

# 1

## October–Early November

### Los Angeles

Don't judge me.

I needed to hear her voice like I needed water.

I avoided calling those first days after the breakup, but eventually the pull was too great. I needed contact. My mobile was private. She couldn't be sure it was me. I felt a cheap thrill when she answered the phone, her irritation a balm to my wounded soul.

"Hello."

Silence.

"Hello!"

This was my fourth night in a row.

"Look, Jon, I've had it." Damn! How could she be so sure it was me? I never spoke. "I'm sick of these calls! You're obviously not dealing well with our decision."

Our decision?

"It's 3 a.m.! You're behaving like a juvenile." Pause, silence, maybe a regretful moment, I hoped. "Look, I'm sorry it didn't work out between us, but that's reality. You need to move on. I have. Goodbye, Jon."

Click.

I stared at my PDA, a picture of the woman who'd just hung up staring back, her ice-blue eyes mocking me. There

was no way I was going to let her off that easy. She'd turned my life upside down, turned me into a sleepless wreck. Since the breakup, I'd been unable to do any work, so forgive me if I felt entitled to a few late night phone calls. If I can't sleep, why should she?

After that night, Sara found a way to block calls from my mobile, so I was robbed of the convenience of calling her at will from my newly acquired, post-break-up shoebox of an apartment. Not one to easily accept defeat, feeling there was a deeper psychological goal to be won here, I started making phone calls from the pay phone at a local minimart a block from my apartment building. No slouch herself, Sara quickly caught on, placing a block on that pay phone as well. So began my nocturnal jaunts in ever widening geographical circles from my apartment, looking for new pay phones from which to harass my still loved ex-lover. Within a few weeks, I was beginning to tire of the game, feeling the emptiness and futility of what I was doing, no longer sure of the why or wherefore. At first, I just craved the cadence of her voice in my ear, but later on I enjoyed her fully expressed anger. To my chagrin, though, my nightly excursions came to an abrupt halt in a manner that I never could have anticipated.

My last call was made one night at the beginning of November. I open here because I consider it to be the true beginning of the story I'm about to tell, even though much of the action started well before. On this fateful night, I hit my emotional rock bottom, the despair sucking the last bits of hope from my soul, leaving me with the shell of a body but no feelings to fill it. I felt my life was over, that I would never recover from this breakup, that I had become a walking, loveless zombie of a man. Little did I know, or recognize, once I hit bottom, I couldn't fall any lower. I'd reached my emotional ground zero, which meant there was only one way for me to go. I didn't have the slightest idea of what a wild ride was in store for me because I was too wrapped up in my own misery.

As the light slowly faded from the day, an overwhelming feeling of claustrophobia gripped me, manifesting itself in shortened breath and a rising panic. This was new. I tried to ignore it. The panic warped my sense of time, making five minutes feel like fifty. I sat frozen in my only chair, counting the seconds, wanting them to move faster. Unable to shake the feeling, I took action. I jumped up, grabbed my car keys, and left my tiny apartment. By the time I climbed into my car, I felt a little better, the feeling of claustrophobia receding. Not sure where I was going, I stuck the key in the ignition of my '82 Buick, backed out of my space, and jumped onto Moorpark. As soon as I put some distance between my apartment and me, the feelings of claustrophobia disappeared altogether. I found myself on the 101, heading south. Though just past midnight, the freeway was filled with cars, bright headlights bouncing off the side mirrors, overloading my senses. I floored the gas pedal to keep up with the nighttime flow, joining the defining bloodline all members of the Los Angeles community shared—the freeway. My Regal reacted instantly, jumping forward. I cleared Hollywood in minutes, drove past the set of L.A. high-rises that passed for downtown, then merged onto the 10, heading east toward Las Vegas. A large sign off to my right told me I had two hundred and seventy miles to go. Five hours, probably less at this time of night. I figured, why not?

As the miles slid by, the sprawl of Los Angeles began to thin out. Night settled in around me, a sense of peace. I was escaping, driving away from my life, hoping the farther I traveled from Los Angeles—from Sara—the better I would feel, hoping for just a little while I could forget about her. After two hours on the freeway, I spotted a sign for a Howard Johnson's Rest Stop and ubiquitous Starbucks. A sense of vague familiarity washed over me. Automatically, without thinking, my hands steered the Regal toward the exit ramp, through the extended parking lot, past the gas pumps, up to the front entrance. I put the car in park, listening to the

quiet hum of the Regal's well-tuned engine. Through the glass doors of the entrance, I could partially see the interior, the Starbucks sign just inside pointing directly back, the restaurant off to the right. An arrow for the restrooms hung below the Starbucks sign. Suddenly, I realized I'd been here before. With her. On our first trip to Vegas together. I closed my eyes, trying to push her image out of my mind, but with little success. The realization there was no escape from my mind—Sara was implanted there like a microchip, her face, her memories—made me feel helpless. Even now, without knowing it, without realizing what I was doing, I'd followed her here. I dropped my head in defeat, and then opened my eyes, my vision centering on the restroom sign. Knowing the pull was too great, I gave in to the urge. I turned the car off, climbed out, pocketed my keys, and walked through the doors of the Howard Johnson's back into my past.

