

One



Alex pulled the invitation out of his breast pocket and laid it on his lap, admiring once again how the lettering danced across the creamy cardstock, the gold metallic script bunched up tightly to fit in the allotted space: FIGGY SHERMAN-ZICKLIN. How the in-laws had harrumphed when he and Figgy had announced, way back when, their plans to hyphenate—and to further flout custom by putting her last name in the showy cleanup spot. Because who said they couldn't? Everything was up for grabs, and SHERMAN-ZICKLIN had a better ring to it than ZICKLIN-SHERMAN. Okay, it was a mouthful. And sure, it did kind of sound like a pharmaceutical conglomerate. But no, the kids would not get hand cramps every time they wrote their name on a school worksheet.

No one was harrumphing now, were they? Here she was, FIGGY SHERMAN-ZICKLIN, nominated for Best Comedy in the roman-numeral-whatever Primetime Emmy Awards. And here he was, the soft shaygetz SHERMAN at the center of all those hard, glottal,

zingy, Semitic consonants, gliding along in a chauffeured Town Car through a camera-ready L.A. afternoon.

It was crazy, all of it, more than Alex could begin to get any sort of reasonable handle on. The Emmys weren't *real*; they came from inside the TV. He was pretty sure they were animated—they occurred in a make-believe world of fictional, distant-realm characters, ladies with shiny shoulders and men with faces three sizes too big for their heads. The Emmys may not have been quite as fictional as, say, the Oscars, but they were still plenty pretend, best viewed at home with wine and pizza and a gay or two for color commentary.

Barely fourteen months ago, Alex was the sensible one with a real job and Figgy was a fingernail-chewing, sporadically employed comedy writer who spent her days in a Cuban bakery drinking carrot juice until her teeth turned orange while banging out pilot scripts everyone liked but no one ever made. Until, miraculously, someone did. Her eleventh pilot, a dark and dirty dramedy about a housewife who runs a prostitution ring out of a scrapbooking shop, was picked up by a premium-cable network looking to “make some noise.” Now she was in Valentino and he was arm candy.

“Have I got lipstick on my teeth?” Figgy said, peering into a compact. “Oh God—I’m terrifying. I’m a sea cow. Or a manatee. Whichever one. I’m a pre-op transsexual. I’m a fucking tranny sea cow. God!”

“Fig, stop,” said Alex, scooting over and giving her thigh a squeeze, feeling the silver silk rub against her Spanx with a synthetic squeak. “You’re gorgeous. Great looking. And you said it yourself—nobody looks at the writers anyway.”

“True,” she sighed, snapping the mirror shut. “We’re the bathroom break. Fuck it. Why are we bothering with this at all? Why are we wasting the babysitter? Let’s commandeer this bad boy and go for burritos!”

Was she serious? Would she really rather spackle the interior of a Town Car with carne asada than go to the actual Emmys? He wasn’t

entirely sure. She was famously impulsive—she delighted in abandoning full shopping carts, dashing off on interstate road trips, and otherwise zipping off course at the last possible minute. It was Figgy who decided to call off the big formal wedding in favor of a civil ceremony that had all the pomp and romance of a drivers license renewal. Alex didn't regret it for a second—he'd had no desire to stand under a chuppah with three hundred of her family's temple friends and his crazy goy relatives—but for the Emmys, he wanted the full experience.

The truth was, Alex wouldn't miss this for anything. Figgy grew up on the funky, lower-rent peripheries of show business—her mom was a once-fabulous, now-cranky Hollywood party girl who'd married four times, twice to agents and currently to a Bronx-born hustler who made a mint in the seventies selling videotape supplies; Figgy had been to the Emmys herself when she was nine, famously falling asleep in Cloris Leachman's lap. But for Alex, all this was new. He'd grown up two hours and many worlds away in a mountain hippie hamlet near the Ojai Valley. He got comic mileage out of his up-bringing now—people loved hearing about his Birkenstock lesbian mom, the llama who lived on their land, and the Indian shaman who shacked up on the back porch. But the reality was a lot lonelier and more chaotic than he let on. He didn't like to talk about it. Anyway, he'd gotten out, left all that behind, worked through his issues.

