Chapter 1

The alarm clock went off in the morning like a child complaining to get attention. It was 5 in the morning on a weekday. The sound waves from the alarm escaped under the gap in the door of the room and travelled all over the house announcing itself to every living being that had the audible sense. As no action was taken to either snooze or to shut it off, the alarm kept on screaming at the top of its capacity. A foot away from the alarm clock was our 14 year old angel, Isabella Maria Aracely Garcia, a.k.a Izzy, in her last stage of dreams, probably thinking of being rescued by her charming prince riding a black horse, away from the hands of the villains. Amidst the frenzy of the alarm still going on, she was in smiles. Nothing seemed to have disturbed her. She did not care. The alarm had its complaint heard by everyone else but Izzy in the house. Outside of Izzy's room, the noise from the thumping of the steps were heard and it grew in its amplitude higher and higher as the steps approached the door to the room. It sounded like a huge roman legion was on its way. The doorknob frantically tried to get opened from the outside. How could it open? It was locked tight from inside! With all this happening around her, Izzy was still in her dreams. Still smiling, gently talking to her prince.

"Izzy…Izzy, open the door." It was Izzy's mother, Ruth, from outside of the room desperately trying to get inside. She was annoyed by the alarm that woke her up way before her normal hours. "Isabella Maria Aracely Garcia, for god's sake, shut that damn alarm off."

Izzy's father, Salvador, and her younger sister, Leslie, stood next to Ruth. They too were disturbed by the sound of the alarm and unlike Ruth, they were not that keen on barging inside

Izzy's room. They were mainly there to show some solidarity to Ruth. Salvador and Leslie yawned and adjusted the blanket they had over them and their eyelids refused to let their eyes see anything that was happening at that time. It was like a controlling parent refusing to let a curious child take a peek. Leslie could not even stand straight and simply let herself fall gently into the sleeping position on the floor. She knew her sister well and she knew that only a miracle would make her sister get up to open the door.

The alarm clock was relentless. It was in its next round of complaints. Having gotten ignored in its first round, it appeared as if it demanded more attention than it was earlier. Still, there did not seem to be any attempt to snooze it or to shut it off. Ruth was annoyed to her worst. She thought her husband would help her, but her frustration jumped to a higher scale when she saw Salvador dozing off next to Leslie on the floor.

"What kind of genetic breed are you all? How could you all sleep when the whole house is screaming?" Ruth knocked on the door, again. "Izzy, you are waking everyone up. Open the door."

No response from the other side. Imagine the scene: Having woken up in the last hours of a good sleep, with the alarm still going on with no way to stop it, somehow, the person who was at the closest did not even appear to care about what was going on around.

After three complaints the alarm finally gave up. It knew that there was no way it could go on. Had it got any legs it would have jumped off the window and run away from that house. Respect and sensitivity is a two-way street, and the feelings of the alarm clock must be respected too.

After nearly 15 minutes of pandemonium there was quietness in the house. Izzy's room door was still locked and there was no sign of any movement inside. Ruth noticed Salvador and Leslie ensconced in their sleep disregarding that it was the carpeted floor. She gently nudged them to go back to their rooms. They were not in the mood to listen and she did not want to persuade them. One last bout of frustration still lurked in her. She thought of making one massive karate kick to burst the door open, lift Izzy from bed and shake her off until she could feel it was 9.0 on the Richter Scale. She controlled herself and walked away, as she realized that there was no more sleep for her. It was all gone, thanks to her wonderful daughter.

Ruth brushed her teeth and went down the stairs to get started with her morning routine. She looked at the clock and it was an hour earlier than usual. One good thing was that she could spend a little more time on sudoku while having coffee in the morning. Every dark cloud had some silver lining, after all.

The aroma of the morning coffee lifted Ruth's spirits. She had forgotten the events that happened an hour ago. It was sudoku time. Her coffee, her newspaper, and her sharpened pencil with the eraser that functioned properly without making any black spots.

"Mom! Mom! Why didn't you wake me up?" You guessed it! It was our princess Izzy rushing down the stairs yelling at the top of her lungs. "Didn't you hear the alarm? Gosh, you are unbelievable. It must have gone at least 3 times. Didn't you hear it even once?"