I found myself standing in the lobby, the restaurant to my right, staring down the hallway at the door leading into the women's restroom. I looked around to see if anyone was watching, noticing as I did so a large family sitting in the back corner devouring what I could only assume to be their late night dinner. Even in my heightened state of agitation, I couldn't help but stare. The father must have weighed at least four hundred pounds, his jowls jiggling as he stuffed a fork filled with pancakes, dripping syrup and butter, into his mouth. No slouch herself, the wife out-weighed her husband by fifty-plus, though she wasn't eating anything. I wondered how she could be that big and not be eating constantly. Their son weighed somewhere in the mid-two's, though I was sure he couldn't be more than twelve years old. Plates of pancakes and French toast before him on the table, he was holding a fork in each hand, his right descending for another helping of French toast while his left was on the way up with a large serving of pancakes. He ate with a fever as if this might be his last time. While the father and son

stuffed their faces, the mother stared off into space. Suddenly, the son looked up from his plate, locking eyes with me, his look voracious and feral, as if when he finished his pancakes and French toast, I'd be next. I shuddered, then blinked. When I looked again, the boy's eyes were glazed over and dull, his gaze quickly returning to his plate.

Shaking my head to clear it, I turned away from the family and focused on the task at hand. I stepped toward the restrooms, glancing around to make sure no one was watching. With a quick look over my shoulder, I stepped through the door. Once inside, I listened for the rustling of feet and clothing, but heard only the hum of the exhaust fan in the ceiling. The restroom was extra clean and looked odd to me, like something was missing, when suddenly I remembered urinals were not necessary in the women's restroom. I passed the first three stalls, pushing the door open to the fourth, the big one set up at the end of the row for handicapped people. It had more room than the others, Sara's choice. I stepped inside, bolting the door behind me. The toilet paper roll was almost empty. I was glad I didn't have to go to the bathroom. I sat in the only place I could, lifted my feet off the ground so no one could see my masculine boots, and then willed my memory to bring my past into the present, even if only for a few moments.

Back on that first trip to Las Vegas, we'd been together a few months, a time in our relationship where faults were overlooked, fights dissipated like the wind, and our kisses carried a passion charged with a storm-like intensity. Sara had checked the restroom to make sure it was empty, then pulled me inside and dragged me to the back stall. At first, I was self-conscious of where I was, but Sara seemed completely unconcerned. We fumbled our pants down low enough for easy access. Out of necessity, taking into consideration the logistics of the small space, Sara turned around, offering herself up to me. As the memory gained traction, it took over my entire body. I could almost feel her touch

on my skin. I squeezed my eyes shut, wanting to hang on to the memory as long as I could. She'd been so excited that night. I could feel her hands reaching behind, grabbing hold of my waist, her body pressed against mine, her—

“—Excuse me. What are you doing?”

My eyelids shot open. A muscular, black security guard was standing on the tips of his toes staring over the stall door at me. A large red keloid scar, running the breadth of his forehead, made him look even more imposing and threatening than he already was. I glanced down at myself, sitting on the toilet, my knees pulled up to my chest, tears streaming down my cheeks. I appeared utterly ridiculous, I realized a little too late.

“Could you open this door? Please.”

I stepped off the toilet seat lid and planted my feet on the ground, opening the door but unable to move past the large, muscular obstruction before me.

“Now, could you get the hell out of here.” He took a step back giving me just enough room to pass.

Without a word, I quickly sidestepped the guard and double timed my way out of the restroom, the giant on my heels. With my head down, I ran directly into the oversized mother who'd been staring into space, standing directly before me, a look of disgust on her face. I bounced back a foot, apologizing as I did so.

“Pervert!”

My head dropped another two inches in shame and, without looking back, I ran straight out the front exit. Moving toward my car, I noticed a line of pay phones off to one side of the parking lot. I barely missed a step, as I turned in mid-stride away from my car toward the phones. I was crying again. By the time I picked up the receiver, I was a teary, blubbering idiot. I heard a voice in the distance getting closer and louder.