And now here he was, actual Alex in a real-life Town Car, with its impossibly immaculate exterior and musky oil smell and walnut inlays and immaculate black carpet so soft and lush that he wanted to rub his face in it. He pressed a button and the armrest slid back with a pleasing hiss. Beneath it he found a tin of candied almonds, a chilled bottle of Dom with a note from Figgy's agent, Jess, and the fall issue of *Elite Spirit*, a glossy brick of a magazine devoted to mini-jets and maxi-wristwatches.

The man at the wheel swiveled around and produced a card. Devon Winchester, Executive Transport.

“Well hello there, Devon Winchester,” Alex said with a smile. “That’s quite a name. You from Windsor Castle?”

“No sir,” he said. “Inglewood.”

Alex learned that Devon had two boys and a girl, but he and their mom weren’t together, owing to some legal trouble Devon got into a few years ago, but he was dealing much better now and making some music and maybe he should put on his CD? Some serious jams. Gonna blow up. Maybe they could use a song on the show?

“Absolutely, put that on,” Alex said, glad they were relating. Maybe they’d be friends.

“So you excited for tonight?” Devon asked. “I shouldn’t be saying this, but I freaking *love* your show. Girlfriend and I binge-watched the whole season on demand in one night—up ’til 4 a.m. Could not even stop. Shit’s crack.”

Figgy leaned forward and craned her face over the seat. “Well thank you very much, Devon,” she said. “So great you’ve actually seen it.”

“Aw no way—it’s the *lady’s* show?” Devon put his face up to the mirror and smiled brightly. “I didn’t realize. All my papers say is I’m driving the EP of *Tricks*—and it’s you? No way! I like that *a lot*.”

“Well thank you very much,” Figgy said, as Devon laughed and banged his fist on the steering wheel. “Not that I have a chance in hell of actually *winning*.”

“You never know,” Devon said. “You watch. You could be going home with some metal tonight.”

Alex sat up in his seat. “We’re just happy for the party.”

He’d been parroting the same line all week—it seemed like the thing to say. He’d checked the blogs and read the trades; the official line put the odds of a *Tricks* win at thirty to one. And that was factoring in the new voting rules and a palpable anti-network, anti-establishment mood among Academy membership. No comedy with women in lead roles had won since *Sex and the City*, and everyone knew that was really a show about gay men. It seemed to Alex that

the whole enterprise was just another big corporate sham—deeply sexist, wildly political and not at all friendly to Figgy’s frank, abrasive, lady-centric take on the world. *Tricks* was a token show, singled out as proof the industry valued women—even if it excluded them from the top jobs or overall deals or benefits that were the industry’s genuine rewards.

But that didn’t mean Alex couldn’t hope. He knew how deeply uncool it was to give even half a shit about the Emmys, but the truth was he stupidly, desperately hoped for a win. It would mean so much. For Figgy and the show, obviously, but also for him. He couldn’t help feeling like winning would validate their whole mismatched-but-mysteriously-right partnership. Him, the agreeable, even-keeled, happy-go-lucky husband; her, the opinionated, emotional, whip-smart, crazy-creative wife. He pictured her climbing up to the mic, clutching her chest and pouring her heart out to him, tearing up in a schmaltzy “you complete me” moment, like Oprah rhapsodizing about Stedman’s “grace and dignity.”

“You’re sweet, Devon,” Figgy cut in, fishing around for an Altoid. “But all I’m hoping for tonight is some nice shampoo in the swag bag.”

Then she stretched out her arms, entwining her palms and twisting them around in a fancy yoga flex. Alex watched her stretch, unsure how to read the body language. He couldn’t tell what she really thought. She’d been dismissive and super casual ever since the nominations were announced, rolling her eyes when he asked if she’d written a speech and making a *pew-pew* sound when his mom told her to make room on the mantle.

Alex, meanwhile, could barely contain his excitement. A few days before the awards, he paid a visit to Sergio’s Formalwear, a storefront a few doors down from their vet. It was a musty, overstocked shop, and Sergio turned out to be a pudgy Filipino guy who, after helping Alex up on a stool and going at him with his measuring tape, barely made a peep when informed that the tux wasn’t for a quinceañera or

a wedding or some other ceremony that marked the quaint rituals of mere mortals; this was for *the Emmys*.

“So you’re on the TV?” Sergio asked, motioning to a wall of headshots picturing female wrestlers, seventies child actors, and puppets. “You have picture?”

