid of losing this one too. If she sounded down, that is why. But telling her you love her and will always be there for her, couldn’t have come at a better time. On a lighter note, are you and Mic going to fly out for Fern’s wedding? I can’t believe there are only three weeks left.” She says happily.

“Mic and I actually found a potential client out there we are going to meet, how cool is that? We get to attend the wedding and write it off as business expense at the same time. Did you book your flight yet? If not, I can make sure you’re on ours. Graham can’t go; his wife is due the following day. He told me that Fern is through the moon to share the day with a baby. What am I saying, of course you’ll come with us, I’ll make the arrangements now.” Samual says as he begins to click around on his computer.

Gigi listens for a moment. She is doing ok at her job, not great but her head is above water. She told Fern yesterday she can’t come because her purse strings are being pulled in too many directions. Fern understood and told her they were coming out this way soon to visit everyone anyway in a couple of months. Tears begin to fall down her cheeks as she hears Samual typing away. Oh, this man has made her heart spin since high school. But how can she tell him and not lose the friendship?

“Sam, please. That’s not necessary.” Her words barely coming out.

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“Gigi, who will I dance with if you’re not there? I can’t dance with Fern and Yana won’t be there or Graham’s wife. Believe me I don’t want to be the one stuck with dancing with Fern’s mom or sister again like the last wedding.” He jokes again, he hears her voice and knows she doesn’t want to accept charity, but he is being very selfish here. He wants her there in the worst way. He will have to get some pointers from Mic as to how to talk to the woman of your dreams and make it a reality, finally.

“Well, if you’re going to put it that way, then of course I’ll have to suffer and travel with you two dumb dumbs. I’ll sleep by Fern’s sister, no need for a hotel room. Besides, you have your business to take care of.” Gigi says.

“I’ll take care of everything, you bring your smile and dance shoes.” He says

“Is that all? It can be cold up there this time of year.” Gigi finds herself flirting with Samual for the first time. Actual flirting, not trying to be funny.

Samual feels his cheeks turn red with blush, the thought of her with only a smile and shoes on has his heart racing quickly right now. Maybe because it is very late, or maybe because it is Gigi, he will have to ask Mic in the morning.

“I heard the color of the wedding is blue, so you can wear that fantastic blue dress you wore at Graham’s big gala last year.” He chokes out his words.

“But you’ve seen me in that one already if you are remembering it.” Gigi flirts.

“Yes, and I’d like to see it again. On you.” He says in a more serious tone.

“Pearls or gold necklace?” Gigi asks trying to extend the conversation.

“I think maybe I’ll bring you something to compliment it, what shoes will you be wearing?” he asks shyly.

“Hmm, I need good dancing shoes and they have to match that dress. But I don’t want to fall or step on anyone’s toes, that can hurt with heels. I know, I’ve been stepped on by heels before. Ok, decision made, I’ll wear my silver flats. Do I need to bring something special for the morning after breakfast?” she asks.

“I’m going to pack simple clothes, a button-down shirt and a pair of casual pants. Not jeans though. We are leaving the night before and staying for three days afterwards, let me know how long you can stay.” He says.

Gigi thinks for a moment; how much should she tell him? “Gigi, can you take that many days off or should I send you back earlier.” He waits again for an answer. What did Mic tell him recently about Gigi? Think quick Samual you idiot, he tells himself. Oh no, Gigi hasn’t been at this new job for very long and here he is asking her to take time off.

“G?” he asks softly.

“I’m here. I have to go now Sam.” She says wanting to steal away from this conversation now.

“G? Are you home now?” he asks.

“Yeah, why?” she says softly.

Sam takes a deep breath, “You sound kind of sad all of a sudden, I’m wondering if maybe you need a hug and maybe if I can be the one to provide that for you?” he asks softly. Maybe tonight he will tell her the truth.



Gigi thinks about what he said, about what they’ve said for the past few minutes, “I think I’d like that Sam.” She says finally.

“I’m in my pajamas, give me five minutes to change. I’ll be there in about 20 minutes I suppose.” He says.

“Drive carefully please.” She says softly but she means every word.

Samual calls Mic and explains the conversation he had only moments ago. “I’m out of line, aren’t I? I mean Gigi is our old friend, why am I trying to intervene?” he asks nervously as he dresses.

“Snicker, you’ve been attracted to her for years, if she didn’t want you to come, she would have told you so. Think of this as a new kind of challenge.” He laughs.

“From you? Challenge accepted.” He laughs as he gets into his car and heads over to Gigi.
~ ~ ~

Gigi finds herself pacing her apartment. Sam is coming here to make her feel better. She is not sure she can handle that. She has been very cautious about who she lets touch her all these years. She has made mistakes in the past and it has cost her dearly. Gigi walks over to her second bedroom and closes the door quietly. She waits by the couch for Sam to come.

The knock clearly shakes her, she checks herself in the mirror and walks to her front door, she looks through the peep hole to see Samual standing there smiling. She slowly opens the door. “Evening” he says softly.

“Would you like to come in?” she asks.

Sam nods and follows her into her home. He closes the door behind him and watches as she walks into her living room. She is walking carefully, there is something Mic doesn’t know or at least didn’t tell him about, his nerves are on high alert now. “G?” he asks again softly. ‘Please let it be the same nerves his has’ he thinks to himself and not an insurmountable problem.

“Come sit down.” She shows him her couch but she sits in the chair across from him.

“Gigi, today has been a full day of revelations for me, as I told you before. I heard things I never knew, I felt things I wasn’t ready to feel, like hearing about Yana, my heart hurt G, it actually hurt when you told me. They will be the best parents, so loving, so encouraging. Look at me, must be the time of night, I’m teary eyed again.

Change of subject, do you know why Mic took on this beard challenge so seriously? I’ve been trying to get him to tell me but all he told me was about everyone else’s challenges, well and a few of his own but not a real reason to take on such a ridiculous thing. A twenty-year challenge? Who does that?” He says trying to smile now.

Gigi looks over at Samual, if Mic didn’t tell him the truth, should she? It will break a very large trust between them. It was a night of one of her bad decisions and Mic suffered the most from it, the beard is as much for her as it is to prove to someone that he has the ability to stick to a promise. Unfortunately, that same person, knows the reason Mic has the beard as well. Well, he used to, who knows if he remembers now.

Gigi takes a couple of deep breaths. Samual’s head jerks to behind him, he must have heard what she heard, but how could he? It was soft and the door is closed. “Did I come at a bad time? I can leave, how about I give you that hug and then we can talk when we are both more



awake.” He says making an assumption that the noise he heard came from a man in the other room. But why would she have him come? Trouble, there must be trouble he thinks to himself. He tries to prepare himself mentally for what he might hear.

Gigi’s eyes begin to tear before she wants them to. Samuel doesn’t know which place to run to first, he decides to start with Gigi, he runs to her and holds her. She lets him. In fact, she hugs him back very tightly, Samuel pulls her up to standing next to him. He holds on to Gigi and lets her cry softly into his chest. His heart hurt before, but now he feels his heart actually breaking. Is that possible? To have your heart physically break?

After a moment or two, Gigi calms herself down and begins to sit, Samuel helps her sit down and he sits on the floor in front of her, giving her some space. He puts one hand on her knee, “You want to talk today? Or should I go now?”

Gigi feels the heat coming from his hand on her knee, a better friend she couldn’t ask for. Her whole group of friends have been wonderful, ever since they were kids. Safety, as she told him before. She feels safe around him but she also feels her heartbeat increase every time she is alone with Samuel.

The noise from the other room is louder now. Without thinking she begins to talk, “My mom is sick Samuel. She lives here with me now. Her insurance only pays for someone to come in for eight hours a day, in other words, while I’m at work. Before and after that, it is all on me. I need to find babysitters for her every time I leave the house.” Her hands cover her mouth quickly suddenly realizing what she said.

Without missing a beat, Samuel says, “I’ll call my sister, she is the best at this that I know of. She works for a company that sends out 24-hour help to people. This is what she does for a living, would you trust her here with your mom while we go to the Fern’s wedding for a couple of days?” he asks.

Gigi’s tears come once again. “Sam, I’m so afraid.” She says.

“Afraid to leave? Or afraid something will happen while you’re gone? Is it an illness she can get better from? Talk to me G. I’m here for you. I’m always here for you. You’re my best girl.” He says softly. Forever, he thinks to himself.

Gigi stares down at the floor next to Sam, she faces him and takes a deep breath. “End stage cancer. About two to three months now.”

“When did she move in Gigi? Why didn’t you tell any of us?” he is thinking of all of the extra money she must be spending that she doesn’t have. Plus, she started a new job which means she doesn’t have any insurance of her own right now. He wants to take care of her, take care of all of her, always. But now is not the time or place.

He pulls her chin up with a finger so she is now looking him right in the eye. “I’m going to help and you’re only going to say thank you.” He says.

“I went to college, I have a degree.” She whispers.

“Yes, you do, but you’ve had a hard time finding a position worthy of such a wonderful person. I, on the other hand, have enough to share with you and am willing to do so for as long as you need. We’ve been out of college a long time and you’re not the only one struggling. Think of all the others from your graduating class. You’re not alone, not now, not then, not ever G. Not

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ever.” He repeats softly. Then he thinks about something in the past and asks another type of question, “How long ago did she really move in? Before the illness, I mean.” He asks looking her in the eye.

Damn, she should have known he would figure out the part she left out. She bows her head, truth, it’s the only way. “How long have I lived here Sam?” she asks him.

“Let me think.” Sam processes all that is before him. He knows exactly when Gigi moved in, he was there that day. “Six years and four months ago.” He smiles at her.

“Wow, yeah, well, minus the four months and you have your answer. I never have anyone over here. Didn’t anyone think that was suspicious? You never ask. No one asks. It’s one of the reasons I love you all.” She says choking back tears again.

“I’m sure we’ve asked over the years but you probably gave us an answer we accepted. Besides, Mikey and I live in very large apartments, we never mind having everyone over and Graham does now too.” The noise comes again. Suddenly, Samuel remembers that noise. Gigi’s mother used to use that noise when she faked having a headache so everyone would leave the house. What could she possibly want from Gigi? Money? Care? A place and person to sponge off of who won’t question her? Aw this is going to suck but Samuel has to find out the truth. He has to dig further.

He looks over to the door again, that must be it. Gigi cares, and who would want to work for your food and housing when your daughter is finally making enough to live in a decent apartment. “Gigi, when did the illness start?” he asks cautiously, he doesn’t want her to catch on that he suspects something is not right. And by something he means he thinks her own mother is taking advantage of her, that she isn’t really sick at all, but knows she can prey on Gigi’s sympathies.

“Let me think. I think it was shortly after she went to the doctor around the time we all came back from that big camping trip where Graham proposed to his wife.” She smiles thinking how adorable that proposal was.

“Ok, so that would be three and half years ago, since they’ve been married for three years. Would you mind telling me how she went from one doctor visit to living with you?” he asks cautiously again.

Gigi takes a deep breath again and looks at Samuel, he is thinking too hard. She knows what that means, it means she is not seeing something that is right in front of her eyes. Not wanting to feel foolish, she says, “Sam, you and I’ve been friends too long to start this. But it is late, and we probably shouldn’t talk here. Although, I will tell you one thing.” She smiles a flirting smile and reaches over to hold his hand.

Samuel covers her hand with his other hand, he stares into her eyes. “Ok. I’m ready, tell me anything you want.”

“The beard, it is kind of my fault.” You can do this, she tells herself. “Do you remember when Wane left school for a while? A whole semester in fact.”

“Yes, it was spring semester of sophomore year. Why?” he asks.

