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Live Wire

Written by Harlan Coben

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Chapter 1

The ugliest truth, a friend once told Myron, is still better than the prettiest of lies.

Myron thought about that now as he looked down at his father in the hospital bed. He flashed back sixteen years, to the last time he had lied to his father, the lie that caused so much heartbreak and devastation, a lie that started a tragic ripple that, finally, disastrously, would end here.

His father's eyes remained closed, his breathing raspy and uneven. Tubes seemed to snake out from everywhere. Myron stared down at his father's forearm. He remembered as a child visiting his dad in that Newark warehouse, the way his father sat at his oversized desk, his sleeves rolled up. The forearm had been powerful enough back then to strain the fabric, making the cuff work tourniquet-like against the muscle. Now the muscle looked spongy, deflated by age. The barrel chest that had made Myron feel so safe was still

there, but it had grown brittle, as though a hand pressing down could snap the rib cage like dried twigs. His father's unshaven face had gray splotches instead of his customary five o'clock shadow, the skin around his chin loose, sagging down like a cloak one size too big.

Myron's mother—Al Bolitar's wife for the past forty-three years—sat next to the bed. Her hand, shaking with Parkinson's, held his. She too looked shockingly frail. In her youth, his mother had been an early feminist, burning her bra with Gloria Steinem, wearing T-shirts that read stuff like "A Woman's Place Is in the House . . . and Senate." Now, here they both were, Ellen and Al Bolitar ("We're El-Al," Mom always joked, "like the Israeli airline"), ravaged by age, hanging on, luckier by far than the vast majority of aging lovers—and yet this was what luck looked like in the end.

God has some sense of humor.

"So," Mom said to Myron in a low voice. "We agree?"

Myron did not reply. The prettiest of lies versus the ugliest truth. Myron should have learned his lesson back then, sixteen years ago, with that last lie to this great man he loved like no other. But, no, it wasn't so simple. The ugliest truth could be devastating. It could rock a world.

Or even kill.

So as his father's eyes fluttered open, as this man Myron treasured like no other looked up at his oldest son with pleading, almost childlike confusion, Myron looked at his mother and slowly nodded. Then he bit back the tears and prepared to tell his father one final lie.

Chapter 2

six days earlier

“Please, Myron, I need your help.”

This was, for Myron, a bit of a fantasy: a shapely, gorgeous damsel in distress sauntering into his office like something out of an old Bogey film—except, well, the saunter was more of a waddle and the shapeliness was coming from the fact that the gorgeous damsel was eight months pregnant, and really, sorry, that kind of killed the whole fantasy effect.

Her name was Suzze T, short for Trevantino, a retired tennis star. She had been the sexy bad girl of the tour, better known for her provocative outfits, piercings, and tattoos than for her actual game. Still Suzze won a major and made a ton in endorsements, most notably as the spokeswoman (Myron loved that euphemism) for La-La-Latte, a chain of topless coffee bars, where college boys loved to snicker for “extra milk.” Good times.

Myron spread his arms. "I'm here for you, Suzze, twenty-four/seven—you know that."

They were in his Park Avenue office, home of MB Reps, the *M* standing for Myron, the *B* for Bolitar, and the Reps because they represented athletes, actors, and writers. Literal-Monikers-R-Us.

"Just tell me what I can do."

Suzze began to pace. "I'm not sure where to begin." Myron was about to speak when she held up her hand. "And if you dare say, 'Start at the beginning,' I will rip off one of your testicles."

"Just one?"

"You're engaged now. I'm thinking of your poor fiancée."

The pace turned more into a stomp, picking up speed and intensity so that a small part of Myron feared that she might go into labor right here in his recently refurbished office.

"Uh, the carpet," Myron said. "It's new."

She frowned, paced some more, started biting her exuberantly polished fingernails.

"Suzze?"

She stopped. Their eyes met.

"Tell me," he said.

"You remember when we first met?"