*Don't do it! Do you hear me?*

Quickly I turned, first one way, then the other. I couldn't

see anyone. The parking lot was empty. Then I realized it was the Voice in my head who visited me from time to time, the Voice of Reason that stopped me—or at least tried to—from doing the most idiotic things in life. This was the Voice that warned me away from dangerous situations, when to keep my mouth shut in social situations, what women to stay away from—enough said. My Voice was often wrong, so I paid no mind. I grabbed the phone.

*You moron, do not make that phone call!*

Shut up, damn it!

*Idiot, that's what you are. She's finished with you and nothing you do is going to change that fact. At least save us some respect. You know she's getting it on long and hard with the French guy you saw—*

I slammed my head against the side of the phone booth as hard as I could. I had been avoiding this for weeks, but knew sooner or later I would have to deal with these thoughts. At the moment though, it was more than I could bear. I figured a good whack to the head would silence my Voice. I felt a lump forming on my forehead, blood rushing to the bruised area.

*What, you think a little pain is going to shut me up? You're wrong, Jon. I'm just here to help you get through this, but at the moment, you seem to want to do everything except forget about her. She's over, gone, caput. Do I need to spell—*

I slammed my forehead against the side of the phone booth again. It didn't hurt as much this time, so I did it again, but I got carried away and before I knew it was banging my head over and over against the metal siding, the pent-up anger and frustration and hurt flowing out of my body. I stopped when I felt blood dripping down my forehead. I stood still a moment. Silence. Nothing. My Voice was gone. I glanced around the parking lot. The large family was staring at me.

“What? Haven't you ever seen a person mutilate himself in the name of love before?” I yelled at them. I turned my

back on them and grabbed the phone receiver.

*This is what you call love? True love flows in both directions, Jon. Sara doesn't love you any longer. She loves the new guy. You see what I'm saying? Don't you have any pride? Doesn't that make you want to—*

I slammed my head so hard against the phone booth that—

I was gone a couple of minutes at most, I think. Next thing I knew, the black security guard was standing over me with the marathon eaters flanking him on either side, all of them staring at me with a look of frightened fascination.

“You okay, my man?” the guard said, his voice not unfriendly.

“I think so,” I muttered as he helped me up. Vertical, my head did a one-eighty. I lost balance, but the guard held my shoulders and kept me upright. I felt like a doll with his gigantic bear-sized paws holding me. My head was ringing.

“You got a good lump.”

My fingers skimmed the top of my forehead, a large lump formed above my right eye.

The son pointed at me. “Mommy, what’s wrong with him?”

The mother leaned over to her son. “He’s a pervert.”

The guard turned around. “All right, folks, let’s get along. There’s nothing more to see.” With some indignant glares and a few grunts, the family backed off and headed for their car. The guard turned to me. “She must have done a number on you.”

I nodded, so happy to have a sympathetic ear. “Yeah, she did.”

“My name’s Donovan.”

“Jon. Jon Fixx.”

“Nice to meet you, Jon Fixx.” He guided me over to a bench and helped me sit.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Donovan looked over my face. “Listen,



man, any woman makes you do this to yourself ain't worth it. If she was worth it, you'd still be with her. Know what I'm saying?"

"Sorry for causing a ruckus." I took a deep breath, looking off into the distance.

"What are you talking about? Working night shift out here can get real slow. Watching you bang your head against the phone booth was better than going to the movies." He laughed with a deep, hearty guffaw, but I didn't feel like he was laughing at me, rather that he was laughing with me, sharing in my pain. Across the parking lot, I watched the marathon eaters climb into a Volkswagen Beetle. I could have sworn I heard the car groan as the father settled into the driver's seat. Donovan followed my gaze.

"Be glad you're not them. They stop here once a month on the way to Vegas. They never talk when they come in, just order the same food, eat, and leave." He paused, still staring at them. I thought he was going to say more about them, but he turned back to me. "Here." He placed some quarters in my hand. "I know that look. You got the fix. Once you get the urge, you gotta take the hit, whether it's good for you or not." I stared at him. "Make the call." He laid a crooked smile on me.

I noticed his left front tooth was chipped. The scar on his forehead seemed to be glowing. I bet this guy could mix it up. Maybe I could hire him to take out the new guy.

"I have to get back inside, make sure everything's going fine in there." He turned for the restaurant doors. Over his shoulder, he looked back at me. "Next time you're heading to Vegas, make sure to stop in. I work the nights." He waved to me before he stepped inside the restaurant. "Good luck to you, Jon Fixx."

I waved back and watched him disappear inside the double doors. I felt like I'd made a friend. I stared after him a moment longer, then turned to the phone. I picked up the receiver and dropped all four quarters into the coin slot.