~ ~ ~



Mikey sits in his apartment with his morning cup of freshly squeezed orange juice and his eggs. Before he gets the first bite into his mouth his door bursts open and Samuel screams, “What the hell is wrong with you?!! We were best friends then, we talked about everything!!! How dare you keep such a dark secret from me!! This, this, I don’t even know what to say.” He pauses a moment, “This involves GIGI!!!” he yells with his hands in the air.

Mikey stares at his friend. It is clear that Gigi must have told him about why he grew the beard in the first place. The part that worries him the most is that if Gigi told him the one thing she swore Mikey to secrecy about for life, she must be covering up something more serious and that hurts him more. Mikey stands and walks to his friend, he pulls him into what he feels is a much needed hug. He holds on tightly until he feels Samuel relax a bit in his arms. Mikey knows that Samuel loves Gigi with all his heart, it must have been really hard to hear.

“Come sit down. Tell me what she told you and I’ll tell you why you never knew and what concerns me more now.” Mikey walks his friend over to couch.

Samuel sits down and explains all he knows then he looks up at Mikey, scared about what he might hear. “She gave you the censored version, now if you promise to control yourself, I’ll tell you the rest. I don’t want you to end up in jail any more than I wanted to be there myself when this all happened.”

“Thank you for letting me vent. I couldn’t do anything last night, I sat there holding her hands and cried with her. I cried in front of her and she held me tighter as I did. I wanted to kiss her so badly but that would have been the worst thing to do. I sat with her and held her for about an hour before I left. When I saw she was falling asleep, I carried her to her bed and laid her down. I kissed her hand and before I left she turned over and waved at me. It was 2:00 in the morning. And yes, she is working today but she doesn’t have to go in until noon she claims.” Samuel sighs.

“You calm?” Mikey looks to his friend who nods.

“If you recall, the hallway near they gym was right in between the girls’ and boys’ locker rooms. After a particular hard workout with Coach Jim, I was heading down to the locker room. It was during those couple of months that I was debating on whether or not I wanted to run for the track team. Stop laughing, I can run.” He smirks at his friend.

“You can run, physically everyone can.” He laughs.

“Listen Snickers, this was a serious consideration at the time. This was during the time you were busy with your karate classes, so I was looking for something to do after school too. But that is not what we are here to talk about. During that same time, Gigi was working on her dance routines with the girls in the musical the drama department, she and Sissy were both part of the group from eighth grade who were allowed to be part of the high school Spring production. I heard screaming down the hall and what I saw was Gigi with her shirt ripped off already and our wonderful classmate in the process of trying for more clothes. He was telling her how he had to teach her a lesson about embarrassing him in a public theater. I ripped off my sweatshirt and threw it on Gigi, pulled him off of her and slammed a fist into his face.

I was waiting for him to get off the floor when Coach Jim came running in. Screaming at us to halt. I stood there watching him on the floor. When Coach got to us he pulled him off of the

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floor and asked Gigi if she was hurt. She told him she didn't think so. He told her to please go get dressed and meet him in his office. Oh, I forgot to mention that while he was still on the floor he said to the two of us that we are going to get into a lot of trouble because as soon as his father hears about what we did to him, meaning she and I, twice, that he was going to make sure both of our fathers got fired from their jobs.

Thankfully, he didn't know Gigi well enough to know there was no father in the equation. Ok, I know, missing the point. Oh yeah, I forgot one more thing, while I was looking at him on the floor he got a lucky shot with his booted foot to my chin, it was bleeding a lot by the time Coach got there.

In the coach's office, he gave me something to put pressure on my chin with and ice pack on top. He made two phone calls to have people come to his office. Gigi had walked in wearing my sweatshirt still. We sat there and waited quietly. She would barely look at me, you know she doesn't do blood." Mikey looks at his friend who he sees is now thinking about something and not the story he is telling him.

Damn, damn, damn. Her mom knows that too, that is why Gigi has never been to the doctor's office, why her cheating piece of crap mother can pull this off. She knows Gigi won't go to doctors for fear of seeing blood. Samuel hits the arm of the couch hard. "Not this, we'll talk after, finish the story."

"If you're sure." Mikey pauses.

"Yeah. Going to be a long day, can I have some juice?" Samuel slumps back into his seat. Mikey brings him some juice and sits on the couch with his friend. "After about 20 minutes, both the principal and Wane's father walked in."

"His father? How did Coach get him so quickly? That man is one of the busiest people in this state." He informs Mikey. "Still is."

"Coach has a way with words I suppose. He was not happy when he walked in, he began yelling about how important he is and why he has no time for this nonsense of teenager angst. Then Coach did something that surprised us all. He turned off the lights and turned on his computer, he hit play and showed us what we all just went through. He did not apologize, he also said that there are signs that say the hallway is monitored by video so it shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone that he has proof without words of consent to being taped. It is completely legal, if people choose not to see the clearly placed signs that is their own doing.

Wane's father looked at his son as if he was ready to beat the sarcasm out of him. He turned to the principal then back to Gigi. He looked right at her and asked if she wanted to call the police. She said no, that she wasn't hurt. He looked at both of us and said not to worry, he has no control over getting anyone fired and he would never do such a thing for the actions of his son. He looked at the principal again and told him his son is going to have to go away for a while to learn how to behave with women and with peers. The man looked beaten, he really did. He had a great reputation for being fair in business, something his son didn't learn even in his adulthood. Sorry, side conversation again.

Listen, that's the whole story." Mikey sits back and looks at his friend. He is very quiet, almost too quiet, "Snicker?" he asks slowly.

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Samual rubs the back of his neck and shakes his head, “So a couple months later Gigi realized your scar wasn’t going away she asked you to cover it up, because seeing it reminded her of what happened all the time. Then while we were in biology class, a semester later, he began teasing you about having a beard, clearly not learning much wherever he was sent. I remember him telling you how having a beard covers up your ugly face. Then he said ‘bet you won’t have it 20 years from now, hell you won’t even have it 20 days from now.’ And you answered him by telling him to write it down, write down the whole challenge. Being the confident idiot that he was, well probably still is, he wrote it down by also telling you that he would give you whatever house he was living in if you still had the beard on in 20 years. He wrote the date and time and signed it. Then his two friends signed it and what did you do with it?” Samual answered his friend.

“Yeah, he signed it, his friends signed it and I signed it, but you wouldn’t because you said it was dumb. After that was done, I took the paper to my uncle, the one who is a lawyer, and he said it was as legal a document as they come. So, he filed it in a file with my name on it, he still has it. In fact, every first of the month, I take a picture in his office of my beard. I don’t plan on cutting all of this off afterwards, but I don’t think it needs to be this crazy long, do you?” Mikey asks smiling, but Samual is no longer smiling, he is no longer sad about hearing about Gigi, no his friend is contemplating a new problem, Mikey knows that for sure.

~ ~ ~

Gigi sits at work and starts to think about her life. When Samual left the other day, he had a heavy heart, but part of her feels good knowing that he knows the truth now, knowing that he still loves her, that even after hearing that, he still tried flirting with me. “Oh Samual, I need you in my life.” She whispers out loud.

Gigi’s personal phone rings, without looking she answers, “Hello?”

“Hello? Is that how you answer the phone to your dying mother?” her mother says angrily.

“Glad to see you’re feeling better today. Most energy you’ve had in a long time.” Gigi answers equally angry.

“I need to go shopping, when will you be home? I need real food, none of this vegetable garbage you keep here. Doctor says I need real food like beef steaks or fish steaks. Maybe even a glass of fine wine too.” She interjects.

On a whim, Gigi asks, “Hey Mom, why don’t you give me your doctor’s number. I’d like to talk to him or his nutritionist about these kinds of food for you. No one else I know who has been through cancer has ever been told to only eat high quality, very expensive food and to only sleep in silk pajamas. Maybe I will stay with you for your appointment this week.”

“I don’t need a babysitter at the doctor Gigi, never mind, I’ll call my friend to bring me food.” She hangs up quickly.

Gigi calls Mikey and Samual on a conference call. “Hey girlfriend, what’s going on?” Mikey says first.

“Samual, you’re right. Something doesn’t add up here.” She says feeling defeated and mostly feeling foolish.

“I never said something was off.” He says quickly.

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“You didn’t have to. I can read every line on your face. I’ve known you too long. I know when you’re thinking, I know when you’re happy, I even know when you’re thinking about me verses anyone else in the room.” She says softly.

“If you’re so clairvoyant, what am I thinking now?” he asks.

“I don’t think I can say that with Mikey on the phone.” She flirts.

Mikey laughs, “Ok you two, Gigi, what’s this about?”

Gigi explains that it wasn’t until Samual came over that she realized things aren’t good with her mom and she isn’t talking about the cancer. She tells them how she moved into her apartment only months after Gigi did herself. She came looking very sickly. Throwing up a lot, looking as if she has already lost a lot of weight since the last time she saw her. But Gigi had assumed she had a flu.

“She recovered from that, never once telling me when she was leaving. I thought she came because its hard to be sick when you’re alone. But then a couple weeks later she told me that she had no intention of leaving, that there is a spare bedroom in my place and this way we both don’t have to pay rent.

But then I noticed she never left, but I was starting that new job, it was a good opportunity and I wanted to make sure I worked my ass off to make sure I keep the job. I called you almost daily Sam, remember?”

“Yeah, we worked out all of what you did each day and talked about how you can do more. You were there for a few years, but then they let you go last year out of nowhere.” Samual says.

“Not out of nowhere, I kept getting called out by my sick mother.” She says with sarcasm. “Take me to this appointment, needing new clothes for her smaller body, hair appointments to make sure she doesn’t lose all of her hair at once. Gym appointments so she can keep up her strength. No, she didn’t bring her car with her. Boys, I think I’ve been scanned by my own mother for years. Just how stupid am I?” She says with a sigh.

“Ok, I have the best idea. In a couple of weeks, we are all going to Fern’s wedding. We will be gone for three days, only two of which are work days. Since we are going at night, we will have my sister come to your place with her dog, she always goes with her dog, he is a service dog for her patients. Anyway, she will be there to take care of her. Your mom can’t fake illness in front of her, or the dog for that matter, she will go in asking for her medicine schedule, check all the so-called pills she takes. You name it, she will take care of it. Especially the bills, she loves to help patients go through their bills so she can help them with payments and insurance.” Samual says.

“Guys.” Gigi begins to cry.

“We’ll be there in ten minutes, take your lunch break, we’ll meet you at your car.” Mikey says.

“Ok.” She whispers because that is all she can do now.

Samual gets in his car and calls his sister, “That sucks. Oh my, she is faking cancer for three years? I hate people like this but Samual, you have to understand one thing. It is possible, you can fight it for a long time sometimes.”

“Gigi doesn’t even know the doctor’s name. She brings her mom to a non-descript building on the corner of Winston and Brick once a week.” Samual says.

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“I know that building, there are no doctors in that building. It is filled with offices of lawyers, accountants and engineers. The nearest doctor’s office is about four blocks from there. Oh Sam, I’m sorry, I know we’re talking about Gigi so that must hurt you most of all.” She tells her brother as an apology. Then continues, “I don’t mind coming, but let’s do this right. Usually, I go to meet the patient first, walk around the home, check out her accommodations to make sure everything is good, then I can tell her I will be back the day that Gigi leaves for the wedding.” She says.

“Ok, send that text to Gigi now, we’re headed over to pick her up, she took the bus today, her car is in the shop again. Which means she is probably waiting outside for us with no car to hide in, and she is upset at the revelation. We’ll call you later.” Samuel says getting angrier and angrier.

“Ok.” His sister hangs up and begins to think of her brother’s love for Gigi, she hopes he can finally make things work between them. Having found love herself, she knows its value. Samuel calls Mikey and tells her about his conversation with his sister. “Remember when she used to moan and claim she had headaches?” Mikey asks. Samuel tells him how he heard that same moan when he was recently there.