“No, not me,” Alex said. “My wife. She’s up for best comedy. Very big.”

“So *she’s* on the TV?”

“Not her, no,” he said. “She’s a writer. It’s her words—her whole *world*. She makes the show.”

“So no picture,” said Sergio, measuring his inseam with a little more roughness than Alex felt was entirely necessary.

The tux fit well enough, even if the first words to pop into Alex’s mind when put it on were: *dickhead maître d’*. Even so, with the dress shoes that Figgy picked up special for the occasion, Alex figured he looked decent enough—if not dapper, at least a passable partner to Figgy, who had secured the loaner Valentino through her costume department, with pleats and cinches and underwires and all sorts of enhancing lifts and supports.

“Be outside and ready to get us, okay—maybe circle around?” Figgy said, as the car funneled through traffic. “We may flee early, after we go down in flames to that ABC crap about the *lawyers*. I’d like to get home early and let the babysitter go.”

And there it was again: the yoga flex. What was that?

Then the Town Car lurched to a stop and the door was flung open by a man with an earbud and a crewcut. Alex hopped out and looked up at the Shrine, a massive auditorium adorned with Moorish spires that extended upward like mounds of soft serve. Helicopters hovered above towering banks of bleachers. The entrance was flooded with a saturated glare that turned everyone into players on a soundstage. Everywhere there was lipstick and cleavage, tiny waists and gleaming dentistry. Welcome to Toontown. It really was a cartoon world.

Alex straightened up as the assembled fans and photographers zeroed in on them. He felt a sudden, palpable rush of longing and excitement. He adjusted his sunglasses and ducked his head down, prolonging the moment. For this brief second, he was someone they'd come to see—not a star, obviously, but maybe the sitcom best friend, or the host of a PBS wildlife series.

“Hey!” Figgy called. She was still in the car, reaching out and tugging at the tail of his jacket. “Little help?”

Alex swiveled and offered his hand. Figgy bounded up and plowed into the crowd, immediately falling into what appeared to be a strictly understood protocol. The actors and nominees flitted around the edges of the press lineup, pollinating at ripe spots along the way. Meanwhile the unfamous were funneled into the faster-moving current at the center.

“Come on,” said Figgy over her shoulder, sticking her elbow back and guiding his hand around her inner arm. “Squire me.”

Alex gave her a squeeze and started to join the procession, but within a few steps, Figgy was intercepted. In a flurry of squeals, a press agent from the network introduced herself as “one of the Melissas,” issued a command on her walkie-talkie, uncoupled Figgy from Alex, and herded her away into the *Tricks* posse: five writers, two network executives, and Katherine Pool, the Ozarks-born, Yale-educated actress who played Toni, the housewife-turned-madam.

“Figgy honey—don't you clean up nice?” Katherine exclaimed, pulling her in for a stiff embrace. “Heels even! I don't think I've *ever* seen you out of those marvelous clogs!”

Figgy grimaced and poked out one foot. “I've already got blisters. But look at you! That dress? Gorgeous.”

Katherine made a little curtsy, and the two of them headed toward the press line, all smiles, no visible sign whatsoever of the epic power plays they'd waged against each other over the past year. Katherine was an incredible actress—she had a wide-open, plate-shaped face that appeared to be constantly churning on some deep, myste-

rious thought—but she was famously difficult. Most of it was standard diva stuff—lateness, rudeness, a refusal to wear anything that didn't show off her yoga-toned arms—but her big problem revolved around the show itself. She spent much of the season complaining that her dialogue was substandard and out-of-character and, worst of all, there wasn't enough of it.

Alex made his way into the crowd, joining a lane of traffic just behind the press line. After a few steps, he realized he'd fallen in with the wife pack, a cluster of smooth-skinned, spooked-looking ladies from the leafier districts of the 310. He recognized a few as spouses of guys on Figgy's staff—they were stay-at-home moms, mostly; they met up for coffee or play dates when production kept their husbands at work until all hours. But just as he'd avoided them at work parties and ignored their occasional emails, he now took a few steps sideways out of their wake.