Myron nodded. He was just a few months out of law school and starting up his fledgling firm. Back then, at the inception, MB Reps had been known as MB Sports-Reps. That was because initially Myron represented only athletes. When he started representing actors and writers and others in the field of the arts and celebrity, he dropped the Sports from the name, ergo, MB Reps.

Again with the literal.

"Of course," he said.

"I was a mess, wasn't I?"

"You were a great tennis talent."

"And a mess. Don't sugarcoat it."

Myron put his palms toward the ceiling. "You were eighteen."

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen, whatever." Quick memory flash of Suzze in the sun: blond hair in a ponytail, a wicked grin on her face, her forehand whipping the ball as though it had offended her. "You'd just turned pro. Adolescent boys hung your poster in their bedrooms. You were supposed to beat legends right away. Your parents re-defined pushy. It's a miracle you stayed upright."

"Good point."

"So what's wrong?"

Suzze glanced down at her belly as though it had just appeared. "I'm pregnant."

"Uh, yeah, I can see that."

"Life is good, you know?" Her voice was soft now, wistful. "After all the years, when I was a mess . . . I found Lex. His music has never been better. The tennis academy is doing great. And, well, it's just all so good now."

Myron waited. Her eyes stayed on her belly, cradling it as though it were its contents, which, Myron surmised, it kind of was. To keep the conversation going, Myron asked, "Do you like being pregnant?"

"The actual physical act of carrying a child?"

"Yes."

She shrugged. "It's not like I'm glowing or any of

that. I mean, I'm so ready to deliver. It's interesting though. Some women love being pregnant."

"And you don't?"

"It feels like someone parked a bulldozer on my bladder. I think the reason women like being pregnant is because it makes them feel special. Like they're minor celebrities. Most women go through life without the attention, but when they're pregnant, people make a fuss. This may sound uncharitable, but pregnant women like the applause. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"I've already had my share of applause, I guess." She moved toward the window and looked out for a moment. Then she turned back toward him. "By the way, did you notice how huge my boobs are?"

Myron said, "Um," and decided to say no more.

"Come to think of it, I wonder whether you should contact La-La-Latte for a new photo shoot."

"Strategically angled shots?"

"Exactly. Might be a great new campaign in these puppies." She cupped them in case Myron wasn't sure what puppies she was referencing. "What do you think?"

"I think," Myron said, "that you're stalling."

Her eyes were wet now. "I'm so damned happy."

"Yeah, well, I can see where that would be a problem."

She smiled at that. "I put the demons to rest. I've even reconciled with my mother. Lex and I couldn't be more ready to have the baby. I want those demons to stay away."

Myron sat up. "You're not using again?"

"God, no. Not that kind of demon. Lex and I are done with that."

Lex Ryder, Suzze's husband, was one half of the legendary band/duo known as HorsePower—the much lesser half, to be frank, to the supernaturally charismatic front man, Gabriel Wire. Lex was a fine if troubled musician, but he would always be John Oates to Gabriel's Daryl Hall, Andrew Ridgeley to Gabriel's George Michael, the rest of the Pussycat Dolls next to Nicole Scherz-i-something.

“What kind of demons then?”

Suzze reached into her purse. She plucked out something that from across the desk looked as though it might be a photograph. She stared at it for a moment and then passed it to Myron. He took a quick glance and again tried to wait her out.

Finally, just to say something, he went with the obvious: “This is your baby's sonogram.”

“Yep. Twenty-eight weeks old.”

More silence. Again Myron broke it. “Is there something wrong with the baby?”

“Nothing. He's perfect.”

“He?”

Suzze T smiled now. “Going to have my own little man.”

“That's pretty cool.”

“Yeah. Oh, one of the reasons I'm here: Lex and I have been talking about it. We both want you to be the godfather.”

“Me?”

“Yep.”

Myron said nothing.

“Well?”

Now it was Myron who had wet eyes. “I'd be honored.”

“Are you crying?”

Myron said nothing.

“You’re such a girl,” she said.

“What’s wrong, Suzze?”

“Maybe nothing.” Then: “I think someone is out to destroy me.”