I dialed a number I'd dialed a hundred times before. The phone rang, and rang, and rang—

“Allo.” A very tired, just awakened male voice answered with a French accent. His name was Michel. I knew that much. Stupid name! I held the receiver in my hand, frozen. This was new. Sometimes my Voice could be so irritating in its accuracy. I said nothing. Again, “Allo.” He drew out the “o” in a patronizing manner.

A rumbling started in my chest, slowly rising up through my lungs into my throat, gaining force as it moved through my vocal chords, forcing my mouth open into a scream of terrifying proportions, loud and incoherent, primal. I directed the noise into the receiver with all the energy I could muster, and after several seconds of this, the scream dissipated into a garble, then to silence. I was completely spent, drained. I placed the receiver back to my ear.

“*Connard.*” Click. Asshole. I looked it up when I got home.

And that was that.

Broken. I felt broken. I was broken. I slowly hung the phone back on its hook. I leaned against the booth, trying to gain some semblance of order in my head but realized there was no order to gain. My head was empty, as was my soul. A French guy was sleeping at my lover's—ex-lover's—house. And if he was sleeping at her house, then of course they must be—

*See, what did I tell you? You should have listened—*

Just shut up.

*Okay.*

I was tired, defeated.

I turned my back on the booth, lowering myself down to a crouch, my head falling into my hands. I felt numb. I knew it was over. I leaned against the booth for an indeterminate amount of time. When I finally gathered the energy to stand, I had trouble getting vertical. Both my legs had fallen asleep. Head hanging low, I stumbled over to my car in an aimless stupor. I drove the two interminable hours

home, pulling up to the ugly, pink building that housed my one-room cave, feeling far worse than I felt when I'd left, which I didn't think possible. Even through my depression haze, though, I noticed a not-so-nondescript black Lincoln Town Car parked in front of the building. The windows were tinted, so I couldn't see inside. Pulling into the underground parking lot, I glanced in my rearview mirror for another look at the Lincoln. It creeped me out, as if the car were watching me. I passed through the security gate to the external set of stairs and climbed up to my first-floor apartment. In the hallway, twenty feet away, a man wearing a black suit exuding forceful nonchalance was leaning against my doorframe.

He was taller than me, with large shoulders and lean, angular features. I knew immediately I had never met him before, but he had official written all over his face. It was 6:00 a.m. This guy was not good news. But I was not in a frame of mind to do anything other than walk right into the gaping jaws of fate. I closed the distance between us in seconds.

"You're Jon Fixx."

"Since I was born," I answered. But he wasn't asking. I waited.

He pulled out his wallet. I could see a shoulder holster holding a .357 tucked under his jacket. At this point, I didn't care if he arrested me or shot me. Over the last few months, as my life fell apart, I'd done a good job at pissing off some very powerful interests so I figured this guy was sent by one of them to clear the air.

"I'm Ted Williams. FBI." He flashed his badge at me proving he was, in fact, an FBI agent. My instincts were right. Official. But why the FBI was paying me a visit, I had no clue. Keeping my cool, I squinted at the badge, indicating confusion with my look.

"Isn't he dead?"

Williams stared at me, a grim look on his face. He didn't find me amusing.

On a roll, I said, “Where’s your bat and glove?”

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“You didn’t see any good trannies on Santa Monica Boulevard? Thought you might have better options in the Valley?” I figured whatever this guy was planning on doing to me, it was preordained, so what I said, or didn’t say, would not affect the outcome in any way. He was going to do what he was going to do, regardless. I was feeling reckless. Something inside my soul had unlatched earlier in the night when I heard the new guy’s voice on Sara’s phone.

My response to Ted Williams’ question earned me a punch in the solar plexus. I doubled over for a second, realizing maybe I did care about what happened to me. The punch hurt. I was in more trouble than I thought. I took a deep breath, steeled my solar plexus, and leaned upright. “Wrong answer?”

“Open your door.”

I complied. He followed me into the apartment, turning on the overhead light by the front door. He took a quick once-over of the place, taking in the messy apartment, the empty pizza boxes and clothes strewn all about. His eyes settled on the dartboard hanging on the wall near the front door. I’d put a picture of Sara up on the board. At the moment, every dart was sticking somewhere in her face.

“Michel said you were strange.”

Michel! That got my attention. Standing in the middle of my room, I stared at him.

“That’s right, Jon. I’m here because of the phone calls. And the late night stakeout-stalker sessions.”