He didn't *dislike* them—not at all! They were all nice enough, and of course he had nothing but respect for their choices as women and mothers. But he wasn't one of them. His life maybe wasn't as over the top as all this, but it was at least vaguely creative. Alex was an account manager for BestSelf, a boutique ad shop that worked with nonprofits—or as described by his boss, the aggro-smarmy Jeff Kanter, BestSelf was “a values-driven agency.” At the moment, Alex was working on testicular cancer, organic school lunches, and shaken babies. He took pride in finding clever ways to employ the dark arts of marketing for righteous causes. Nonprofits didn't bring in big money, but Alex did okay, well enough to have covered them through the lean years. He'd also taken full advantage of the agency's “family-friendly flextime” policy and health insurance, working the system to get six months of paternity leave when the kids were born.

Close to the entrance to the hall, Alex stopped on the red carpet and stood on his tippy toes, peering over the coiffed heads. He spotted the *Tricks* crew at the end of the press line, Katherine huddled with Melissa Rivers and Figgy giving a thumbs-up to a reporter for

Slavic TV. He caught up with Figgy at the towering front doors of the auditorium and led her inside.

Figgy leaned close. “Makeup check,” she whispered. “Am I smudged? That guy from *Access Hollywood* was practically licking me. Have I got monster face?”

“No monster face,” he said, looping a strand of her stiffly ironed hair over her ear. “You’re perfect. Breathe. And breathe again.”

Figgy smiled, the two of them having recently decided that a yoga studio near their house was obviously attempting to one-up and out-do mere breathers with a big sign out front that commanded: “Breathe. And Breathe Again.”

“You know I love you, right?” she said.

“Right back at you.”

Alex planted a kiss on her cheek and reached over Figgy’s shoulder to flag down a tray of champagne. They downed their glasses in quick gulps and headed into the crowd, Alex and Figgy huddling close and submitting to the raw excitement of the spectacle. Alex was surprised at how pleasing it was, seeing so many heretofore fictional characters in person (Jon Stewart, futzing with his bowtie! Rupert Murdoch at a urinal! Janeane Garafalo, smoking a Camel!). When they found their seats—center row, middle back, not far at all from the podium, a good sign—Alex was struck by a sweet, tingling, intoxicating feeling of... what was it? Hopefulness? Hubris? Maybe it was just the proximity to so many fawned-over, sought-after powerful people. Power players, A-listers, and ballers were everywhere. He got a chemical jolt of adrenaline just being in their air space, seeing them shift in their seats and scratch their marvelous faces and tug at their tailored collars—they were just people, after all, people not all that different from him. All the success in the room, all the fame, all the confidence and recognition and ego—for this moment, anyway, Alex felt like just being here was to be assimilated, incorporated, sucked into their force fields.

And the show itself—even that was more exciting than he’d

thought possible for what was essentially a glorified TV taping, with an announcer breaking in during commercial breaks to remind everyone to keep smiling, keep clapping, keep up the *energy*. Ricky Gervais was a genius! And the interpretive dance tribute to the World War II miniseries: actually kind of moving! Alex felt irrationally happy for winners he deemed deserving, of whom there seemed to be a great many, more so than usual, which led to a faint hope that Figgy's dark-horse oddity might pull an upset.

Please, Alex thought, please let it happen. Just this once. Let her win.

The best comedy award came midway through the show, just after a commercial break. Alex knew it was imminent when an ox-shaped guy with a camera on his shoulder came loping up the aisle, crouched down and aimed his lens directly at them. Oh God, he thought: the reaction shot. He squeezed Figgy's arm. It suddenly occurred to him that his wife might actually flip off the camera when the award went to the lawyer show. "Don't even sweat this, 'k?" he whispered in her ear. "Just keep smiling."

And then it happened. Chris Rock opened the envelope, shook his head, grinned, and announced the winner. It took a second for Alex to realize what he'd said; by the time he rose to his feet, Figgy and the whole *Tricks* cast and crew were stampeding forward, down the row of seats and into the aisle. After climbing the steps to the stage, Figgy marched to the front of the crowd and exchanged a greeting with Rock (Alex couldn't believe it—did his wife just *first bump* Chris Rock?).

"I want to thank the Academy and all the nominees—you guys are amazing, but sorry fellas!" she said. "This one's for the ladies!"

A great whoop went up from the crowd. Figgy held up the statue. She wasn't blinking or breathing hard or betraying any writerly anxiety at all. She beamed. Her skin looked luminous, dewy. It was as if she'd been buffed with the fame loofah.