“I don’t get it, who has Gigi been paying then? Her mom keeps handing her all of the bills saying it is what is leftover from medical bills. But she hasn’t been working, has she? Does she have some kind of job that we don’t know about? Is she making money only to not use it? I’m not getting this.” Mikey says.

“I am. Gigi is the only girl, she has three older brothers, they graduated high school and never came home. Gigi, like us, went to a local school. Actually, she went locally because of us but that is not today’s story. The boys never enjoyed being around their mother, I never asked why. I think they had their own form of abuse from her, but this emotional abuse she is giving Gigi is simply cruel. Why prey on a woman in her 30s. She isn’t a child any more. You would think that getting fired from the last job would have made this all stop.” he says.

“One other thought, we all know that Gigi’s mom always talked about money. Her ex didn’t send much support, but the boys seemed to have found him and reconciled. Gigi never has, mostly because she never left the area really. But that aside. I wonder if her mom is using Gigi’s money to pay her own debts, bills coming from collectors can easily look like medical payments. They usually aren’t too specific and Gigi doesn’t like to study paperwork, she’d rather pay the bills and have good credit. I’ll head over to her place, you pick her up. I’ll see you soon.” Mikey says. He wants to catch Gigi’s mom off guard. “Steak? What doctor requires that?”

Mikey gets to the apartment in a few minutes, he knows he has at least ten minutes before the others get here. He is going to use his key and let himself in, claiming he assumed she was at work. Before he puts the key into the door he hears some noise, is that a radio? He asks himself. No, that isn’t a radio, it sounds like someone singing, live.

He quickly puts his key in and opens the door with his phone camera ready to be used. He sees something he was not prepared to see. Gigi’s mother is sitting on the couch clapping to the man in front of her who is singing. They haven’t noticed him, yet, his phone is still recording. About 30 seconds later he turns off his phone and yells, “What the hell is going on here?” Gigi’s mom looks at him in shock. “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do!” he yells again.

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"I don't have to explain my actions to the likes of you." She stands and takes her friend into her bedroom.

Mikey sends his recording to Samuel. He sits down on the couch and waits for them. At the next light, Samuel plays the video Mikey sent him. Gigi sits quiet, she grabs onto Samuel's arm. "That is her physical therapist that comes over once a week. Oh Sam, I *am* a fool, I'm bigger than a fool, aren't I? I should have listened to my brothers, they told me to kick her out shortly after she moved in. That is the last time I spoke to any of them though, they've never called back, never checked in." she sits back in her seat.

Samuel doesn't say anything until they get to her apartment. "Ready?"

"Yeah, let's walk in and make lunch for each other, pretend none of this happened. Your sister said she is coming tonight anyway, right?" Gigi says.

They walk in to see Mikey sitting on the couch looking quite angry. "Come in the kitchen Mic, let's make lunch. I'm in the mood for some grilled chicken and a simple salad." Gigi says. Mikey looks at her, if she can do this, he will too.

"I'll start the chicken, can you go get your bills for this month, I want to go over a payment schedule with you." He says in his best big brother voice.

"Ok, I have them in one place. She walks over to her desk to pull out a stack of paper." Gigi looks down at them again. She has marked each payment she has made along with a date. Everything is recorded on a sheet of paper on the inside of the folder.

When she gets back to the kitchen, she and Samuel begin to make lunch and Mikey looks through the paperwork. He takes pictures of each one. He will call on them back at his office. In total there is \$25,000. So far Gigi has paid \$9,000 according the sheet on the folder. That amount of money, plus her car payments, rent, phone, allowance she gives her mom, no wonder Gigi doesn't have much left over he thinks to himself.

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Mikey has spent the past week looking through and making calls on all of the bills Gigi had given him when they were at her apartment. That day is a nightmare in his life. Since then her mom has poured on the guilt telling Gigi she was entitled to have a day of fun instead of all the pain.

Gigi hasn't spoken to Mikey at all since then, she is even avoiding calls from Samuel. Tonight, the two of them plan on surprising her right after work. Mikey has a lot to point out to Gigi, they are also bringing a lawyer with them. Out of the 12 bills he was given, only one of them was a medical bill. That had nothing to do with cancer either, it was when she went in to the emergency room for a sprained ankle, four years ago. The original bill was so old, her mom hadn't even moved in yet. The lawyer took the bills over for Mikey and they met last night, it was a real eye opener and he is angrier than ever. Not only has this woman given Gigi old bills to pay, she continues to mount them on her. Mikey realized that the \$25,000 that he saw was only the recent group of bills. Gigi has paid over \$50,000 in old bills for her mother in the past three years alone.

The lawyer had checked into her mother's social security number and saw that her credit rating is one of the worst he has ever seen. He contacted the collection agencies and found the real

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numbers of how much she owes in total. She only hands Gigi one bill at a time, and with her big heart, Gigi keeps finding a way to pay them off. The level of debt is more than Gigi makes in five years at her current salary. The lawyer also found three aliases her mom has been using. The worst part, the one that made Mikey want to call the police is that she finally stooped so low as to use her daughter’s social security number to get a new credit card only a month ago. It is already maxed out and with Gigi having a good credit rating, she was given \$8000 to spend and she did. But where is it? Where are all of these belongings?

The lawyer wouldn’t tell him, he said he will discuss this all tonight. Mikey calls his friend.

“Samual, I’m so angry right now, there is no way I can go tonight. I want to go over to her apartment and scream at that bitch.”

“This is so messed up. I know you told me not to, but I called her brothers to tell them about tonight’s meeting. I yelled at them and told them it was time for them to step up and save their sister from financial disaster. I told them that it was nice of them to run the other way, to tell her once that she should kick her mother out but never follow up on whether it was done and leave her to clean up their mother’s mess. I even told them that if they don’t show up I’m going to have the lawyer check into their finances too to make sure they aren’t doing the same thing to Gigi. That shut them up right away. They are all married now, we know that, but even in their busy lives they promised to be here. They only live two hours away. Two hours away and they never thought to check on their only sister. We’re meeting at the steakhouse now, private room, her oldest brother arranged this and called me this afternoon. He also told me he called his uncle, mom’s brother, to show up too. I think there is some bad blood there because of money as well.” Samual sits back and sighs. Samual is going to fix this if it is the last challenge he ever takes on.

“Snicker, you’ve been my best man my whole life, at this point, you now know everything there is to know. You know my thoughts, you know my dreams. Tell me why do I want to do something so evil? I mean I really want to hurt her physically.” Mikey asks.

“Well, I have a feeling you’d have a lot of help with that. I just got another text from her oldest brother that they’ve hired a private detective to investigate her financials as well as social activities for the past three years. Making sure she isn’t dipping into their lives as well I suppose. Seems once I opened their eyes they admitted to running from the suspicions they’ve had for a long time. I’ll be right down, I’m assuming you’re close.” He says.

“Just pulled into your parking garage. But Samual, Gigi’s car isn’t at the garage getting fixed, she sold it to him to pay one of the bills that had a particularly aggressive collector. That woman owes her a new car, or maybe we make sure the brothers buy her one. They owe her at least that if not more.” Mikey says. “It’s not as if her mother will ever pay her back.”

Samual gets into Mikey’s car and they head over to pick up Gigi. “Hey G. Guess which two handsome men came to take our best girl to dinner?” Samual says on the phone.

“Hmmm, can’t handle me on your own yet, eh Sam?” she flirts.

“Guess not.” He says with a shaking voice.

“Ok, I’m finishing up here, shutting down my computer. I’ll be down in a few.” She says smiling. Gigi hasn’t called her friends recently because she has been trying to figure out her life.

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Her mom handed her four more bills yesterday claiming they are all old medical bills and that the doctor won’t continue to treat her if she doesn’t pay.

Gigi had a big fight with her mom last night, telling her she would like to go to the next meeting with the doctor to get a full picture of what is going on. She now believes that her mom is taking diet pills to make herself look too thin and sick. But she can’t find anything in her apartment, so where can all of this be?

She gathers all of her belongings and slowly walks down the stairs to find her friends. “Hey, why so glum?” she looks at them both through the window.

“No time for discussion now, let’s eat.” Mikey says with as much enthusiasm he can muster.

They discuss work and other light subjects. When Mikey pulls up to the steakhouse Gigi looks at her two friends from the back of the car, “Ok boys, what’s up?” she asks nervously.

Samual opens the door for her and says, “Please Gigi,” and holds out his hand to her. She takes it and squeezes his hand. She doesn’t let go the whole walk in, when they are brought into a back room, she already knows something is wrong, when she sees all of her brothers, she nearly falls over. Is that her uncle? Samual is there to catch her and help her into her chair.

Her brothers run over to her as well. “Damn Gigi, we should have called, we should have been in touch. I can only say sorry. Please don’t worry now. No one is going to die, not unless I leave here now and kill our mother. We came because your best man here, Samual, called and told us we have to be here for this meeting. You know me, always up for a challenge but this is not one you should have done alone. We’re jerks, ok, we get that. All of us heard from our wives when we talked yesterday. We live near each other. We left you out, all this time. Right now, we are all in trouble with our wives. They had assumed we were in touch and you’re just too busy to come visit. Trust me, there is not a big enough apology. We ran, that is the truth, we ran and never looked back. Maybe we made an assumption that she wouldn’t treat a girl the same as she did us, but that’s not an excuse for our actions, or a rationalization. Are you calm now? Can we eat first or do you want the meeting first? Or would you prefer to use that fist your holding and make it land in the middle of my face?” he asks all while looking in her eyes. “I’d deserve the pain.”

Gigi has not let go of Samual’s hand with one hand, her other is holding a tight fist, her brother is right. She looks up at him and he nods to her. “I haven’t eaten all day and these guys promised me steak.” She tries to smile.

Samual helps her stand and walk closer to the table where he pulls out a chair for her to sit down on. Mikey sits on the other side of her, everyone eats in somewhat silence. Conversation didn’t go above talking about anything more than her nieces and nephews’ school activities, and everyone’s jobs.

When it looks as if everyone is only playing with their food the lawyer speaks up, “Ok, we need to get this done already. Gigi, first of all, stop paying your mother’s bills. Second, you’re going to have to tell her to go back to her own apartment. The one she has been paying for herself through her own job she has from an online call-center. The place where she sends all the packages she orders under false names. The doctor you take her to? Yeah, that building is three blocks from her home. She goes there, to a building with a doorman who takes in all of her

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packages and makes herself appear as the fancy woman she thinks she is. There is so much more here, more than you really need to know. The bottom line is this.” He takes a deep breath.

“I’ve already notified the authorities. They are picking her up as we sit here. Fraud on so many levels, identity theft. She is no more sick with cancer than I am a hairy gorilla.” He tries to smile as everyone looks at him and realizes he is as bald as can be.

No one speaks for a few minutes. Gigi looks around at the people in front of her and all she finds herself able to say is, “I sold my car a week ago to pay for one of the bills, they were very demanding, I had to. You must think...” she begins to choke on her own voice and looks to Samual and Mikey.

“We must think exactly what our wives told us – we are jerks. Gigi, we will buy you a new car. That’s not-negotiable. All of the bills will be handed over to the lawyer here, all of them, everything in her name will be sold to help pay back as much as can be paid back. We will return anything in original packaging still. We hired a private detective to find out everything about her since we left and even before that. We need to know all we can. This guy is known to be the best. All I ask is that you trust us now Gigi, we’re going to take care of this. Not you. You’re going to go back to learning how to be an adult, one who is on her own, one who has great friends. One who has crap for brothers.” He looks at her and then to Samual who nods with a curt smile on his face.

Gigi notices this and thinks to herself that Samual is satisfied but still not happy. She reaches over and lays her hand onto his thigh; his hand slowly slides off the table and lays on top of hers.

“Why won’t you tell us the whole story?” Mikey asks the lawyer.