Oh yeah, the stakeouts. Forgot to mention those. I’d been parking outside Sara’s house at night so I could see for myself what was really going on with her. The first few nights I was there nothing happened. Then one night, a man I had to assume was Michel pulled up in a Jaguar with Sara in the passenger seat. Over the next few weeks, I saw Michel go to the building on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Sat-

urday nights. He usually showed up around 7:30 p.m. and left about midnight. I had to grudgingly admit he was a good-looking guy. Blond hair, probably blue eyes, though I never got close enough to find out. He was fit, I could tell. I knew enough to know that the general public would not consider my behavior healthy, so I never did more than observe, though the thought of confronting Sara and Michel crossed my mind many times.

“How do you know Michelle?” I asked, doing my best to stand tall, appear confident.

“It’s Michel.” He pronounced it mee-shel, accent on the second syllable.

“I prefer my way.”

Williams ignored my comment. “Michel is my cousin.”

“But he’s French.”

“They have cousins in France.” He stared at me, his eyes narrowing slightly. “Jon, it stops today. Leave Sara and Michel alone. No more phone calls. No more drive-bys. No more parking outside her building. You understand?”

I felt completely betrayed. Sara and I had shared our most intimate secrets, dreams, desires, everything together. Only weeks before we were lovers. Now, I was her stalker.

“If I don’t?”

“I was hoping you would say that.” Williams smiled wide, sadistically. He slowly took his suit jacket off, his arms reaching out behind his back, the jacket easily sliding off his shoulders.

“Do you practice that move in front of a mirror?”

His smile disappeared. I noticed his button-down shirt was a size too small, intentionally, I figured, to show off his bulging biceps. He circled around behind me. “On your knees, Jon.”

“Thanks, but no, that’s not my thing. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, if that’s what you’re into.”

I felt a solid impact against my shoulder blades, my knees buckling involuntarily, dropping me to the ground.

Williams stepped behind and leaned over to be extra menacing. He threatened me with all types of terrible images about arrest and jail, anal sex, and an inmate named Bubba. This guy had a way with words. After a few minutes of this, I relaxed a bit. He was not here on official business. He was doing a favor for his cousin. Therefore, I was probably not in much danger. Then I turned this thought on its head, thinking that maybe I was in more danger specifically because this guy was not on official business. He didn't have to check in with anyone, so he could do whatever his personal moral code would allow him to because there was no official oversight. But the FBI was the least dangerous of the many different government protection agencies as far as I knew. The CIA and the NSA—those guys meant business. The FBI consisted of Boy Scouts compared to the other organizations.

“Stand up,” Williams demanded.

I complied, my initial fear now replaced by a slow burning anger. Hearing Michel's voice on the phone had sent me over the edge. My relationship with Sara was over. I understood that much. Williams circled around to my front. He took a step toward my dartboard, pulling a dart out of the wall.

“You're not going to torture me with that, are you?”

“Shut up.” He turned around, regarding me. “Michel told me you'd be a piece of cake, wave the badge and the gun around a bit and that would be that. But you're not scared, are you, Jon?”

I shrugged. Williams crossed behind me. The dart whizzed past my ear and struck the bullseye on the dartboard. Williams leaned into my ear.

“You should be. Let me show you why.”

He proceeded to illustrate several different ways in which he could immobilize and then kill me by breaking or slicing my neck, piercing my heart, crushing my brain or, my favorite, shoving a key into my temple. As he moved me through

these variations of near death, he usually stopped the moment before the final blow would have finished me off. I remained limp throughout the exercise of intimidation, figuring my relaxed compliance and lack of fear would be the best way to upset him. Standing before me, car keys in his right hand, he had a hint of satisfaction on his face. This was his Achilles' heel, as far as I could tell. His arrogance and cocksureness would get him into a situation one day that would be more than his capabilities could afford. Williams looked at me. I stared back at him. He wanted a response.

“Are you going to show me dance moves next?” I asked.

Williams scowled. He pulled his gun out.

“Do I need to show you how this works?”

I shook my head. I felt empty inside. I'd had enough. I wanted Williams to leave so I gave him what he wanted. “I'll leave Sara alone.”

And I meant it. Even if Williams hadn't shown up with his unorthodox and illegal display of government power gone astray, I knew I would not be contacting Sara any more. Beyond that, I had no idea what my future looked like. My mind felt fuzzy and unclear, not like I'd come to a crossroads but rather that I'd hit a brick wall head first, and no matter how far I looked to the left or to the right, the wall stretched as far as the eye could see. I would have to sit in this spot until I found the tools to take the wall apart a brick at a time. Williams peered at my face to see if he could find any hints of irony or deception, but I gave him back only the truth. He put his gun away, grabbed his jacket, and threw it back on in one move, then stepped to the door. He turned around.