"Oh gosh—I want to thank my killer agent Jess and my manager

Jerry—you guys are *animals*,” Figgy said. “And to Kate and all our fabulous actors. And to Neil at the network and Wanda at the studio and everyone on my crew and my whole darling family, you guys are amazing!”

Alex let out a sound: half-laugh, half-sob. He was suddenly aware of his fists, clenched tight and balled at his chest. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the blinking red light on the camera. He tried and failed to relax his hands. Breathe, he thought. Breathe again.

Figgy paused, nodded once, and seemed to reflect for a moment. “Most of all,” she swallowed. “I want to thank... the Academy, for finally recognizing the oppressed minority of Jewish girls from Sherman Oaks. Rise up, my sisters!”

A huge round of applause sounded from the crowd, and Figgy raised the trophy in triumph. Alex clapped along as she was led away from the mic and into a darkened crowd off stage.

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Figgy didn’t come back after the next commercial break, or the one after that, leaving Alex to sit and stew, his fingertips tingling, a flutter in his throat, and a disbelieving grin locked on his face. Her seat was soon snatched up by an older woman in a saggy, peach-colored gown. Alex gave her a confused greeting.

“Seat filler,” she said, snapping her gum. He shook his head, not understanding. “We come out for the crowd shots. So it’s always a full house? Don’t worry—I’ll skedaddle as soon as—”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Alex said, embarrassed that he needed the explanation.

“That was your wife, wasn’t it?” she asked. “The *Tricks* lady?”

He nodded. “Right—Miss *Tricks*. Do you know if I can go backstage? For the press conference?”

“I wouldn’t try that,” she said, her breath sugary and hot. “You need a pass to get back there. Anyway, there’s only enough seat fillers

to cover the winners. You sit tight—she'll be back.”

Then the stage lights brightened and the music swelled. Alex clapped and tried to feign interest in the other awards. Where was Figgy? In the moment after she won, he'd gone blank. It was as if he'd been concussed by the shock of it. Had he kissed her before she jumped up? One second Rock was ripping open the envelope... the next Figgy was up on stage, the speech spilling out, the joke, the thanks, all those names, the agent and manager and star....

Of course, he thought: *She'd had her remarks prepared all along.* He thought back to the limo and the way she'd stretched, that fancy yoga flex—it was a tell! Beneath all that never-gonna-happen bluster, she'd somehow known her name was in that envelope. Why *shouldn't* it be her? She was like this about much of her life—mysteriously certain. Whereas Alex was constantly plotting contingencies, drifting from one thing to another and clinging to vague notions of realistic expectations, Figgy plowed forward with the force of someone who absolutely deserved what it was they were as sure as hell about to get. To Alex, she seemed magic this way—”The force is strong in this one,” he'd say, as she got the gig or the parking spot or the phone call she'd been counting on all along.

Not that she ever admitted such certainty out loud. That was part of her magic, the Evil Eye part, the part inherited from her gypsy-Ashkenazi ancestors: One never acknowledges or predicts good fortune, lest one incur fate's capricious wrath.

Figgy reappeared at last in the show's final few minutes, trophy clutched close like a football, the seat filler scurrying away at the sight of her. Alex leapt up in the narrow space between the seats, managing to get one arm around her in an awkward side-hug.

She pulled him close as they settled back into their seats.

“Oh God, honey—I am so, so sorry,” she whispered. “I was a hot mess up there. I don't know what happened.”

“Stop!” Alex said. “You were great.”

“But the speech? I can't believe I pulled a Swank.”

Alex narrowed his eyes, not getting it.

“You know—Hillary Swank? When she forgot Chad Lowe? That’s all anyone remembers about her Oscar: forgot Chad. I’m so sorry—I meant to say something nice—I wanted to! But with those insane lights and the guy waving me offstage, all I could think of was my list of work people and my *darling* family. Darling? How lame is that? Like some basket of kitty cats?”

She let her weight fall against him, plopping the trophy into his lap. “I’m such a fucking idiot.”

Alex shook his head and laughed. “It’s fine. I’m fine. *Seriously*. You were incredible. Don’t you dare get into a funk right now—this is nothing but good.” He pinched one of the statue’s wings and laughed. “How crazy is this?”

“The craziest,” she said.