Izzy was in her pajamas. She had her cellphone in one hand and her makeup kit on the other. She hastily prepped up her hair. Ruth did not say anything. Rather, she did not want to. So much had happened with Izzy's behavior in the last one hour and Ruth just focused on her sudoku. Not caring about her mother's lack of response, Izzy opened her makeup kit and took

out the contents. She spread them all on the dining table. The tabletop that was clean until that time had every bit of makeup accessories showcasing their importance in Izzy's life.

"I was supposed to get out by 6. The people in this house have no care at all. It is as if I don't exist at all." Izzy mumbled to herself. "The whole world is waiting for me, and I would appreciate it if there was any appreciation for me."

The next few seconds went on by working on the lipstick, dabbing a bit of mascara, adjusting her hair, and straightening her brows. With just the phone in her hands she darted across the living room, opened the front door, and ran outside. Little did she realize that the door alarm was still on. The door alarm must have heard the commotion from the alarm clock in the early hours and perhaps, waited for its turn, and boy, it was happy to get its turn. Izzy did not bother about it either. She was out onto the street to take care of whatever she had on her mind. For those who were familiar with the way the house alarm system worked, even for the internal alarm, when it went off, it had to be silenced by keying in the code. Did you guess who was going to do that in our current situation? If that alarm did not get switched off within 2 minutes it was going to make its presence a lot louder than that simple alarm clock upstairs, not to mention the possibility of the cop cars showing up in the neighborhood. In that Internet frenzied social media obsessed world, Izzy's house would feature on the latest breaking news. What could be more blissful than that?

Ruth got up in anger and approached the keypad to silence the alarm. Timing could not be perfect; Izzy came back engrossed on her phone. She was busy texting and noticed her mother standing with her arms akimbo on her hips. Ruth's visage showed every possible hue of the red color.

Izzy, showing a picture taken on her phone, “Gosh, I was worried about how bad it would be at 7 in the morning. I was supposed to take my pictures at 6 and post them. See.”

Izzy switched to her Instagram account and noticed the responses she had received. She was not happy. “The world does not wait for my pictures. I got it. I should have taken them and posted them earlier. Thousands waited and they all went back to sleep. I would have received a lot of *likes* otherwise. If I can’t be punctual, how would my followers know that I am serious? If I am not taken seriously, how can I be an influencer?”

Ruth took a deep breath. She did not want to start a verbal battle with Izzy at that time.

“Look at my dress. I could have dressed up a little better for my photos, had I been woken up on time.” Izzy kept on throwing on dynamite sticks one after the other on the dam called Ruth that was about to burst open. Ruth could not resist that time. Her years of practicing transcendental yoga did not transcend well at that time. She went behind Izzy and in a sudden move yanked the cellphone out of her hand. Izzy did not expect that.

“What the hell!”

“Enough! I said enough. Go back to your room. Now.”

“What?” Izzy threw a disgusting, disappointing look at her mom. “Who are you? What the hell? Manners, mom. Manners. Jesus.”

Hearing the curse word in full, that too, with the name of Jesus in the same breath was something Ruth could not let go. That was the last of the dynamite sticks. Even in that heated moment, the first thing that came to Ruth was to gesture the cross sign to ask for forgiveness from Jesus. Catholic upbringing played into her guilt. With Izzy still in shock, Ruth hurried

towards the front door and opened it with force. With one foot in and one foot out of the door, she turned around and put on the smile of a villain. Without any hesitation, she threw the phone towards the lawn outside. Even in that act of desperation, in that act of frustration, she did make sure that the phone was safe from getting broken. After all, for a phone without insurance, who would pay for it again? Just a second after the phone landed on the soft lawn, the sprinklers came up to finish the act. It reminded her of watching the fountain display at the Bellagio, only that there was no music to accompany. With deep satisfaction, she took a deep breath.

"Sweetie, how do you want the door to be? Open or closed?" Ruth's love of James Bond showed up in her words. She smacked her lips with every alphabet in sadism spelt out. She gently closed the front door without locking it. "By the way, how are you doing, bestie? Shaken or stirred?"