“A piece of advice, Jon Fixx. Be careful who you associate with. You could find yourself in a world of trouble if you spend time hanging out with the wrong people.”

And then he was gone. What the hell did that mean? Standing in the middle of my apartment room, I stared at

the closed door, the image of Ted Williams in the doorway still visible in my mind.

Now what? No more Sara. It was over.

In retrospect, our breakup could not have come at a more inopportune time in my life. Over the last several months, my professional status had drawn me into the service of some unusually powerful clients, clients whom it was extremely unwise to disappoint. But my mental and emotional faculties had been so compromised during this same period that my decision-making skills had diminished below any healthy, rational level. The attorney general of California was threatening to sue me, or worse. I was mixed up with a Mafioso boss and his family, which I didn't yet fully understand the ramifications of. Now, to make matters worse, I'd bothered my ex-girlfriend so much that I had just received an unexpected visit from an employee of the Federal Bureau of Investigation waving around a .357 magnum Colt and doing his best Dirty Harry imitation. My biggest problem, however, was that without Sara, I felt like a complete and total loser, and if I wanted to avoid making my situation even worse than it already was, I had to figure out how to stop feeling that way.

Maybe understanding how it had come to pass would be the first step. With the feel of Williams' hand still fresh on my shoulder, I sat down on the floor of my dingy apartment, staring back in time, searching for some clarity. The Sara cold front had been moving in on me since early summer, having a solid, negative impact on my work. Throughout the summer and into the fall, I tried to convince myself, not very successfully, that I'd run into a good case of writer's block. Then one fateful day while I was in the middle of working on a project that was beginning to feel like it could have life or death consequences, Sara came home from work and turned my life inside out. She threw her keys in the basket on the bookshelf, closed the door with purpose and, standing legs akimbo in the entryway as if she



were facing off in a Wild West gun battle, locked her eyes on my face. Backlit by the light peeking through the open space between the door and the frame, she looked beautiful, blond hair cascading down over her shoulders, her trim waist highlighted by the tight blouse she'd worn to work that day. It was almost dark in the room, the light from the hallway blinding me a bit so I couldn't see her eyes. She stood there for several moments, silent. I glanced back at the computer screen where I'd been diligently working, though the screen was blank. Everything I typed was immediately erased. This inability to write anything worth saving was creating an ever-present panic deep in my gut. Sara's voice interrupted my mental dithering.

"Jon, I'm not in love with you. You need to move out."

She may as well have said, "Sure was nice weather today." No emotion. Flat. I responded in kind, because when you're in shock, that's what happens. You go into autopilot.

"Why?" Meaning, "Why should I move out?" I tried to ignore the first part.

"I've fallen in love with someone else."

Three things wrong with this answer. First, I didn't ask her if she had fallen in love with someone else, I asked, "Why should I move out?" Second, I didn't ask her if she'd fallen in love with someone else! Third, during my most recent visit to New York, I had decided to pop the Big Question, and this significant a change in our relationship status would severely hamper my sought-after outcome.

After that, things unfolded very quickly because that's how Sara liked it. Make a decision, then act without hesitation. She had those words taped above her computer at work. She wanted it over. She'd moved on. She was finished with our relationship. That first night, I went overboard. I cried. I begged. I pleaded. I followed her around the condo all night, peppering her with questions about who the new guy was. She was ice. Not a word out of her. After a time, the tears stopped, the threats started. I intimated that when

I discovered this guy's name, I would hunt him down and break his legs. I would make him pay for destroying our beautiful relationship.

She was brushing her teeth for bed when I reached the threatening stage of my process. Her movements purposeful, she picked up a water glass resting on the bathroom counter and quickly and efficiently rinsed out her mouth. Setting the glass down with finality, she said, "Jon, you will do nothing of the sort. You and I are over. If it had not been Michel—" Michel, French! "—he would have been someone else. Our relationship ended a long time ago. I'm doing this because I know you. If I don't make it final, you will drag it out. I think you are a wonderful person. Someday, you may even realize that. I need someone else. Not you."

I spent the night on the sofa chair by the front window staring out at the L.A. skyline. She slept in our bed—her bed. In the morning, we didn't speak. She left for work. I packed up and moved out. Luci, my best friend in the world, helped me move. I found the small aforementioned studio apartment later that day. It was dark and dingy, just like a cave, and I took it against Luci's advice. He wanted me to stay with him and Izzy, his girlfriend, but I didn't want to subject them to my misery, so I politely declined his offer. I bought a TV, futon, and plastic silverware, settling in for the miserable weeks and months to come. Within days, the glow from my computer screen was the only light in my life. The sparse, unkempt, cramped apartment became a metaphor for what I was feeling inside. My better half was gone. Pizza boxes stacked up. Luci stopped in every so often to check on me, to give me a pep talk, but having known me for many years, he didn't expect much.