She gripped his hand tightly for the remainder of the show, and then pulled him, giggling, all the way up the aisle. They met up with Katherine and the rest of the *Tricks* contingent—more squeals, this time accompanied by big sloppy kisses—and headed into the crowd, which parted magically at the sight of the trophy. Strangers smiled and flashed thumbs-ups. Alex began to feel that same loopy high he’d gotten in the auditorium, the same pang of confidence by osmosis. He clutched Figgy’s hand and led her outside, across a concrete patio, and toward a press tent. Beyond two vinyl flaps, he could see a swath of red carpet and phalanx of waiting cameramen and correspondents.

Maybe it was all the time he’d spent stewing in his seat while Figgy was backstage, but looking inside, Alex felt a rush of take-charge urgency. He gave Figgy’s hand a squeeze, sidestepped around Katherine, and led the way, waving in a half-salute like a candidate stepping onstage at a rally. As he moved forward, he felt something strange on his foot, like he’d stepped in gum. He looked down. Something was sticking out from underneath his right shoe, bending away from the sole.

Before he could investigate, Alex felt his face go hot. He was now alone at the entrance to the tent, lights flooding the space. He sucked in a breath and collected himself. He was, after all, the man behind the woman, the proudly feminist supporting spouse; this was his moment, too. He prepped himself for the questions from reporters preparing second-day think pieces about the significance of Figgy's win: *Mr. Sherman-Zicklin! Mr. Sherman-Zicklin! How does it feel? What are your thoughts on the evolving roles of women in Hollywood? How will this change things for you at home? For your kids? For your marriage?*

The gaze of the room zeroed in on him. Then silence. A cough. It was as if a thousand onlookers had simultaneously sucked in a breath, held it for a moment, and then exhaled in a single whisper: "nooooooobooooody."

Rushing forward on either side, Figgy and Katherine stepped around him. The energy of the room kicked back to life, flashbulbs popping. "Over here!" "On your left!" "Over the shoulder!"

"Hold this a sec," Figgy said, passing her jeweled clutch with a deft backhand.

Alex took the purse and froze. The tent filled with the barks of photographers calling requests to Katherine, who ducked her chin coquettishly, one impossibly long leg peeking out from her high-slit gown.

"Excuse me—champ? Your shoes? What is *up* with the shoes?"

Alex turned. The voice was a lazy drawl. It was Huck somebody, Katherine's husband—he'd just come inside and was standing a few feet back. He had a shaved head, just-so stubble, and a fitted charcoal tux with a loosely knotted black silk tie. The Concierge. So named by the tabloids, which had feasted on his story a few years back: Nobody singer-songwriter working at Telluride hotel has whirlwind romance with TV star Katherine Pool, marries her in quickie Vegas ceremony, and becomes surrogate dad to her two kids, ten-year-old Penelope and an adopted Chinese baby named Bingwen. Now Huck motioned

toward Alex's feet with a look of alarm. Alex followed his eyes down and saw that both soles of his shoes had peeled away from the undersides and were now flapping madly, like two long, moist tongues.

He hollered ahead to Figgy, his personal shopper. She was a few feet ahead and managed to cut away, mid sound bite.

"Fig, honey?" Alex said. "The shoes you got me? Where'd they come from?"

She smiled and flashed him a thumbs-up. "The County Morgue Thrift Store! Amazing, right? Fifteen bucks!"

Alex felt a knot bunch up in his gut. His Emmy shoes were never meant to hold the weight of a living man. They were made for a corpse. No wonder they were decomposing.

"Dude, you are *fucked*," laughed Huck, who shook his head and quickly ducked away, in a hurry to go God-knows-where. Alex stayed put. Any additional movement, he feared, would cause the shoes to come apart entirely. Figgy had gone back to her interview. As the procession flowed around him, he waved lamely toward the press lineup, as if, yes, he was thrilled to be here, the guy with the sudden paralysis, the jeweled clutch, and the crazy face.

Off to the side, a security guy muttered something into a mic on his lapel and took a few steps forward, intent on putting a stop to the spastic grandstanding of this mere civilian. Out of the corner of his eye, through the tent's entrance, Alex caught sight of someone clambering over a metal gate. It was Huck, head gleaming in the overhead kliegs. Just as the security guard reached Alex to physically shove him along, Huck burst through the entrance, proffered a roll of duct tape, and ripped off two silver strips.