“To be honest, I don’t need anyone’s permission to press charges at this point because these are federal crimes. I know she is your mother but this is one of those moments where the law is the law no matter who is involved. It is out of my hands already. Like I said, I turned over the information to the appropriate authorities, I had gathered so much, so quickly I needed a federal prosecuting attorney not a state one. Upon even further inspection, we found you aren’t the only one she has been sponging off of my dear. I will tell you, though, that the judge will probably order her to pay you back, but she has so many others to pay off as well, I wouldn’t hold my breath.” He says looking around.

One of Gigi’s brothers speaks first, “You have all of the bills that our sister has already paid over these last couple of years?”

“Yes.” The lawyer answers.

“If you can write down a number and slide it over to me. I’d like to see how much we owe our sister.” He says. The lawyer does what he is asked. By the look on his face the brother is shocked. He looks to his sister. “Why Gigi? Why didn’t you think you could call us? My wife is going to kill me for this.” He slides the piece of paper over to the other brothers to see and their uncle. The oldest brother makes a phone call to his wife. She wants to speak to Gigi, he hands her the phone.

“Gigi, had I known we would have helped. But there is no way for us to know when they never called their mother and now I’m beginning to think they didn’t call you either. I’m so mad right now I don’t know where to put my anger. But not at you, never at you.” She says softly.

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Gigi looks around the room, she interlocks her fingers with Samual under the table and he squeezes her hand in his. Samual looks at her and raises one eyebrow, trying to figure out what she wants to say. He nods to give her strength.

Gigi takes a breath. “You are right, your husband doesn’t call me. They made it very clear to me when they left that they were leaving for good. I don’t need your all-of-a-sudden sympathy and I don’t even want your money. Without paying the bills any more I will have enough to live off of. You guys can pay the lawyer’s bill as well. I’ve done my part, now if you’ll excuse me my steak is done and my boys here are going to take me home. Don’t follow us.” She looks around at her brothers and slams the phone on the table. She stops and takes one look at her uncle, “And you! I have no idea why you are here, I haven’t seen you since I was 10.”

Samual jumps up and pulls her chair back so she can stand easier. Mikey is there right next to her in a flash. He takes one hand and Samual is holding the other as they quickly turn and walk out, leaving her brothers with the bill and the lawyer. No one speaks until they get in the car and they are on their way to her home.

“G?” Samual turns to the back seat to see how she is doing. “So many years, she had to put in so much work to make it seem real. I think it’s the most she has worked in my whole life. I wanted to believe she needed me for a change. I never called on the bills, I didn’t want to know. But recently it’s been much harder. I could really use a car, I have to take three buses to work now. I thought it was only going to be one, but after being late the first day without my car, I quickly looked up the route so I could do it right.

I like this job. I make decent money, and I feel good doing my work. I’m not angry at her as much as I’m angry at them. My mom has always been a user. I knew that but she moved in with me, I took care of her, in my heart I did what I was supposed to do, to take care of my parent in need. The only father I ever took care of was Pat’s, he hated the world but liked me and Pat. I hope you guys don’t hate me.” her voice is quiet because she is emotionally spent.

Mikey pulls over to the side of the road and turns around, “Gigi, we love you, top to bottom, inside and out. If you’re looking for a roommate I’m sure Sissy would love to move in with you. You only have to ask. If you want your space for a while, that’s ok too. But whatever you do, don’t shut us out like you’ve done this past week. OK?” Mikey asks.

“Mic, you’re my best friend. But I know you have a temper and you probably want to yell, rant or scream at my mother but I think, after sitting in that restaurant, I lost all my anger. There are three women out there who will whip their asses pretty good when they get home. But at the same time, none of them ever called me either, ever checked in, ever told me about a child being born, nothing. I received nothing. Today was the first time I even heard that I had nieces and nephews. I quickly realized I have my own family, I have you guys, Fern, Pat, Graham and his wife Cherry. What more do I want?” she smiles but she feels her tears coming now.

However, before she is able to let them fall her phone rings. “Hello?” she questions because she doesn’t recognize the number.

“Gigi, this is your mother, in case you’re wondering why I’m not home when you get home and why all of my belongings there have been taken; its because I’ve been arrested on some trumped-up charges. I need you to come here and bring my bail money.” She says flatly.

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“No.” Gigi answers.

“What do you mean no? Gigi I need your help, you’d best get down here and fix this.”

Her mom says with a lot more agitation in her voice.

“Mom, I’ve been paying for you for years, this one I think I’ll skip. Go call your sons, they have plenty of money. Enough to jump on a plane and show up to my dinner at the steakhouse tonight. So, if you want your bail paid, call them. Oh, and don’t bother trying to get back into my place, I’m changing the locks tonight so if you do get out tonight, go to your own apartment.” She hangs up and lets her tears fall now.

Mikey pulls into the parking lot next to her apartment. “You want company?” he asks. She can only nod.

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It’s been two weeks since that crazy night when Gigi’s mom was arrested. Tonight, the three friends are headed out of town to their friend’s wedding. Gigi has gone through her apartment a dozen times since her mom’s departure to make sure nothing is left here that belongs to her mom but upon changing the sheets to her own bed she sees a sheet of paper between her sheet and her mattress.

She sits down on the floor and looks at it more closely. All she can see are a list of phone numbers with money amounts next to them. Some are in red and others in black. But what bothers her the most is the note on the bottom written quickly in her mother’s handwriting, it says ‘you owe me this’.

Gigi had taken two whole days off of work after being honest with her boss that she has to straighten things out because her mother was arrested. He understood and allowed her to do so as well as allowing her to take these couple of days off for Fern’s wedding. In a private meeting in his office he explained he had a similar issue with a brother and knows she needs some time to come to grips with all that has happened. He even gave her a number to a lawyer he used, this person made sure his brother’s mess didn’t affect him in any way and he highly suggested she do the same.

Up until today, she thought he was making too much of her situation. But how could her mother not only fool her but get her involved without her knowing? How twisted is her mother’s mind? Is this why her father ran out that day so long ago – only to become a recluse? And what about her uncle? Why was he even at the steakhouse, he made no comment or gesture to her at all? Is he as guilty? Is he involved? Has her mom always been this way? Is the uncle going to pay her back too? So many questions are running in her mind right now, she can’t even breath.

“I don’t know G, I don’t know that we will ever know.” Samual says looking down at her.

“Did I say that all out loud?” she looks up at him.

“Yeah, what’s going on?” he points to the paper in her hand, she hands it to him and tells him what her boss said.

“Do you have the number?” he asks.

“Yeah in my purse.” She looks up at Samual, “Sam, I can’t get up. I mean I really can’t. I’m glued to this spot right now. I’ve been here since I came home from work almost three hours ago. Stuck in the middle of changing my sheets, like being stuck in a time warp.”

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Samual leans down and helps her up to a standing position. “Go out to the living room, Mikey is there waiting. I’ll finish here, you make the call. Let’s let him do what he needs to do while we are away. Then, when we get back, we are finding you a new place. New beginning.” He looks to her with soft eyes.

Gigi nods and leaves the room.

Samual looks around the room, he makes a decision. When they get back, Gigi has to move. This place will always bring her bad memories. From now on, she will only have good memories and he wants to be the one to make sure they happen. He has three days away with her to make her his, officially. Mikey and he talked about this extensively. It’s a now or never situation. Samual busies himself with straightening up her room and he comes across a picture on her table next to her bed. He turns it over and sees that it is a picture of the two of them from a party a couple of years ago. The one where she wore the dress he suggested for the wedding. She is so beautiful.

“Samual!” Mikey calls to him.

“Coming.” He says and leaves the room. “What’s up? I was fixing the bed.” He says.

“I know, sorry, I get impatient after a minute, you know that. We called the lawyer, he is beyond pissed off and is on his way over. The lawyers that Gigi’s brothers have that are handling things, or supposed to be, are not good people he says. He is going to take over Gigi’s share of everything. Let them deal with the debts that they owe Gigi. He will be here in a minute, he lives nearby it seems.” Mikey slumps into a chair next to him.

“I can’t believe this is still going on. I thought once my brothers took the bills away from me that I was done. Once she was arrested for her various other crimes that I was out of the picture. How could she involve me? How could she put my name on things without me knowing?” Gigi busts into tears and Samual is there to hold her, again.

“We will give the lawyer your keys to this apartment. Then we will leave and go to Fern’s wedding, we are going to have three whole days of only fun. No stress, no worries. Let him look through your whole apartment as many times as he needs to. Does she have access to any of your accounts?” he asks.

“No, and even if she did, I alternate my password every few months because I’m a paranoid weirdo. My friend had her accounts hacked once and lost thousands of dollars and it took an army of people to get it back for her. I can’t afford that. Clearly, I’m also not one to have thousands in my account either. Oh Samual. Why do you put up with me?” she asks him quietly so Mikey won’t hear.

“Because I love you more deeply than you can imagine.” He whispers back to her. Not the way he wanted to tell her, but there, he said what his heart feels.

Gigi picks her head up off of his chest and looks into his eyes for the truth of what he said. The only thing she could think to respond with is, “I packed the dress you asked for.” She smiles at him with what she hopes is a flirtation smile.

“Thank you.” The knock on the door prevents him from saying more.

“Hello. Mikey?” the man asks.

“Yeah, come on in.” Mikey moves out of the way.

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The lawyer comes in and addresses all of them. “I called your boss Gigi, believe me when I say this whole thing burns me up. He gave me permission to tell you his story; that he lost not only money but his car and his home because they thought he was faulty in paying his mortgage. The person who screwed him used to take his mortgage payments for himself. The man was almost penniless and living on the streets, so when he heard about your plight he had already informed me that you might call. I hope you’re not angry at him. He considers you a dear friend and he doesn’t ever want anyone to go through what he had to. I take it this is the note.” He looks down at the table and picks it up.

“What do you need from me? We actually have to be on the road, we have a friend’s wedding out of town.” She says trying to stay calm. She already lost her car.

The lawyer sits with her and gets all the numbers of all her accounts, her personal identification numbers in everything and then he says, “I’ll take about an hour to scour your apartment, then I’ll leave and lock up. I won’t have to come back in. If I do, it will only be after notifying you that I’m coming back and you can have someone meet me here if you’d like. You should go and enjoy the wedding. Forget about all of this. This is no longer your burden, it is mine. The fact that she is already behind bars can be a blessing. No one has come forward with bail money for her and that says something about her support system. I won’t talk to you unless I need you. But we work thoroughly and efficiently. I hope we can put your affairs back in order by the time you get back.” He looks at both of the men in the room.

“But we’re only going to be gone for three days.” Gigi says nervously.

“That’s enough time. I promise this is not as complicated as you think. It’s what we do. Go, enjoy your friends.” He says.

Samual grabs the suitcase he sees on the floor, “Anything else?” he asks.

“My dress. It’s in the hanging bag in the closet here.” Samual moves before she does and grabs the bag out of the closet. He pushes her along and Mikey follows them.

“Well,” Mikey says with a big breath. “That puts an end to that chapter, now on to more exciting things. We’ve only lost an hour of time, so that’s not too bad. Come on, Fern is waiting.” He smiles as they all get into the car. They decided that the road trip would be better than flying this time.

They are only on the road for a couple of hours when Graham calls, “It’s a boy!!! He screams into the phone.

There are a lot of cheers in the car. “She said she felt funny last night and we called the doctor, went in at 3:00 in the morning, and now we have a son. Oh my goodness guys, you can’t imagine my excitement. He is so beautiful I can’t even breathe. And my wife?! Beyond my wildest dreams, I have no words.” Graham says choking back more tears.

“We will bring the good news to Fern. She will be so excited. She wanted to share the day, but the day before will be good enough I’m sure. Send out some pictures when you can. Thank you Graham, you don’t know how good your timing is.” Mikey calls back to him because the phone is on speaker as he drives.