Myron kept his eyes on the sonogram. “How?”

And then she showed him. She showed him two words that would echo dully in his heart for a very long time.

Chapter 3

An hour later, Windsor Horne Lockwood III—known to those who fear him (and that was pretty much everyone) as Win—swaggered into Myron's office. Win had a great swagger, like he should be wearing a black top hat and tails and twirling a walking stick. Instead he sported a pink-and-green Lilly Pulitzer tie, a blue blazer with some kind of crest on it, and khakis with a crease sharp enough to draw blood. He had loafers, no socks, and basically looked as though he'd just gone yachting on the SS *Old Money*.

"Suzze T just stopped by," Myron said.

Win nodded, jaw jutting. "I saw her on the way out."

"Did she look upset?"

"Didn't notice," Win said, taking a seat. Then: "Her breasts were engorged."

Win.

"She has a problem," Myron said.

Win leaned back, crossed his legs with his customary coiled ease. “Explain.”

Myron spun his computer monitor so Win could see. An hour ago, Suzze T had done something similar. He thought about those two small words. Harmless enough on their own, but life is about context. And in this context, those two words chilled the room.

Win squinted at the screen and reached into his inside breast pocket. He plucked out a pair of reading glasses. He’d gotten them about a month ago, and though Myron would have said it was impossible, they made Win look even more haughty and stuck-up. They also depressed the hell out of him. Win and he weren’t old—not by a long shot—but to use Win’s golf analogy when he had first unveiled the glasses: “We are officially on the back nine of life.”

“Is this a Facebook page?” Win asked.

“Yes. Suzze said she uses it to promote her tennis academy.”

Win leaned a little closer. “Is that her sonogram?”

“Yes.”

“And how does a sonogram promote her tennis academy?”

“That’s what I asked. She said you need the personal touch. People don’t just want to read self-promotion.”

Win frowned. “So she posts a sonogram of a fetus?” He glanced up. “Does that make sense to you?”

In truth, it did not. And once again—with Win wearing reading glasses and the two of them whining about the new world of social networks—Myron felt old.

“Check out the picture comments,” Myron said.

Win gave him the flat eyes. “People comment on a sonogram?”

“Just read them.”

Win did. Myron waited. He had pretty much memorized the page. There were, he knew, twenty-six comments in all, mostly various good wishes. Suzze’s mother, the aging poster child for Evil Stage (Tennis) Mom, for example, had written: “I’m going to be a grandma, everyone! Yay!” Someone named Amy said, “Aww cute!!!” A jocular “Takes after his old man! ;)” came from a session drummer who used to work with HorsePower. A guy named Kelvin wrote, “Congrats!!” Tami asked, “When’s the baby due, sweetie?”

Win stopped three from the bottom. “Funny guy.”

“Which one?”

“Some turdlike humanoid named Erik typed”—Win cleared his throat, leaned closer to the screen—“Your baby looks like a sea horse!” and then Erik the Riot put the letters “LOL.”

“He’s not her problem.”

Win was not placated. “Old Erik still might be worth a visit.”

“Just keep going.”

“Fine.” Win’s facial expressions rarely changed. He had trained himself in both business and combat to show nothing. But a few seconds later, Myron saw something darken in his old friend’s eyes. Win looked up. Myron nodded. Because now Myron knew that Win had found the two words.

They were there, at the bottom of the page. The two words were in a comment made by “Abeona S,” a name that meant nothing to him. The profile picture

was some sort of symbol, maybe Chinese lettering. And there, all in caps, no punctuation, were the two simple yet wrenching words:

“NOT HIS”

Silence.

Then Win said, “Yowza.”

“Indeed.”

Win took off his glasses. “Need I ask the obvious question?”

“That being?”

“Is it true?”

“Suzze swears that it’s Lex’s.”

“Do we believe her?”

“We do,” Myron said. “Does it matter?”

“Not on a moral basis, no. My theory? This is the work of some neutered crank.”