Huck knelt down on the red carpet and wrapped each of Alex's shoes in tape. "Got this from a gaffer," he said. "There you go, Cinderella—glass slipper fits. You're good to go."

"Thank you," Alex stammered, relief and gratefulness flooding over him. "Stupendous. Seriously—that's some MacGyver handiness right there."

“Just tape,” Huck said, rising up and clapping him on the shoulder. “Shit seriously solves ninety percent of the world’s problems. Come on—let’s drink. Let the ladies do the dog and pony show. They’ll catch up with us at the after party.”

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Tricks was assigned to table 852 on the far outer reaches of the tent, near the bathrooms. Somewhere near the center of the space, a football field away, a contortionist in a kelp-pattered unitard gyrated to the tune of plinky electronica, this year’s party inexplicably done in an undersea/nautical theme. Swirly blue lights cast odd shadows over the thousand-plus tables below. Alex and Huck sat across from three wives huddled around an immaculately turned-out fellow called Dan who was describing his Hawaiian wedding to Phil the line producer, while the rest of the *Tricks* contingent mixed it up in the circulating mob.

“Would’ve been nice to be closer, wouldn’t it?” Alex craned his head over the crowd, looking for their wives; the last time he’d spotted Figgy she’d been at the dessert table with Julia Louis-Dreyfus. “If this were a solar system, we’d be out near Pluto, on one of those icy planets that no one knows the names of.”

“Dwarf planets,” Huck said, the stem of a lollipop wagging in the corner of his broad grin. “Love those. Ceres, Makemake, Haumea—irregular orbits, all gaseous and icy. Total fucking mystery. Astronomers can’t get a bead on where they are or even what they’re made of. Dwarf planets *rule*, am I right?”

Alex shook his head and smiled. No dummy, this concierge. “Hey—thanks for the help with the shoes. That was incredible. I’m not sure electrical tape goes with my tie, but I’m just glad not to be barefoot.”

Huck peered down at his handiwork and shook his head. “Nah—looks kind of slick, actually. Like it’s a thing. Next thing you know

taped-up shoes'll be going for \$700 at Kitson. Dandypop?"

Huck reached into his breast pocket and offered Alex a green lollipop.

"No thanks." Alex shrugged.

"You sure? Government-strain medicine. Prime canabiotic. Takes a minute to kick in, but nice. Full-body high, no couch lock, like popping two Xanax. And it's *candy*. Greatest thing ever."

Alex took one. The two sat quietly for a while, sucking and slurping, Huck periodically shooting meaningful grins at Alex. As the lollipop took hold, Alex felt a cozy glaze settle over him. He felt a little bad he wasn't out there with Figgy, who might need him to disentangle her from an aggressive agent or refill her glass or do whatever it was spouses in these situations were supposed to do. But he didn't feel bad enough to move. She'd come get him if she needed him, and anyway, he was happy to kick back on the outskirts of the room with Huck, away from the roar of *you look so great* and *let's have lunch* and *I'm off gluten and I feel fantastic!*

Tonight, Huck said, was the fourth awards show in the last six weeks. "I don't mind this at all, but they're death for Kate." They got to chatting about music, Alex happily discovering that Huck knew enough about early eighties punk to keep up with his gushing fanboy rant about the Germs, the Adolescents, and Black Flag. Even better, he seemed to know a fair amount about food—he had his own sous vide machine and raved for a solid ten minutes about the smoker he'd just bought. More impressive than Huck's gastronomical cred was how genuinely happy he seemed. He loved his lady. He loved her kids. He seemed to especially love all the helpers who did their chores, freeing him up for writing songs, kickboxing, and sucking lollipops.

"I'm telling you, dude," he said. "The plus one thing? It's the best."

"The what?"

"You know—what you are. And me. And—" Huck arched an eyebrow toward their tablemates, slugging back the last of the house

wine. “The hot mommies getting shitfaced while all the power-partner spouses work the room? We’re the plus ones.”

Alex suddenly flashed again on the invite. He hadn’t paid much attention to anything beyond the curlicue lettering. Now he plucked the card out of his coat pocket and inspected the small print at the bottom of the card. There it was, in small Helvetica type the same size as the instructions for parking: plus one.