“We heard about your mom Gigi, but if it is any consolation, we never liked her.” He laughs a bit.

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“Thank you Graham, you and your wife should always be this happy.” She says.

“I’ve got to call Pat, love to you all.” Graham hangs up.

“That should be a good sign. We’re on our way to happiness.” Samuel says.

Gigi closes her eyes and reminds herself of the words he said back in her apartment. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly.

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“AHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!” Fern screams upon seeing her friends pull into her parents’ driveway. She runs outside to greet them.

“Graham had a boy!!!” Gigi calls to her and runs into her arms. They hold on to each other very tightly.

“I heard about your mom, forget her. Think of me. Oh my, I’m getting married tomorrow!!!” she looks at Gigi in the eye and sees happiness. She looks over her shoulder and sees Samuel smiling, then she whispers, “He has loved you forever Gigi. You know that, right?”

“How do you know?” Gigi asks.

“You’ve always been his girl. There is a reason Mikey never told him things about you. He knew Samuel would get himself in trouble. Another reason to hold on to this silly bet of his. But as far as anyone is concerned, it is legally binding. I don’t know if Mikey will actually take the house from Wane but to make him squirm at his own stupidity? That will be a nice turn of events. It will be fun to watch how his wife feels about that too, since she is the one he supposedly built this house for. You going to be ok?” Fern asks her.

“The new lawyer told me to forget about it for the next three days. Is your other sister here yet? I’m sure Mikey would like to see her. She always hated him, his beard and everything he stood for.” Gigi teases.

“Yeah, she said his beard was stupid. That he would never amount to much and that his good morals are only a façade, that he was probably a jerk all the time. Sadly though, she isn’t here. She flat out told me she had better things to do. Who knows if she will show up tomorrow. Her jealous moods are annoying, we all ignore them. Ok, new subject, who are we going to set up Mikey with?” the girls giggle.

“Who are you two laughing about?” Samuel asks smiling.

“You.” They say in unison.

Mikey pulls everyone into a group hug. “Best day ever!!!! Where is your mom?”

Fern brings everyone in to begin the festivities. Champaign is handed out to everyone, laughter ensues and a lot of hugs and kisses.

After a late dinner the three friends go to their hotel room. As promised, Samuel had found a suite with two bedrooms in it. They take turns showering and meet in the common room of the suite.

“Ok Mikey, what’s going to be with the bet?” Gigi asks.

“The last day we are here, around 4:00 in the afternoon, my lawyer is going to serve him the papers that it is time for him to pay up. He is also sending the same papers to his father. It is my understanding that Wane’s dad is getting pretty tired of cleaning up his messes.” He says.

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“Are you going to take his house? I mean his wife has been pouring her heart and soul into that. She is in all the magazines talking about which products are best and why she picked one over the other. I’ve never seen such a public display of excess, but the magazines are eating it up for some reason. Her hair is coifed differently in each one, her outfit chosen specifically for each one too I’d assume. Maybe she is just like him.” She adds

“No, she is nothing like him, personality wise. But yes, she does like his money and plans on taking as much of it as possible. My guess is this house is a set up before a divorce. They’ve been married almost six years and no kids. This house is what she wants in the divorce. I’m almost sure of it.” Mikey says.

“Oh dear, that is horrible. You really think she is ready for divorce?” Gigi asks.

“I can’t tell you why I know this, but yes. I do. She is actually a fun-loving individual who wants a doting husband and deserves one too. She wants kids, he doesn’t. Not in their original conversations though.” He says.

“Mic?” Samuel asks slowly.

Mikey takes a deep breath, “She’s my cousin Samuel. The only one I speak to. This is going to be harder than you think for me. I think she knows about the timing. She knew about the original bet, she has asked me about it in the past and again recently to see if I was doing it for real. Maybe she is doing this for me? But I doubt that. It’s for her. She loves her money but if she had a family she would give them all the attention they need and smother them with love, attention and anything they asked for. That I’m sure of as well.” He looks at his two friends.

“Why is everything so complicated with us?” Gigi asks.

“Life is a challenge G, one which I have fully accepted.” Mikey smiles at her.

“Will your cousin be ok after a divorce?” she asks.

“Yeah, she’ll come out ahead. Her brother is the one who drew up the pre-nuptial agreement for her when they got engaged. But tomorrow is a big day for us all, so let’s get to sleep. Really guys, don’t stay up tonight talking. You waited this long, you can wait another day, yeah?” Mikey asks as he walks out of the room to his bedroom.

“We can wait.” Samuel says as he leans over and kisses Gigi on the lips before heading to sleep in the room with Mikey, he turns to her before he opens the door, her hand is on her lips, her other on her heart and she is smiling. He nods to her and opens the door.

~ ~ ~

Wedding day is always hectic. The guests are pouring in to the hall and Fern is overjoyed. “Oh guys, this is the best present ever. Having you all here. Really. THE best. When I told my mom you were all coming, well except for Graham and Pat wasn’t sure, she was jumping around the kitchen. Literally. You’ve always been more like family to me than any of my siblings and she knows that. Just look at all of us. Some married, some not, but we are all still here, together.” She turns to Mikey and he opens his arms to her. She runs into them. “I’ll say a little prayer while I’m up there. I heard God listens to brides.” She whispers. Mikey nods in response and then holds her out at arms’ length.

“You really do light up a room Fern.” He says.

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“Did you start without me?” Graham says with excitement.

“Graham!” everyone yells.

“My wife said I should hop on the first plane this morning because her parents came to take care of her in the hospital so I’m here on loan for the day. Then I have to head back before dinner. Fern, you are more lovely than ever. Can I get a hug?” he asks with open arms.

Fern runs to him now and so does everyone else. No one hears the knock at the door. “Hey!!” a voice yells over them. All heads turn towards the door. “You’d best be getting down to the front row. I need to take my little girl now.” Fern’s father says. “Graham? Oh boy, is my wife going to cry. Congratulations, welcome to fatherhood, it’s the best.”

“Thank you sir, that means a lot from you.” Graham walks over to give Fern’s father a hug, each person does the same as they walk out of the room.

“Damn nice friends you have. Always liked them. I like my soon to be son in law as well. He is definitely your other half that you didn’t know was missing. Kind of like your mother and me. I was told to come and get you. Mom wants to walk down with us, is that ok? I know its not traditional but she’d like to. She is waiting at the top of the aisle.” He extends his elbow for his daughter to join him. Fern leans her head on her father’s shoulder.

“I love not being traditional.” She says as she sees her mom.

“Aw Mom, no tears. You promised.” Fern says.

“I didn’t know Graham would be here. And Sissy showed up too, a few minutes ago. Everyone is here for you Fern. You are so blessed. So very blessed.” She says with another tear running down her cheek.

“Next will be Mikey, you’ll see.” She says.

“No, probably Samuel and Gigi, but you never know these things for sure, do you?” she says smiling. “That music is our cue.” Her mom says.

Everyone stands as Fern and her parents enter and walk down the aisle together, with very large smiles on all of their faces. The ceremony is quick, no speeches, only the clergy speaks. Then everyone is asked to join them in the other side of the hall for a reception.

“This place is amazing.” Sissy tells her brother.

“Glad you could make it. You look good.” He says.

“You too, can’t wait for you to shave though. I miss your face.” She says.

“We’ll see.” Is all he says and leads her to the dinning area to find their seats.

The group of friends enjoy the day together. Mikey chose to drive Graham to the airport so he didn’t have to take another cab.

“You must be flying high as could be.” Mikey says.

“First my baby, now Fern’s wedding, and Samuel and Gigi finally woke up to their feelings we all knew they had. My wife is going to be so excited. I took a million pictures of all of us. As usual, I’ll send them out to our group email list. So, you going to shave it off when its all done?” Graham asks.

“I don’t know, been with me a long time. I really don’t know. Is that silly? Yeah, probably trim for sure, definitely be brought closer to manageable.” He laughs.



Graham laughs and the two of them talk about the baby almost the whole way to the airport. “Well, buddy, I’ll see you when we get back in a couple of days.” Mikey says.

“Mikey, I know this is weird timing but I promised my wife that if I got you for a private moment I’d mention this. You see, well...” He looks to Mikey and takes a breath, “My wife’s sister, the one we call Birdie, has a huge crush on you and the wife, well, she thinks. Aw Mic, I’m sorry, but...” Graham trips on his words.

“I like Birdie, she is cute, smart and loves to laugh at my stupid jokes. Tell your wife, I’d love to take her out. One date doesn’t mean we’re getting married. Ok?” Mikey looks at Graham. He knows Graham hates getting into other people’s business.

“Really? You don’t have to humor me.” he says.

“Nope, meant every word I said. Finally, being able to talk to a girl when it’s not a challenge? Sounds like fun to me.” Mikey says smiling.

“Oh, yeah, you did enough of that already.” Graham laughs as he gets out of the car.

“See you in a couple of days.” Mikey waves to his friend and smiles. “Birdie” he says out loud and smiles the whole way back to the party.

“What took you so long?” Fern’s husband asks to Mikey.

“You know us friends, we can’t stop talking once we’re together. Guy at the airport had to knock on the window to tell us to move on. Graham finally got out of the car. Did I miss something?” he asks.

“No, not really. Fern has been wanting to do a group shot with all of you and we can never find all of you at once.” He smiles.

“Don’t worry about that. Graham took a dozen or so of all of us. Even with you two in it and you probably didn’t even know. He’s good like that. He is going to send them out on our group email. You’re on the list now, you’ll get it. Congratulations, you guys are really made for each other. Welcome to the family.” Mikey smiles.

“You guys sure are a great group. I had two friends growing up, and neither of them are here, but I have to say, I’m thrilled you all are. You took me in as if you’ve known me as long as Fern. That means a lot. Thanks.” He smiles.

“We only talk the truth to each other. Sometimes too blunt, but you’ll get used to us.” Mikey smiles and gives him a hug and walks away. He is surprisingly in a great mood since the mention of Birdie.

~ ~ ~

Gigi spent the past couple of days with Fern’s family, getting her apartment all set up for when they come back from their honeymoon. “She’s going to love all the finishing touches you’ve put in Gigi.” Fern’s mom says.

“You think so? I love putting things together.” She says.

“You’re very good at it. But you waste your talents in an office. You still have an artistic eye, I wish you’d use it more.” Fern’s mom says.

Gigi stops in her tracks. “How do you know that?” she asks.



“Fern has saved every sketch you ever made for her. She recently had them framed, didn’t you see them?” she asks.

“No, this is only a three-bedroom apartment, I think I would have seen them if they were here.” She says.

“They aren’t here silly, they are in her office, where people can see them. She won’t let anyone touch them. Everyone asks who the artist is. Really, I’ve been there when people ask.” She says assuredly.

“I’m not sure I believe you on that.” Gigi says.

“Ok, here is proof.” She takes out her phone and shows a text from Fern, only days ago, with a picture of her office wall with all of Gigi’s sketches in various frames, the caption reads *‘One more person asks who the artist is and I’m going to have to tell them. Why doesn’t she know how talented she is?’*

Gigi stands and looks at Fern’s mother, then back down at the phone. She enlarges the picture and she sees that indeed, Fern framed her sketches from long ago as well as recent ones she sent her. She puts a hand to her mouth because she is about to scream, but she doesn’t know why.

“I told you she is proud of you. I told you that last time you were all together too. Remember you did that sketch from the side of my living room, with everyone in it? Fern gave that one to me last year for my birthday. I had taken that one to be matted and framed professionally, I love it. It’s hard to capture faces and make them real, you have real talent in this area. Gigi. You ok?” she asks. “You’re turning white.”

“I only draw for Fern.” She says.

“Gigi, sit down for a moment, I have to ask you a serious question. Please, sit down.” Fern’s mother leads her to Fern’s couch and she sits down next to her and holds Gigi’s hands in hers.