Myron nodded. “The great thing about the Internet: It gives everyone a voice. The bad thing about the Internet: It gives everyone a voice.”

“The great bastion for the cowardly and anonymous,” Win agreed. “Suzze should probably delete it before Lex sees it.”

“Too late. That’s part of the problem. Lex has sort of run off.”

“I see,” Win said. “So she wants us to find him?”

“And bring him home, yes.”

“Shouldn’t be too difficult to find a famous rock star,” Win said. “And the other part of the problem?”

“She wants to know who wrote this.”

“The true identity of Mr. Neutered Crank?”

“Suzze thinks it’s something bigger. That someone is truly out to get her.”

Win shook his head. "It's a neutered crank."

"Come on. Typing 'Not his'? That's pretty sick."

"A *sick* neutered crank. Do you ever read the nonsense on this Internet? Go to any news story anywhere and look at the racist, homophobic, paranoid 'comments.'" He made quote marks with his fingers. "It will make you howl at the moon."

"I know, but I promised I'd look into it."

Win sighed, put the glasses back on, leaned toward the screen. "The person who posted it is one Abeona S. Is it safe to assume that's a pseudonym?"

"Yep. Abeona is the name of a Roman goddess. No idea what the S stands for."

"And what about the profile photograph? What's this symbol?"

"I don't know."

"You asked Suzze?"

"Yep. She said she had no idea. It looks almost like Chinese lettering."

"Perhaps we can find someone to translate it." Win sat back and re-steepled the fingers. "Did you notice the time the comment was posted?"

Myron nodded. "Three seventeen A.M."

"Awfully late."

"That's what I was thinking," Myron said. "This could just be the social-networking equivalent of drunk texting."

"An ex with issues," Win said.

"Is there any other kind?"

"And if I recall Suzze's rambunctious youth, there could be—conservatively speaking—several candidates."

“But none that she imagines doing something like this.”

Win continued to stare at the screen. “So what’s our first step?”

“Really?”

“Pardon?”

Myron moved around his renovated office. Gone were the posters of Broadway plays and Batman memorabilia. They’d been taken down during the paint job, and Myron wasn’t really sure if he wanted to put them back up. Gone too were all his old trophies and awards from his playing days—his NCAA championship rings, his *Parade* All-American certificates, his College Player of the Year award—with one exception. Right before his first professional game as a Boston Celtic, as his dream was finally coming true, Myron had seriously injured his knee. *Sports Illustrated* put him on the cover with the tagline, IS HE DONE? and while they don’t answer the question, it ended up being a big fat YUP! Why he kept the framed cover up he wasn’t quite sure. If asked, he said that it was a warning to any “superstar” entering his office how quickly it can all go away, but Myron somehow suspected it went deeper than that.

“That’s not your usual *modus operandi*,” Myron said.

“Oh, do tell.”

“This is usually the part where you tell me that I’m an agent, not a private eye, and that you don’t see any purpose in doing this because there is no financial benefit to the firm.”

Win said nothing.

“Then you usually complain that I have a hero com-

plex and always need to rescue someone in order to feel complete. And lastly—or I should say, most recently—you tell me how my interfering has actually done more harm than good, that I’ve ended up hurting and even killing maybe more than I’ve saved.”

Win yawned. “Is there a point?”

“I thought it was pretty obvious but here it is: Why suddenly are you willing—enthusiastic even—about taking on this particular rescue mission when in the past—”

“In the past,” Win interrupted, “I always helped out, didn’t I?”

“For the most part, yes.”

Win looked up, tapped his chin with his index finger. “How to explain this?” He stopped, thought, nodded. “We have a tendency to believe good things will last forever. It is in our nature. The Beatles, for example. Oh, they’ll be around forever. *The Sopranos*—that show will always be on the air. Philip Roth’s Zuckerman series. Springsteen concerts. Good things are rare. They are to be cherished because they always leave us too soon.”

Win rose, started for the door. Before he left the room, he looked back.

“Doing this stuff with you,” Win said, “is one of those good things.”