Several weeks into my self-imposed exile, I heard Luci's knock on the door.

"It's unlocked."

Luci stepped inside. At six feet, lean and fit, straight brown hair to his shoulders, he looked imposing in the

doorframe. He was wearing a white gi and sandals. There was a little comfort in the sight of something familiar, unchanged. He was carrying a picnic basket. He gave me a once-over. My arm was cocked, ready to throw a dart at Sara's picture. I'd already gotten direct hits in each of her eyes and nose. I was now aiming for her ears. He looked from me to the cardboard frame, taking it all in.

"Well, this is something new."

I lowered my arm. Luci closed the door behind him, realizing that the only light in the room came from the small light fixture I'd attached above the kitchen aimed at the dartboard. He shook his head slowly from side to side, toeing the stack of pizza boxes near the door. "This is a little out there, even for you, Jon."

"People hang pictures of their loved ones on the wall all the time."

"Then spotlight the picture and throw darts at it?"

I shrugged.

"I guess you're nowhere near letting this go?" Luci asked, knowing the answer.

I looked at Sara's picture and shook my head.

"Listen, Jon, I know you love Sara, but sometimes things don't work out because other better things are on the horizon. You understand?"

I stared at him, completely unwilling to consider any future that was not a mirror image of my past, even though I knew there was truth in his words.

"OK, fine. But so I don't have to worry about you, would you answer your damn cell phone when I call? Izzy's worried about you, too. She asks about you at least three times a day."

"Sorry about that. I've been avoiding the phone. I'd rather not take a chance on answering."

"San Francisco? The Nickels?"

I nodded glumly.

Luci took in the information silently. After a moment, he

asked, “How’s the writing coming along?”

I pointed to the computer screen sitting on the plastic outdoor chair I’d been using as my writing table while seated cross-legged yoga style on the floor. The screen was empty.

“That doesn’t look promising.”

I smiled for the first time in a long time. “I agree.”

Eying the pizza boxes, Luci said, “Pizza is dead food. You need to eat something healthy. The pizza will only keep you depressed.” He motioned to the picnic basket on the floor. “Izzy figured you could use some home-cooked food. There’s pesto pasta in here, a spinach salad with tofu, and a chocolate on chocolate cake. You need it more than I thought.”

With sincerity, I said, “Tell Izzy thanks.”

“You need anything?”

I stared at the floor. “No, I’ll be okay. Thanks for coming over.”

“Call if you do.”

“I will.”

Luci stepped into the hallway, closing the door, the light in the room leaving with him. I glanced back at my computer screen, realizing I hadn’t done any decent work since before August. By that time, I had finished all my interviews and research for “The Coffee Shop Lovers,” the novella for Scott Michaels and Anna Jensen, my November wedding couple. In August, I had been working on the first draft of their story while attempting to complete a final draft of “The Internet Love Affair” for Candy Nickels and Edward Bronfman, due mid-August for an end-of-August wedding.

In the eight years I’d been doing this, I’d never missed a wedding deadline, but by the beginning of August I was in danger of doing just that. I’d written several drafts for Candy and Edward, but they seemed flat and uninteresting, not remotely representative of my normal product. I had ambitiously intended to finish all my projects by the end

of August so I could spend the final four months of the year working on my forever-unfinished first novel, a labor of love I'd started just before entering college and was still trying to complete. The biggest obstacle for reaching this goal was the overwhelmingly negative impact my degraded relationship with Sara had on my writing. By August, everything I wrote had a dark slant to it, not a characteristic conducive to love stories. How was I supposed to write love stories for other people while my own romantic world was falling apart? The due date for "The Internet Love Affair" came and went and I was nowhere near having a finished product for them. If I had given them what I had at the time, they would have asked for their money back. But the problem was not just my personal crisis of love interfering with my ability to write. The couple themselves also posed a problem for me. If I had liked Candy, or Edward, the whole situation might have turned out differently. Maybe I would have been inspired in some way to get the story done. But as fate would have it, I didn't like either one of them. They were self-involved, spoiled, shallow, and boring. Third-generation wealthy, their trust funds provided what the grandparents, and then parents, had worked hard for. They enjoyed all the money without the benefit of having to put in any of the hard labor. Candy said the words "me" and "I" more than any client I'd ever interviewed. Edward was just an arrogant prick. With my relationship drama in full swing, I didn't have a chance in hell of finishing their story.