“Does your mom know you can draw? Don’t look at me like that. Of course, Fern told me what was going on, you knew she would. We’ve always taken care of you kids. Does your mom know?” she asks again slowly.

“I’m not sure.” She answers with a shaky voice.

“You need to have someone check your apartment for your sketch pad or pads. If she knew, she used them, or sold them for sure. She probably told you that it was a nice try and pretended to ignore them. Then when you weren’t looking, she took it out of the book and sold it as a representative of your art. Maybe they are in her other apartment. Oh darling, I know this is all messed up. I know you feel as if you have no one to trust but you know Dan and I love you dearly. We’ll take care of any lawyer bills you have. You make sure she didn’t exploit your talents. Talk to me Gigi, you’re too quiet.” She says.

“She used to tell me to buy a new sketch book and start over. In the past couple of years, I probably bought six or seven new books. You see, this is why it is easy to take advantage of me all this time. I’m too stupid to see what she has done. I’m not worthy of Samuel or any of them. I should go home now. Pick up the pieces of my life and try and move on or move away.” Gigi begins to cry as Fern’s father walks in, he immediately sits down on the couch and pulls her in, as



any father would do. Fern’s mom gets off the couch and calls Samuel and Mikey to tell them what she did.

“I’m sorry, I ruined things for her again, but she is so talented. I’m so sorry boys.” She says to the phone that is on speaker on their side.

“I’ve been texting this all to the new lawyer we have, one that is actually taking care of Gigi’s business. He wrote me back that he is going to go back and check her mother’s other apartment and the storage facility she has been paying for. He will find them, if any one will. This guy is after blood. I don’t know what happened to him but he is trying his hardest to make sure it never happens to anyone else in the world.” Samuel says hurriedly. Then Samuel takes a breath. “I’m sorry. Ok Mic, your call. Client or home?” he asks.

“Home sounds good. We’ll say we had a family emergency.” He says quietly. “We’ll go to the hotel and pack then swing by and pick up Gigi, get her some ice cream. Always works.” Mikey says trying to smile. But nothing about this is making him happy.

“Sissy, think fast, where would Gigi’s mom go to sell her sketches without her knowing?” Mikey says in the car as he calls his sister.

“Easy, there is an art dealer in the Garment district, he hides there because he doesn’t like to be flooded with crap. He says people come to him because they find him out not because he has a store front. Ego, whatever. But he is the best. Gets the best dollar for the work too. She took that from Gigi too? Maybe her lawyer is right and she needs to plead insanity.” She says.

“He wants her to do that? How did you hear that?” he asks.

“Um dum dum, I work at the court house I hear things I’m not supposed to but this is the first time I let anything spill. I should not have done that, I can get fired. Mikey, please.” She pleads.

“I would never get you in trouble. I’ll simply ask Gigi’s lawyer to check into what the defense is planning. I’ll tell him I don’t trust the guy and that maybe he is going to try and pull one on Gigi because the woman probably has something on him too.” He smirks at Samuel who gives him a smile back in agreement.

“Here is something to ponder too. I’ve heard that the more a person has on pending charges, the higher the bail goes. More reasons for the person to run. Ok, I have to get back to work, I had stepped outside to grab an ice cream myself. Love you two. It was great seeing you at the wedding, we should all bar b que when you get back.” She hangs up.

“Enough challenges, we don’t need any more.” Mikey says.

“The only challenge here is to get Gigi to accept her talents are real, and she should not be in the office but in a studio of sorts. I accept.” Samuel laughs and so does Mikey.

They arrive at Fern’s new apartment in half an hour. Gigi is still in Fern’s father’s arms on the couch. Samuel approaches slowly, he squats down and touches her shoulder. “Time to go home G, back to where we are going to start anew. You and me and Mikey makes three.” He teases.

Gigi lifts her head to see Samuel smiling at her, a smile she knows is only for her. She has no strength, she is emotionally drained. Everyone hugs Fern’s parents goodbye. “We’ll be in touch



darling. Anything you need from us boys, you call ok? No hesitation, I mean that.” Fern’s mom looks at them seriously.

“Yes maám, we will be in touch in a week. That should give us enough time to sort through all of this nonsense. Yeah?” Mikey says. Fern’s parents nod and walk them out to their car.

Mikey starts heading back, they had decided to drive instead of fly for the convenience of being on their own schedule, because of today they are extremely happy they did. After two hours of silence Gigi finally says. “I haven’t eaten all day.” She says it softly.

“Sandwiches or real food?” Samuel asks.

“Ice cream.” Gigi says.

“Done.” Mikey says.

~ ~ ~

An hour from home Mikey’s phone rings, he puts it on speaker. “You’re on speaker, talk at your own risk.” He jokes.

“The deed is done and let me simply say Wane’s father is furious. Beyond furious. He practically strangled the boy on the spot.” Mikey’s lawyer says.

“Wait, what? I thought you were doing them separately.” He says nervously.

“As it turns out, our boy was visiting daddy as we were going over the papers with his father. Wane walks in towards the end and security had to grab daddy so he wouldn’t literally kill his own son. Wane, as we knew he would, tried to brush it off as not being legal but his father had his lawyer in the room at the time because they were in the middle of something when I showed up.

The lawyer looked at Wane and said, *‘you have to turn over the title of your home. Today actually. You signed it, it was witnessed and you even added extra to it in your handwriting. I see it from here.’* To which Wane said, we were teenagers, its not a legal document. Besides I wrote down the impossible, that he had to take a picture once a month to prove he never shaved.” The lawyer pauses.

“His father picked up the thick file and flipped the pages in front of his son, then he told him that he is on his own with this one. He told him, that by the end of today, his wife is going to have to walk away from all that she had done to the house. In fact, his father’s lawyer told him that the best thing to do is to pack up his clothes and head to a hotel until he finds another place to live. Not at all what I was expecting. No fight at all from the father, except to his son.” The lawyer concluded.

“I don’t hear much excitement over there. I know this is not really what you wanted, but on the other hand. You did what was asked on paper and now he has to follow through. The home is yours by end of business today. Did you warn your cousin?” the lawyer asks.

“Yeah, she knew before I left for the wedding. I think she is handing him divorce papers too today. She said she is tired of a false marriage. I think she said the only one she will miss is his father. I wonder if she went to see him before you. What do I do now? Call my cousin? Warn her?” he asks.

“No, he will think you did this in conjunction with her, you should not call her. When you spoke before you left was it on her phone?” he asks.

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“No, she doesn’t like talking on the phone. We’ve had a standing date every month since we were kids. We meet for pizza at Joes since, well since forever. First Tuesday of every month. We show up at lunch time. Only time we communicate is if something comes up to prevent us but otherwise we are there. So, no, nothing on her phone.” He says quietly.

“A call coming in. Go to your place. I’ll be there in two hours with news.” He says and hangs up.

“How about we go to my place. Wane doesn’t know where I live.” Samual says.

“Better yet, let’s go to the Clayton hotel. I don’t think I want to even sleep in my apartment anymore. I might need a loan to pay for it though until I find my own place.” Gigi says.

The men don’t speak. Mikey drives to the Clayton Hotel. The three of them walk in and each get a room of their own. “I need some alone time.” Gigi says and walks in and shuts her door quickly.

Samual and Mikey take the rooms across the hall. Each to their own mind. Samual’s phone rings. “Hey G. You ok?” he asks.

“I am not worthy of you, of your love. Please Samual. You and Mikey should leave in the morning. Don’t make this harder on me. Please.” She says trying to hold back tears.

Samual takes a deep breath, “Ah G, but you are so wrong. It is I who is not worthy of you. I have been watching you get hurt, watching you fall all these years but I’ve been too afraid to stick my neck out for you but no more. I’m a giraffe now. I have loved you for so long I don’t remember when I didn’t. Before all of this happened, I had talked to Mikey and said that this time away, Fern’s wedding, was going to be the perfect time to confess my undying love for you.

But life happens in its own time, we don’t get to pick always. So, no G, I’m not leaving in the morning and neither are you unless you’re coming to live with me. Seems Mikey is going to have a huge house to live in, eight bedrooms. Maybe we can go live with him. One big happy family. We’ll get Pat to move in too or Sissy. But you and me G? We are forever. Now, am I coming to your room or are you coming here because another minute without holding you and I’m going to burst.” He says all of this in a soft voice.

He waits another second, before he speaks there is a knock at his door. He opens it and sees G standing there with tears running down her cheeks. He drops his phone and grabs her face in his hands, he pulls her in for a kiss he has been holding back on for years.

Slowly Gigi reaches her arms around his neck and he pulls her in even closer. Without releasing each other Samual pulls her in further and closes the door behind her with his foot. When he comes up for air, he looks into her eyes. “Forever G. You’re my girl.”

“You’ve always called me your girl.” She says in remembrance.

“Because you are.” He says.

“Yes, Samual, I believe I always have been too.” She pauses still looking in his eyes.

“Should we go take care of Mikey?” she asks.

“Yeah, come on.” He takes her hand and they go to Mikey’s room. He doesn’t knock.

“Hey Mic, what is the plan?” he asks.

“How did you get in?” Mikey asks.



“The guy gave me keys to both of your rooms. I told him I needed them. That you guys lose them all the time. He laughed and gave me one. Not great security but whatever.” He shrugs his shoulders.

“The lawyer is on his way, he says he is bringing something to me. Sit, he will be here in five minutes. You two good now? Officially?” he looks from one to the other.

“Yeah, she’s my girl.” Samuel says.

“I know, you’ve told me that for years.” Mikey says.

“But now I know it too.” Gigi says smiling.

“Ah, good. Fern will be happy and so will Graham. Let me get that.” He gets up to answer the door.

The lawyer is standing there with his cousin. “May we come in?” she asks.

“Oh Gigi, you look wonderful darling.” Mikey’s cousin says in sincerity.

“Thank you.” Gigi says softly.

“Now what?” Mikey asks kind of annoyed.

“Here is the truth in a nutshell, I went to see Wane’s father this morning. He is a good man despite his outside persona. I sat with him and his lawyer and we went over the pre-nup together. Wane has a second apartment, a three-bedroom condo that he never gave up after we were married. I informed his father of this and he shook his head in shame. He hugged me and said he was sorry. He also called Wane in to come over in an hour. I signed the papers right there and he was going to have Wane sign them on the spot too. He handed me a check for the amount in the pre-nup because he said he is not sure his son has that amount liquid right now. He dug through some old files and found that indeed Wane still had the other apartment. He handed me the deed to it and told me to have the locks changed today. I did already. I moved all my stuff in there with the help of one of his father’s people. He took care of everything, then you must have come in after me but before Wane and handed him another problem, which is why he wouldn’t help him. He already gave me the condo. He told Wane he did and then yelled at him for keeping it in the first place. I accepted the check in lieu of having to deal with alimony. Sure, I’d love to have it but his father asked if I wouldn’t mind taking a one-time fee. When I saw the number he wrote, I said ok. It will help for a long time. I’m good with money and I have a three-bedroom condo in a great building, doorman and all the amenities a gal can ask for.

I have my own car, I have a place to live. Now you do too. I spent so much money on that place because he let me, it was fun. But I honestly knew I was never going to live there. Take it Mikey, he caused you enough pain. Take it for pain and suffering all those years. Take it and live there with Samuel and Gigi, or anyone else you want. Fill the place with the love and children that would never have been there had we moved in. I came here today to tell you in person that I’ll be ok and I expect to see you at Joes next month. I love you Mikey, you’ll always be my best friend. Bye Gigi, Samuel.” She begins to walk out.

“How did you know what happened after I was there?” the lawyer asked.

“Wane’s father called to tell me. Asked me if I knew anything about the bet between his son and my cousin. I told him all I know is that it happened a long time ago and now my cousin has a crazy long beard.