“You gotta claim that shit,” Huck said, leaning back. “I say it loud and proud to anyone and everyone—that way no one can ever use it against me. I don’t ever forget. Look—today at two in the afternoon I was sipping mint-cucumber water at a spa on Robertson getting my whole business...” Huck waved generally at his midsection, “waxed. A brozilla, they call it. I’ve done the trimming and clipping and manscaping—but this is a whole new level. I’m cleaner than I’ve ever been in my whole sorry life.”

Alex choked on his lollipop. He knew women waxed, but he was opposed to such things on ideological grounds—as a scholarship undergrad at Hampshire, he’d even written a paper that concluded that the bare pubis “is for Barbie dolls and little girls, expressions of a pervy corporate patriarchy.” Discovering that guys, or at least guys like Huck, were now shaving their pubes scrambled his ideological radar. Was it a sign of progress, of gender parity? Was the shorn male groin evidence of post-feminist liberation?

Alex’s theorizing ended with a horrifying mental picture of his own hairless wang, freed from its fuzzy, protective nest of reddish fur, the fleshy bits dangling alone and fully exposed. A shudder rocked through him as he looked back over at Huck, who was now chomping meaningfully on his lollipop. “I’m telling you,” Huck pronounced, “the second you lose sight of who you are, who you *really* are, you’re dead. Wreckage on the roadside. Being a plus one is like riding a motorcycle: crazy fun, but a ton of ways to die.”

“Dying? Who’s dying?” Alex crossed his arms. “I don’t follow.”

Huck motioned over Alex’s shoulder. “Over there. Second table

on the right? In that pathetic *fedora*?”

Alex turned and peered through the crowd. Standing behind a seat and brandishing a deck of playing cards was a guy in his early forties. Grey felt hat, tiny black eyes, micro-sculpted beard that extended across his jaw like a cut-here mark. “The magic guy?”

“That’s Randall Watkins. He was some kind of radio producer—documentary stuff. Then his wife Sandra gets named VP of production at Fox. You know what they say, right? Behind every successful woman in Hollywood, there’s a guy she’s too resentful to fuck? That’s Randall. Right after the wife hits it, he stops working, gets bored, takes a class in sleight of hand, cute, whatever—but then he starts dumping a ton of money into props and costumes, trying to get a whole stage show going. Just bleeding cash. Wife goes around saying she’s a magic widow, complaining that her husband is turning into Doug fucking Henning.”

Alex looked closer. Randall plucked a card from the floral centerpiece and handed it to one of the women at the table, who shrugged and handed it back apologetically. Wrong card. Alex winced. “How do you know all this?”

“Sandra has lunch at the Davies all the time,” he said. “I’m kind of the mayor over there. At least on weekdays from one to four.”

Alex had only seen pictures of the Davies, a members-only club atop a curvy glass office tower on the western edge of the Sunset Strip. It figured Huck was a regular—Alex had no trouble picturing him sprawled out on the low, modular seating with a mojito and a gang of screenwriters, producers, and other industry-associated loafers.

Huck motioned for Alex to come in close. “Poor fucker has no idea what’s about to hit him.”

Alex bent in. “What? What’s hitting him?”

“Petition for dissolution—all drawn up. Sandra’s got another guy in the wings. Trading up. She’s been lining up the notification requirement for months. No therapy, no arbitration, nothing. And get

this: They're two months shy of the magic ten."

Alex leaned back and nodded. He got the general sense of what Huck was saying—the studio lady was leaving the magician—but the stuff about the petition, the notification requirement.... "What," he finally asked, "is the magic ten?"

Huck reared back. "How does a fucking concierge from Colorado know about the magic ten and you don't? California statutory law—split up before your tenth anniversary and you get alimony for half the length of the marriage. Past ten, you get alimony for life. *Life, son.*"

Alex took a swig of wine and tried to absorb this new information. "So he's getting dumped because of... California statutory law?"

"That, and he's a shitty magician."

Alex looked up at the underside of the tent roof, lights dancing across the vinyl in a kaleidoscopic swirl. He wasn't sure if it was the effects of the lollipop, or Huck's story, or just the weirdness of the night catching up with him, but he felt an intense sadness spread out inside his chest. He craned his head around the table, looking for Figgy in the crowd. Was she ready to leave?

"So," Huck said after a long pause. "How long have you been married?"

Alex straightened up. "Last year was—eight? Nine? Yeah—ten is next March."