Several days before the wedding, Candy's father, the current attorney general of California, called with veiled legal threats about missing deadlines and financial repercussions and the like. I hate bullies, and I hate being bullied even more. I decided I liked the father even less than the daughter. Looking back, I should have returned their money immediately after hanging up the phone and begged personal mental illness. I should have asked for more time,

though Candy's father had made it clear that was not an option. So I just sent them what I had, which was definitely a mistake. The phone calls started coming the day before the wedding, and they have not let up since. Now, anytime my PDA buzzed, if I didn't recognize the number, I didn't answer it. The messages they left were disturbing enough. I didn't need to hear them live. Nickels Sr., Edward, Candy, and even her younger brother Nick Jr. were all calling. In a strange twist, Nick Jr.'s messages were more vicious than the others. I hoped eventually they would tire of harassing me, but they were relentless. After two months, moving into November, the calls were still coming.

When I first stumbled onto the idea of writing short Hollywood-framed love stories for couples about to become newlyweds, I never imagined one day I'd be ceaselessly harassed and threatened by my clients. Over the years, one of the side benefits of the job had been honing my skills of perception while interviewing the couple and their family and friends. I often discovered closely guarded secrets kept by one, or both, of the newlyweds-to-be that, if revealed, would shatter the delicate bonds of trust needed to keep the couple's happiness intact. Generally, my clients wanted me to write what they wanted to believe to be their history together, not actually what was their history together. Over time, one of the harder parts of my job was realizing early on what each half of the couple actually wanted to be written, and not written. Regardless of my clients' wishes, however, I considered it my job to know fact from fiction. Finding out about the petty fights, the side flings no one knew about, the breakups that happened before they finally settled in, the ubiquitous ex was the ground neither member of the couple wanted to cover or discuss, but which family and friends were more than happy to gossip about *ad nauseam*. Usually, the happy, positive, loving information came from the couple, while the juicy, racy information was provided from those close to the couple. Once I had the truth,

I would then write the story I knew the couple wanted their friends and family to read, and often it was not the complete truth.

But writing anything other than the complete truth for Candy and Edward became next to impossible. I grew to hate the assignment far more than any project I'd ever taken on, wanting nothing more than to be done with them. As August wound down, I was on a crash course for failure, but I was so wrapped up in my own romantic demise I was unable to see the bigger picture.

I looked down at my computer, opening up the Nickels folder, clicking on the final draft I had sent to them. I began to read, stopping myself only moments into it, realizing I had been incredibly foolish—and mean—for turning over to them a story that had no filter. I'd given them a truthful, unedited version of who they were or, at least, how others saw them to be, and it was not a pretty picture. During my interviews with friends of the couple, I heard more negative gossip than I'd heard on any previous job. Many of Candy's friends seemed like sycophants who cared more about Candy's wealth than her friendship. Edward's buddies had derogatory nicknames for his bride I'd never heard friends of the groom use before. Now, over two months later, my decision to hand over their story was still haunting me. I remembered the first conversation I had with Nickels Sr. after I'd sent off my final draft FedEx to Candy. Not even a day had passed from the moment I sent the final draft when I realized what I had done, so I decided to send the fifty percent deposit back as well. I knew I didn't deserve to get paid for what I'd written. Nickels Sr. was the first to call. I unsuspectingly answered my PDA. He started talking before I'd even said hello.

“I don't care that you sent the money back, Fixx. Candy has been crying nonstop ever since she got that piece of shit you call a love story. Candy means the world to me. If she's unhappy, I'm unhappy. I'll do whatever it takes to

make sure everybody knows you're a complete fraud! Then I'm going to destroy your life."

In a foolish, futile attempt at gaining some lenience, I tried to explain to him that I was having trouble with my own love life, but he cut me off.

"They've called off the wedding, did you know that, you little maggot?"

I reacted to that information with silence.

"I hold you one hundred percent responsible for this, you piece of shit. I knew I never should have hired you. My damn wife thought your romance novella would be such a great gift. Edward's the one who cancelled the wedding, so I'm going to take care of him first, then I'm coming after you. I'm going to make sure you never write another story for anyone ever again."

Feeling weak in the knees, I tried to protest. "But Mr. Nickels, you can't pin that all on me. Maybe in the long run, this is all for the best. If Candy and Edward are having second thoughts—"

"Watch your back, Jon Fixx. I'm coming." Then he hung up.

Looking back on that conversation, I remember thinking it couldn't get any worse. Between my problems with Sara and my problems with the attorney general of California, how could my life become any more complicated or depressing? Then it did. Soon after Nickels made it clear to me he was going to ruin my professional and personal life, that's when Tony Vespucci came calling.