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He appreciated my being honest. He took a moment to explain what had happened because I think he needed to tell someone. His lawyer had left and he called me first. The man has a soft side for brunettes I guess. Apparently, his lawyer filled him in on some other things his son had done in the past and that he assumed the father wanted cleaned up. He didn’t tell me what they were only that they existed and that he refused those as well.

I wished him well as he did to me too. I feel like he is still going to be in my life, watching out for me. I don’t mind. I always liked Wane’s father. Mikey, really. Take the house. You earned it.” This time she makes it to the door before someone says anything.

“See you at Joes.” Mikey says smiling.

“At Joes.” She says and walks out feeling good.

Mikey’s lawyer looks around the room. “I love working for you man, always keeping life interesting.” He laughs.

“Gigi, the lawyer who took on your stuff before you left, well, he is a good guy, works in my office. I’ve been helping him out. So glad I’m on his good side. You don’t want to be on the other side, ever. He found most of your sketches. She hadn’t sold them yet because she kept telling the buyer that the collection is almost finished but gave him piece by piece. When he was told about them he told your lawyer that you should feel free to call him if you want a legal contract to sell with him. He ripped up the one from your mom. He had 22 pieces, she told him it was a collection of 25. I guess you’re not done with three of them.” He looks at her for confirmation.

“My mom had asked me if I would sketch the sunset, she said that she likes to look at them from her bedside. I had started on the first one.” Her voice coming out meekly.

“Ok, I’ll let him know then that the 22 pieces he has is probably all there is.” He says. Gigi nods in agreement. “Here are the keys to your house Mikey. The deed is here too, all changed already to be in your name. Congratulations. We’ll be in touch.” He walks out of the room.

“Oh holy hell, how much taxes do you think I have to pay each year on that monster of a house?” Mikey asks.

“Well, put away money as if you had a mortgage each month, then at the end of the year, it should be enough. Don’t you think?” Samuel asks.

“It will definitely be most of it I suppose. How long can I keep that up though? Thankfully, I can afford that now, but forever?” he asks.

“Want some roommates?” Samuel asks in a serious voice.

“Really? Don’t you guys want a place of your own?” he asks.

“I’ll bet in a place like that we won’t see each other for days if we don’t want to. Mikey, we work in the same place, well different buildings but same place, we see each other for dinner many nights a week already, is there so much difference?” Samuel asks.

“When you put it that way, I guess not. Gigi?” he asks.

“I can’t afford anything right now. I’m not even sure I have a job I want anymore. But I can’t quit, he did find me a great lawyer.” She says.

“Ok, first thing tomorrow morning we go pack up Gigi’s place, take her to work. Then Samuel and I will move our stuff in, I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Mikey says wearily.

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“I can afford a four-bedroom house right now, so can you, but instead we put it together and have an eight-bedroom house. Could be even more. I remember hearing there are eight bedrooms on the second floor alone. We could have done this on our own if we wanted to, we didn’t need his house. We can sell it on the market tomorrow if you want then go buy our own place together. A place of our choosing.” Samuel suggests.

“Let’s go take a look at it tomorrow and decide.” Mikey says. “Right now, I’m exhausted. Good night you two.”

Samual and Gigi walk out into the hallway. “Your place or mine?” he asks.

“Ours.” She smiles as they head into her room.

~ ~ ~

Mikey and Samual pull up in front of Mikey’s new house. He never heard directly from Wane, word in the socialite pages of the newspaper is that Wane was kicked out of his marriage and is being forced to live in a hotel. No mention of why he is not in his big new home. Wane’s father promised his own wife and Mikey’s cousin he would keep the news to a minimum and he has honored his word.

“You ready?” Mikey asks.

“Yeah, let’s do this.” Samual says.

The minute the front door is open Mikey smiles. He sees the color of the foyer, the drawings on the walls, he walks towards the dinning room and laughs, they walk into the living room and the den. Each one making him laugh.

Then they find the kitchen and finally Samual sees the humor in it all. His cousin wasn’t decorating the place for herself. She made this home for her cousin. “What does she owe you Mikey?” Samual asks.

“She keeps holding this little thing I did for her when we were teens.” He shrugs. Samual needs the truth, “Mic?”

“We were at the nature park and she fell into the river, she can’t swim and she has asthma on top of it, exasperated by stress. Which makes getting water in the lungs a bigger problem than the average guy. I jumped in as she was pulled under, or so I thought. She had been under longer than it seemed, she nearly drowned. She always tells me one of these days she will give me back a second chance at life like I gave her. She did this for me, she stayed married to him for me, to wait until now. Who does that?” Mikey asks.

“Someone who owes you their life. It was only four years Mic.” He says softly. “Let’s go look upstairs.”

The two of them walk around each bedroom. Four on one side of the house and four on the other. Five full bathrooms too. One downstairs and four upstairs. Plus two half baths downstairs as well. Each bedroom is decorated with small things that she knew Mikey would like. She designed this house for all of Mikey’s friends to live in, he can see that now. She had every intention that Samual and Gigi would move in.

When they get back downstairs, Samual goes back to the den to look again. He looks around and smiles, down to the last detail, this room is the same as Mikey’s office at work, every



last piece. Mikey had decorated his office himself. Only this one is twice the size, but equally as comfortable.

“I don’t know what to say.” He says on the phone. “Why sacrifice like that for me?” he asks his cousin.

“The first two years I thought weren’t so bad but then I realized I had only been with my husband less times than well, you don’t need to know the details. Suffice it to say, I had a roommate who treated me like the wallpaper, nice to look at but not really necessary when you can use paint. Then one day you got your beard in your pizza and I asked when you were getting rid of it, you said you had two years left, and in that moment, I made a decision. I had two years left as well. Mic, there is nothing I can pay you back with for my life. Please accept this. Please.” She says.

“No more, we’re even then.” He says firmly. “Hey, did you hear me?” he asks again firmly.

“Yes, we can be even. But don’t cut me out Mic, please that would hurt too much.” She says.

“No way, too many years of monthly pizza. You going to date? Move on?” he asks.

“You know something funny, Wane’s father encouraged me to do so. Said I should never have stayed so long in a loveless marriage. He adores his wife, they’ve been on a 40-year honeymoon he tells me. I want to wait for that Mic. Is that selfish?” she asks.

“Sounds beautiful to me. Graham has that, so does Fern, I think Pat is on the verge of it as well. We’ll get ours, you’ll see. Even.” He says again.

“Even.” She answers.

Mikey walks back into the front foyer to wait for Samuel who is still in the den. “Hey, what gives?” Mikey asks as he comes out.

“She even scratched the date of delivery into the desk top drawer. This place belongs to you Mic.” Samuel says.

“Yeah, I spoke with her, we’re even now. I made her promise.” He says.

“Ok, let’s go get our stuff and bring it in. Where should we put Gigi?” he asks.

“We’ll bring her suitcases and boxes in and let her pick. She may even want the guest room on the main floor here. It has its own bathroom, we won’t have girly things in ours.” He jokes.

The men leave to gather their belongings. They tell their landlords they are leaving and pay them for two months’ rent so they have time to fill the apartments they are leaving. No need to bring furniture their new home has more than they need. Only their personal belongings. The landlords seem to appreciate this as well.

By midday, they are exhausted from moving everything around. Sissy brings them lunch.

“Wow, this place is great, almost as if it was made for you Mic.” She jokes.

“I guess our cousin and I have similar tastes.” He says.

“Weird how that works. Listen. I’m not going to stay but next time I expect a full tour.” She says.

The doorbell rings shortly after Sissy leaves. Mikey opens the door to see Graham, his wife and baby and Birdie. “Please come in.” he says smiling.

Graham looks at him with ‘I’m sorry’ in his eyes. Mikey smiles and grabs him in for a proper hug. “I really don’t mind.” He whispers to him.



“Let me take my nephew.” Mikey takes the baby from Graham’s wife and leads them to the living room to sit down.

Samual brings in some glasses and a pitcher of water. “So, how do you like our place?” he asks jokingly.

“So, Sissy meant it, you both moved in?” Graham says. “We saw her on the way in or was it out, I get confused how to say that.”

“And Gigi, after work today.” Samual says.

“I’m so glad you and she are moving in too. This place is way too big for one person. Even too big for one family. I mean really, who needs all this space? What?” Birdie looks at her sister. “Did I say something weird? Is there spinach in my teeth?” she looks at her angrily.

“No, you said nothing wrong, that’s why Samual and Gigi are moving in. Because this house is a monster that needs to be tamed. Not a job for one man. The dining room table seats 12 and that is without any extensions in. I was told the living room we’re in could fit 30 people without bumping into each other. Your boy snores like you Graham.” Mikey says.

Everyone laughs at that. They visit for a while longer and then Samual leaves to go get Gigi and her personal effects from her apartment. Pay her landlord the same as he did his own and move her in. Graham’s wife takes the baby to the guest room to nurse him.

~ ~ ~

It’s been one whole month since everyone has moved in to Mikey’s new place. They checked into the taxes and made a payment schedule for themselves, each month both Samual and Mikey put money into a special account to be used for taxes only at the end of the year. Thankful that it wasn’t as bad as they assumed.

Mikey, for the first time in 20 years walks into a very fancy barber shop. “I need at least 10 years of this 20-year growth off.” He jokes to the man behind the desk.

“We specialize in beards sir, would you like a simple trim and shape? Or do you want a specialized shape?” he asks.

“Simple is fine. It needs to look human again.” He says.

“I have the exact person you’re looking for. Come this way.” The man leads him to the back where there are sinks that look like the kind to get your hair washed only they are smaller. He sits in front of the sink and a man puts special soap in his beard and washes it over the small sink. He then puts in some kind of conditioner that smells like lavender to Mikey.

The barber takes out a pair of scissors that Mikey has never seen; he uses them for precise cutting of the beard. A little more lotion, a comb, a trimmer and a final application of cream and Mikey is finally ready to leave. His beard is now only four inches from his face and much more manageable. They also sold him the conditioner and cream that he needs to keep in his beard to keep the hair soft and manageable. For the first time in a long time, Mikey feels good looking in the mirror. He has his second official date with Birdie tonight. She is really a pleasure to be around.

Back in the office, everyone applauds his choice of style. Sitting in his office waiting for him is Gigi. “About damn time.” She says to him.

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“What’s wrong? Did I know you were coming? Why aren’t you at work?” he asks nervously.

“First, I’m glad you did what I suggested and you went to beard specialists. Second, my boss caught me doodling yesterday on my lunch break and he nearly fell over. He told me my work looks like the work he has seen in a small art dealer’s shop. In the garment district. He then told me he has been waiting for the rest of a collection so he can buy the whole thing. The owner of the dealership is someone he knows and tells him each time a new piece comes in.

Long story, short, I told him it was mine and my mother stole them to get the commission for bringing the art in. Here is the check he gave me for the whole collection. At first, I wouldn’t take it, then he told me I don’t belong behind a desk but in a studio making the world a better place. Look at that check Mic, it has four zeroes in it. Do you see that?! He wouldn’t take no for an answer. He told me how much the dealer was charging and I nearly fell over. The dealer was charging almost double because he had to pay my mother and presumably she was going to pay the artist. Do you see this check? I told him he can take the ones I have done, I really wasn’t making 25, but he asked if I would. He even asked for three specific things and told me he would give me a month to do them, he has waited this long. I don’t know what to do with myself. He said take the rest of the day off to get a head start on his request.” She looks at Mikey, “look at that check!” she says again shaking the paper in front of him.

Mikey looks down one more time at the check she is holding. It is more than she makes in a year. One check. She has more than her year’s salary. “I’ve seen your work G, I love it. Why shouldn’t you get paid for doing what you love? Hell, Fern has clients clamoring for the name of her artist all the time. People like your work, why is that hard to believe?”

“Because I’m Gigi, that’s why. What do I do with this?” she asks shaking the check once more.