Ruth went back to continue her sudoku and she gently sipped on her coffee. It had transferred all of its temperature out of it by then as the heat transfer must have occurred on to Ruth a few minutes back through the invisible ether. She decided to warm it up and kept the cup inside the microwave. She noticed Izzy back with her phone, drenched in the welcome showers of the sprinklers, in a striking distance from her. The mud from Izzy's feet left footprints all over from the entrance to the family room. Izzy played Jesse Murph's "Blue Strips" on her phone, and she mouthed the song and did a few steps of dance showing her talent to be the next Jackson Pollack who used the floor as the canvas and the muddy feet as her strokes of brushes. Izzy did not want to buy mansions; but, she definitely showed her attitude. She knew the lyrics were not parentally appropriate, that too, for a girl to sing in front of her mother. No, no, no, not for a mother to hear. Yet, she danced her way to the microwave and pushed the combination of buttons to stop it and got its door open. If there was an Angel of Stupidity in the universe, he or

she must have made its presence over there. Izzy took the coffee mug that had her mother's favorite brew and emptied it in the sink with the motion that showed the trajectory of the coffee from the mug to the sink. A physics enthusiast would have used the equations of parabolas to trace its exact path from the mug to the sink.

"Karma!" Izzy laughed. Jessie Murph's "Blue Strips" was still a chill reminder to her state of mind.

Ruth wanted to hold Izzy by her shoulders and to slam her down like a WWF champion. Being a strong willed mother who would never let her teenage daughter have the last laugh, she could easily summon the spirits of martial arts champions Iyo Sky and Tiffy Stratton in seconds. Hearing the lyrics of "Blue Strips" was not for her, no matter how popular for a teen it might be.

For anyone who understood the history of why certain countries were always at war over decades, or why certain tribes fought against each other over centuries, what we witnessed showed how human ego - no matter how different the ages of the conflicting parties were, no matter how one had emotional dependence on other - could be one compelling factor that had been the root cause of all the evils that humankind had seen.

In a mad rage, Ruth took two steps towards Izzy. Izzy, perhaps anticipating that move and she pushed herself against the countertop, spun around and was ready for the action. Had there been enough space she might have stood on top of the countertop like the WWF wrestlers on the ropes. She tightly gripped the coffee cup, raised her hand high and gestured to show she was about to slam it hard against the kitchen sink.

"You will never be able to hold this mug, ever again. Dear mother."

Izzy did not even flinch a little. “It will be a hundred pieces of broken memories, mother. Do you really want to test me, mother?”

Ruth, in a strange coincidence, noticed how Izzy kept on pronouncing “mother” with a tone that suddenly seemed very frightening.

Anything but that coffee mug. Ruth knew its sentimental value. It was one of the perfect mugs, in shape and size, in terms of grip, in terms of a perfect glaze she made out from her pottery work. For the enthusiasts who were into pottery, they would know how great a feeling it was to create a mug with a perfect handle. To make that mug, she watched over hours of You-Tube videos to get the perfect physics of handle-to-mug weight ratio. To add, it had the handprint miniatures of both her kids. She had worked too hard for it. It was not just a mug for her. She just couldn't risk seeing it smashed into smithereens after that brew in that mug got emptied out. Ruth had a passion turned obsession with experimenting with different blends of coffee and that was one of her perfect blends of various ethnic mixes in the coffee beans that were part of it.

“Izzy, not that mug, please.” Ruth did not yell at her daughter. Multiple trips to the neighborhood *Michaels* store came to her mind. The scores of clay packages she got from online suppliers came to her mind. “Please, keep it down…sweetie.” The words came out with so much caution. She was surprised that she mumbled the last word out of some sort of survival instinct.

Izzy kept the mug down and rubbed her feet on the foot mat by the sink. She made one “what are you going to do now?” shade at her mom. With a quick smirk, shrugged her shoulders off, and took off towards the stairs. Within seconds she was gone inside her room.

Ruth had a few options then: To escalate the situation further by confronting Izzy with some other insanity of her own; to wake her husband and to call for an immediate resolution to the conflict; or, simply count down to 100 and find her way to have another cup of coffee and continue with her day. The second option was the one that she immediately vetoed. Of all the people, she knew her husband well. He was a softie, who could never say no to his daughters. He was a true gentleman who would care, who would go to the end of the earth, for only two groups of women in his life: his mother and his daughters.