“Deposit it and finish three more drawings.” He laughs.

“Really?” she asks with caution.

“Really. Come, I have to meet my cousin at Joes in half an hour. Let’s see how she likes this new look and get her unbiased opinion of your work.” He smiles.

Every time he runs his hand in his beard, it feels so good now, not scratchy. “I love it!!!” his cousin screams upon seeing him. She hugs him and they sit down.

“You’re not going to believe this, I don’t believe this myself. But my ex-father in law set me up with someone. Honestly, he did. The man is so gorgeous I almost fell over when I met them for lunch last week. He is a furniture builder; can you believe that? Custom made pieces, each one costs thousands of dollars. He has a whole store full of furniture pieces and he needs someone to help him run the front of the business. So now I have a job and I get to have sex with the boss. My life is wonderful. Wane’s dad thought we’d hit it off but not as quickly as we did. Before lunch was over he told us he has to go take a cold shower from all the heat we were emanating.

Oh Mic, he is so kind and gentle. He built me a special chair to sit on in the store, for me. He made a whole chair one night thinking it would fit me and it does. I’m going to cry again damn it.” She wipes a tear from her eye.



Gigi looks at her and says, “Life can be wonderful like that. I sold my first set of drawings to my own boss today. He is the one the dealer was saving them for in the first place.” She smiles. “Mikey has pictures of some if you’d like to see them.”

“Oh Gigi, I’d love to.” She says. Mikey takes out his phone and shows her the pictures of Fern’s office. “Gigi, make sure your name is on all of this. You don’t want anyone taking credit for these when they came from your heart. You can tell.” She smiles at Gigi.

Lunch went well. Gigi and Mikey decide to go straight back home, they send a text to Samual to let him know. When they get home the house smells wonderful, they run into the kitchen and see Samual cooking. “I left an hour ago, was in the mood to try things out on this fancy equipment. Dinner will still be a while but this is fun. Mic, you look fabulous. Call Birdie tell her to join us for dinner.” He says calmly.

“Good idea.” He begins to walk out.

“Nice job on the beard.” Samual calls to him.

“Thanks. Tell him your good news G.” Mikey says as he walks out to call Birdie.

Samual looks at his girl, “G?”

Gigi tells him all about her boss and the sketches. The new ones she has to make and shows him the check. Samual looks at the check, “You are my girl, I had you first, not sure I’m ready to share you with the world, I only got you myself recently. But I can’t stop greatness. Let the creative juices flow my dear.”

Dinner with Birdie at the table is lively and fun. The four friends talk all night. Literally. “Birdie, you can’t drive home now. It’s 2:00 in the morning. Please, stay here with us. I’ll give you some pajamas and clothes for the morning.” Gigi says.

Despite living in the same house. Samual and Gigi have never shared more than a few kisses. Although her heart wants to, she also wants to wait. Having Birdie one night will not interrupt anyone’s routine.

“Are you sure? I really do hate driving when I’m tired. You hear about so many accidents from tired people.” She says as she yawns. “Oh my.”

“Come, the boys will clean up our glasses and stuff. You can sleep on my side of the building. They sleep on the other.” She smiles. “I have the cleaner bathroom” she whispers and the two women laugh all the way upstairs.

In the morning Birdie pitches in and helps Gigi make everyone breakfast. “Last night was fun.” Birdie says. “Do you guys do that often?”

“Us? You should see what happens when the whole gang gets together, we would still be in the living room.” She laughs.

“Gigi, its 6:30 in the morning.” She says.

“Yep, we’ve done all nighters before. Literally all night. Not uncommon for this bunch. Sometimes someone dozes off for a while but wakes and becomes part of the conversation as if they never left. We’re a crazy bunch who love and understand each other’s every breath.” She smiles proudly.

“How wonderful, no wonder my sister cried so much about missing Fern’s wedding. I didn’t understand until now. Can I tell you something?” she asks Gigi

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“Yeah, sure.”

“I’ve had a crush on Mikey since my sister began dating you guys. I realize she never dated just Graham, that it was the whole group. Those few times I was there and so was Mikey, I could hardly breathe. Still pinching myself now.” She whispers.

“Sounds like you fit right in Birdie.” The women laugh.

“Too early in the morning for laughter.” Samuel says as he walks over to kiss Gigi softly on the lips.

“Good morning to you too. We’ve made pancakes this morning. Go sit down and enjoy, we don’t need you sleepy *and* hungry today.” Gigi teases.

~ ~

“Samual, how the hell did you wait so long?” Mikey asks.

“So long for what?” he asks.

“Gigi, how could you put off your feelings for so long? I’m dying here with Birdie, I want everything with her, yesterday, today, tomorrow, forever. How did you wait? When is it a right time? I’m going crazy, if she accidently sleeps over one more night it will be hard for me to keep my hands off of her.” Mikey paces Samuel’s office.

“You’ve been together for four months; Graham and her sister were only together for three before he proposed. What are you waiting for? For her to meet everyone? Well, then let’s officially make a house warming party weekend so she can meet everyone, then at the end you can take her out to the backyard gazebo and propose there.” Samuel says casually.

“How are you so casual? Ok, you’re right an all weekend house warming party, ah, two weeks from now it’s a national holiday, everyone will have off on that Monday as well. I’ll make all the calls. You and I are going ring shopping afterwards, about time you put a ring on Gigi too.” He smiles and walks out of the room.

Time flies when you’re planning a weekend event. Gigi has been busy making sure there are enough supplies in all the bathrooms, towels, sheets, first aid kits, feminine products. Each bathroom has it all.

She has stocked the refrigerator as well as the freezer with everyone’s favorite foods. Bought a dozen movies to be watched or ignored but they are at least there if anyone wants them. She bought a couple more couches for their living room and some outdoor furniture to go along with it. The weather is supposed to be nice so she also made sure there is plenty of meat to grill as well as the grills to use. Samuel went out to buy the kind he likes to grill on.

Thursday night Gigi is busy in the basement, Samuel had set her up a studio there for her to do any kind of work she wants. She does not come up until midnight most nights. She tries to walk through the house quietly but she is caught by Samuel, he picks her up and swings her around, as she lands he plants one of his softest kisses yet on her lips.

“I know, it’s a surprise, you don’t have to tell me what you’re working on, but I have a surprise of my own I can’t wait any longer to share with you. Gigi, you’re my girl. I’ve said the phrase so long people say it is a mantra, but now I want you to be my woman. Mine and only

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mine. I want you to marry me and make my life a living heaven.” He says all of this only a hair’s breath away from her face.

Without even looking at her hands, he slides a ring on the appropriate finger. Gigi looks down at her hand, there on her finger is a simple round diamond surrounded by swirls of white gold. Gigi looks up at Samuel, her Samuel, forever been her Samuel. “The idea of a living heaven sounds perfect to me.” she says.

Samuel pulls her in and kisses her again, this time not so gently or quickly. Gigi pulls away because if she doesn’t stop now, she won’t until morning. “Help me set these on everyone’s bed please.” She holds up a stack of envelopes.

“You drew something for everyone?” he asks.

“Yeah, but you may not want to share yours.” She smiles. The newly engaged couple, walk to each bedroom and place the final piece on the pillows, along with a small box of candy. Each room has also been given a small vase with roses or lilacs for the smell.

At her bedroom Samuel says, “Until tomorrow then.”

“Tomorrow.”

The furry of friends begin to arrive by 10:00 in the morning. Birdie came at 8:00 to help make the brunch for those who are coming early. Gigi shows each person to their room and walks away, Birdie is in charge of making sure each person has food to eat as they come back downstairs.

While it seems as if there is a lot of activity, everything runs so smoothly. Even Graham’s baby is enjoying himself. He is calm and sleeping in each person’s arms who holds him. There is only comfort here in this group. They invited Mikey’s cousin to join them but she opted out saying she is going out with her new man for the weekend. Even joining her ex in laws for the trip.

Around 3:00 in the morning Fern finally opens up, “Ok so who doesn’t love the picture Gigi made them. Mine is of the time we went sailing together. What did you guys get?” she asks. Each person relays the special moment that Gigi drew for them. She was right, Samuel doesn’t want to share his, she drew the moment she fell in love with him. With both of them in bathing suits, her memory of his body is spot on and he almost cried looking at the details. Her talent is amazing. He hopes she realizes that.

Birdie speaks last, “I met Gigi for the first time at a funeral. But she didn’t draw that, she drew the night the four of us stayed up all night here in this very room. Gigi, I know we’ve all been busy tonight with getting to know one another all over again, for it seems you never know each other enough in this group. But we forgot one thing, all of us did. Congratulations! Did anyone else notice she is wearing an engagement ring?” she looks around the room.

No one had noticed and Gigi was fine with that. Tonight was for everyone to meet Birdie again, it was her night. Now Birdie handed the attention over to her. She really does fit in to this group. Gigi walks over to hug Birdie first. Then everyone bursts into yells of sheer joy. Samuel is practically tackled by the guys.

The talking goes on for another couple of hours, everyone finally files out and heads towards their beds. “Brunch will be served at 11, if you come down before that, you’re on your own.” Gigi tells everyone.

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Laughter brings everyone to their rooms. Gigi stands looking out of her window, she doesn’t even hear her door open or close. Samuel’s arms around her waist startle her. She turns quickly. “I need to sleep here tonight.”

“Sleep.” Gigi says.

“Yes, I’m too tired for anything but sleep.”

The two of them slide into bed and into a blissful sleep.

~ ~ ~

Sunday night the men are in charge of the grill and making dinner, the women are inside laughing and having a great time. Gigi is watching Birdie, who is watching Mikey. She has been doing that for years with Samuel. Now she will watch him forever.

At dinner, Fern stands up, “Ok, so here is the deal. I texted my parents that you two were engaged when you told us. Mom jumped at the chance to tell me that she and Dad are walking you down the aisle Gigi. Then she said that she will take you dress shopping, the whole nine yards. Believe me she enjoyed planning my wedding almost as much as I did. She made the whole experience fun, no stress.”

Fern begins to sit down then she pops back up, “Oh, and we’re already expecting!!” she yells excitedly.

Birdie leans over to Gigi, “Wow, I hope you guys don’t do these weekends too often. My heart can’t take all this.” Gigi leans her head into Birdie’s “Ah but it can, love begets love, you’ll see.”

Sunday evening easily turns into Sunday late night. But by 1:00 in the morning everyone begins to moan about needing to leave tomorrow and having to get up and be ready. One more brunch together and everyone will be on their way.

Gigi pushes everyone upstairs, Mikey grabs Birdie and brings her outside. Standing in the middle of the outdoor furniture, not making it to the gazebo, he kisses her neck, one side, the other side, one cheek, the other cheek. “I could do this all day. All night even. Aw hell Birdie, I’m not good with words. I don’t even understand my own feelings most of the time, but these people? These people are pure love. You’ve seen it all weekend. The weekend was about you. I wanted everyone to love you as much as I do. I wanted this group to envelop you into their lives, include you into their jokes and they did so, easily.

What I’m trying to say is, Birdie, can we do this forever? Together you and me, marry me?” he pulls out a small velvet ring box and shows it to her, she opens it and sees a very simple uncut diamond. He left it natural. Didn’t try to make something natural into man’s idea of beauty.

“This is the most beautiful thing you could have done for me. Most people will think its an odd shape, but I know it’s in its natural shape. Pure, like your love for me?” she asks.

“Yes, exactly like that.” He smiles at her.

“Mikey, I can’t imagine being part of a better group of people. Challenge accepted.” She grins.

Mikey picks her up as high as he can. He grabs her hand and runs back into the front hall of the house and despite the hour he screams at the top of his lungs, “SHE SAID SHE ACCEPTS THE CHALLENGE!!!!”

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Everyone comes pouring out in their pajamas to congratulate the newest couple.

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