To tell the truth, the first option enticed her. A little shake down with her daughter could take her to the level of joy that she could keep repeatedly for years to come. The consequences could be much worse. What if Izzy broke her favorite mug when Ruth was not around? She could always make another one with even a much better handle. Not a big deal, right? In revenge, Ruth could anyways go after Izzy's favorite items, particularly, that cherished boba cup of hers she got at Sabrina Carpenter's concert a few months ago. By going after that cup Ruth could traumatize her daughter way beyond her worst fears. She could be the Instagram sensation for moms with teenage daughters that were looking for a savior. She could be "Ruth the ruthless" among moms. The opportunities were endless. What else could potentially happen? A cup for a mug would make the entire world…thirsty?

Ruth decided to go for option 3. "Numero tres" she heard it in her mind loud and clear, in her native language. She went through her ritual of washing the mug and filled up with the brew she had prepared for. Minutes later, the coffee was ready again – that time, with much more aroma and vigor. She looked up at the clock on the microwave display. She looked up for the same on the oven display. She looked up at the wall clock. She checked with the time on the cellphone to make sure that all the clocks at her house were 10 minutes ahead. Not to sound

misogynistic, was it historically the women's way of making everything rushed? Or, was it a mom thing to give themselves a self-aggrandized psychological cushion for doing many things? Have womenkind ever wondered if the clocks might have feelings too?. What if the clocks did not want to feel rushed and manipulated, and wanted to have their own *Bell of Rights*? If the clocks ever protested about why they were always kept a little ahead of the actual time, the mom's union might nip that protest at its bud.

Ruth realized that she had just enough time to finish her sudoku and to get started on her morning routine. She moved over to the kitchen island with her pencil and the day's newspaper. It was just around 7 A.M and, that day she noted that she did not have any of the school related duties. That was quite unusual for her. One more year for her younger daughter Leslie at the elementary school, and then practically Ruth might lose her interest in the school duties she had always loved to volunteer for. She knew very well that as her daughters meandered through Junior High and High School in the years to come, the competition for parent volunteering might not be as challenging and invigorating as the days of a parent in elementary schools. At the elementary schools, among that scores of moms hanging around the school for everything, finding good looking dads was always a blessing! Also, who would want to hang out with those gray haired, reading glasses wearing moms and dads at High School, anyways?

As usual, Izzy had the schedule at 8 A.M and Leslie had it at 8.30. Both of them biked to school as their schools were closer to their home. One thing a parent would cherish while raising their kids. No need to drive them to school in the early morning chaos of the school zone traffic. With at least half an hour of free time available, Ruth got back to her sudoku, sipping the freshly brewed coffee.

Around 7.30 Leslie came down. She was already ready to go to school – a good, an hour earlier. Punctuality and perfection, it was Leslie. All packed up. Hair cleanly done. Elegantly dressed, she looked like the one who was going to the church. No make-up kit or cellphone in her hand! How many 6th grade girls in the entire universe of this social media obsessed world had that sense?

"Good morning, mom." She planted a kiss on Ruth's cheek. She peeked around. "Looks like I got to get my lunch at school today. No worries."

"Sorry, sweetie. Mom had a rough…" Ruth hugged Leslie tight.

"No worries, mom. Not a big deal. Today the lunch menu has my favorite pasta and veggies, anyway."

Leslie opened the drawer and got herself a bowl. She looked for the step ladder to reach for the cereal box in the top shelf. Ruth noticed that.

"Sweetie, it is in the garage. I used to get something from the attic. Let me get the cereal box for you."

"Please keep the ladder back where it is supposed to be." Didn't we just mention Leslie's perfection? Oh girl! It hurt at the wrong time.

"Sorry, I just forgot. I should have. I will put it back."

Ruth opened the top shelf.

"Honey Bunches of Oats, please."

"No more Fruit Loops for you, honey?" Ruth asked with a teasing smile. "If you want, I can get the one with the animal crackers too, from the store."

Leslie rolled her eyes. It was her gesture of letting her mom know that she was not a child anymore. She was soon to be a middle schooler.

“Thanks.” Leslie poured a cup worth of cereal into her bowl and handed the cereal box back. She had the milk from the fridge in a cup by then. She took a book from her bag and started to read, in between her cereal intake. She looked at the top shelf and was satisfied to see the cereal box seated properly in its place.

“Can you read the label, honey? The angle is set right for the natural light to highlight it,” Ruth joked. “I maintain the spacings between the boxes, too.”

Ruth looked at the clock. It was inching closer to 7.50. No signs of Izzy yet. Her Advisory class would start at 8.10 and she had to be in school by then. It was still a 10 minute bike ride without getting stopped by the traffic guard at the intersection closest to the school. Getting marked absent for the Advisory class was one thing the teachers highly frowned at and it had become a norm for many of the Junior High students. The teachers typically would be at the school a lot earlier so that they could have the classrooms ready by then. They had families, too. The women teachers that were moms, had to get their kids off to school too. Teachers aside, the admin staff at the schools should get the commendations for the Nobel Peace Prize, year after year. What do they get rewarded for coming early and opening the school office at the earliest hours? A queue of sleepy students waiting for the tardy pass an hour later?

Leslie saw a tiny bit of anxiety on her mother’s face. Ruth put two slices of bread in the toaster.

“Mom, don’t worry. As per the national weather service forecast, the tornado will arrive any time soon. Just keep all the flying objects secure. By the way, the toaster needs to be in the number 3 setting.”

Ruth saw that it was in the number 1 setting. Given the sequence of events that had happened thus far, she did not want to bother too much. Still, she tried to adjust the setting dial.

“Let it go, Ruth Garcia. Let it go. We mere mortals are too small for this.” Ruth told herself. Suddenly, out of some unknown evil thought in her, she notched the setting dial to the highest setting.

“Not a good idea.” Came the voice, as if it was the voice of an angel from the heavens above.

Ruth wondered how Leslie could focus on the book she was reading and at the same time with her third eye she could notice whatever was happening around. Like the television news program *The 60 minutes*, Ruth could hear the clock ticking, tick…tick…tick.

From 7:51 to 8 A.M as per the weather prediction from Leslie, the Garcia family house experienced a tornado rated at EF5 on the Fujita scale. Nine minutes of absolute mayhem. All Leslie and Ruth saw was something supposedly a human, a young female about 5 '8 height, about 120 pounds in weight, dressed in ripped jeans and a top, a layer of foundation about half an inch thick on face, eyelashes all curled up, just opening every possible drawer and the shelves. A daughter that looked like a church going girl on one side, and the other that looked like an escapee from a wild rock concert. Interestingly, both were getting ready for school.

“Where is the peanut butter?”

The following second the fridge door was opened and slammed shut.

“I don’t see it in the fridge. Who kept it out? People have no organizational sense.”

Ruth tried to respond, but Leslie gestured not to say anything.

“Oh, here it is. Who keeps the peanut butter on the shelves?”

That human tornado next moved its target to the toaster. It saw the bread slices inside and pushed the button on. A few minutes later the slices popped out. You guessed its color and texture. Yes, dark, and harder.

“Whew! What the” That was the expression after the first byte.

“Sweetie, how about spreading the peanut butter?” Ruth could not control the laughter. Was revenge the dish best served with peanut butter, she wondered.

“Gosh. I hate my Advisory. I don’t want to be tardy. Mrs. Cruz and her bigger judgmental eyes.” The tornado complained.

That tornado then opened the door leading to the garage and went towards the bike. On its way to the bike, it pressed the switch to open the garage door and it hopped on to the bike.

“Oops…my bag.”

The bike fell on the floor. Inside the house again and up the stairs, the tornado changed its path. It came back with the backpack on its shoulders rushing down the stairs, finding its way back to the garage again, and it hopped on to the bike.

Just outside the garage was Angel Diego Salazar, waiting on his bike with his cherubic smile. He pushed his flowing curly hair up. His well-oiled hair glowed in the sunlight. A real

Angel he was in every way. Izzy's childhood friend. The one she many times treated like an emotional animal for her support.

"Izzy, we got to rush. Come on, let's go. We don't have much time to get our morning boba."

Angel adjusted his helmet and he looked at Izzy who was without one. He smiled and shrugged. He looked at the tires of Izzy's bike and pointed out that they might need to be inflated. Izzy was not the one who bothered for those kinds of things. He had one last thing he had to do before they pedaled off to school. He looked towards the garage and there he saw Ruth waiting by the door to the kitchen. He waved at her.

"Buen Dia, Señora García. Hasta Luego."

Ruth smiled and waved back at him. His presence in Izzy's life was one thing she felt like a true blessing. A true friendship that kept Izzy grounded. She pressed the switch for the garage door and let it close.

###