

Back(stabbed) In Brooklyn

By Lenox Parker

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Back(stabbed) In Brooklyn

Thank you for reading this book.

Thank you Mom and Dad and Joe.

Thank you Moxie Mezcal. Thank you Year Zero Writers.

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Chapter 1

Howie, You're Too Old for the Part

“Donnie, I understand what you’re saying, it’s totally clear. But what I’m trying to get you to understand is what I’m dealing with here on my end—” pleaded Alan Shiner into a tiny mobile phone, with the other hand covering his ear. His whole body motioned when he emphasized a point on the phone, because he couldn’t use his hands as in a personal conversation.

“Donnie, Donnie, you don’t even have to explain to me anymore. You think I don’t know? Of course I know. I’ve worked with this guy for 40 years. I know like you have no idea I know. You see where I’m going with this?”

And that ended his plea with the big-time director of the new film that Alan’s oldest client, Howard Kessler, was being kicked off and replaced with a younger lead actor. At least younger was the excuse they used. And in Hollywood, that’s a viable excuse.

The deal was tentative, at best, when it was signed, and Alan knew it. It came on the heels of yet another scandal that Howard brought on himself. While on set filming a public service announcement for a children’s charitable organization, he was caught doing lines and getting a blowjob by one of the P.A.’s in a trailer. And the P.A. was apparently only 17 years old. It was like these media-friendly train-wrecks were happening one a month.

So any deal for Howard was a good deal, these days. At 66, Howard’s lead actor status was diminished, but his ego

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and denial were his driving forces, so breaking this news wasn't going to be a high point of Alan's day. He'd been an agent for nearly 50 years, and like Howard, was from Brooklyn and made it out to Hollywood and set down roots. He didn't want to see one of his peers get old because that meant that he, too, should hang it up soon. So he was really pulling for Howard, his most lucrative client, the actor that made Alan a star agent.

Alan shifted his weight on his feet and paced. He was just outside the lunch spot he came to every day when he wasn't entertaining clients—a small Vietnamese bistro where they treated him like the king he felt he was. He stepped outside to take the call from the director. Alan rarely takes calls in restaurants—and even in L.A. where doing deals on the phone over a meal is just a regular extension of the office. Alan sees his business as one of discretion; he's an old-school shark. Before stepping back in to his table, he paced some more outside and flipped open his phone again to dial Howard, hoping he wouldn't answer.

“Howie, it's Alan. You, uh, you, the picture, just call me,” he said in a whisper.

Alan whispered when there was bad news. He didn't even do it purposely. His demeanor was such a dead giveaway when he had bad news to tell, that he frequently didn't even have to explain the details, people knew immediately. Last week he called his wife from the deli to tell her they were out of whitefish salad. In the hushed tones, like as if he was telling her that the dog had cancer.

Today he was broken up. He stepped inside, put some cash down on the table and walked back to his car, thinking that this may just be the beginning of the end for both Howard and himself.

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Howard's sprawling Malibu home was usually packed with people on a Friday afternoon. He, or his girlfriend at the time, would entertain by the pool, play high-stakes card games, and show movies in his 50-seat custom built home movie theater. He's a movie star; they can do things like that. Today, though, the cavernous, sun-filled house was empty. Howard sensed that Alan's call would be coming. It wasn't the first time he'd gotten bad news recently from his agent and his friend, but the first time that a deal had been actually signed and then broken. Howard knew that when this happened in Hollywood, it was a tactic used to pin him as the bargaining chip for studios to get another actor with a higher price tag. It happens all the time.

This came right after a disastrous episode on the Stern radio show, when the interview didn't go as planned and the wack pack ganged up on Howie about his recent, high-profile plea deal he cut with prosecutors on an indictment for his role in a high-net worth betting ring. Instead of joking his way out of it, he cursed and spit in his defense. The following week, media loudmouth Jon Hein's commentary revealed his thoughts about Howard Kessler's Hollywood status: jumped the shark. Howard knew that once you jump the shark, you weren't jumping back in the big pictures that the studios, once upon a time, would line up for his involvement.

The phone rang.

"Alan I know what you're gonna say," he took a deep breath in as if he was going to give a long response. "This is shit. It's just shit," Howard exhaled.

"Howie, I know, this asshole director, what is he, French or something? Anyway, he's a shit and the studio's shit--I don't know what else to say. You know I'm working for you, buddy, right?"

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“Listen, can we take a break—what am I trying to do here? I just have to wait it out. This town could use a break from me. Five pictures in 3 years, it’s like I’m Travolta. It’s fine, I’ll take some time and we’ll see what comes up in the spring.”

“You sure about that? I mean, I’ll hit the streets, there’s stuff out there for you now...” Alan trailed off, not believing what he was saying and letting that come through. Being polite wasn’t Alan’s strongest characteristic, but he’d never been in this position with Howard—Howard Kessler, the biggest star to come out of Brooklyn since DeNiro. Except DeNiro is from the Bronx.

Howard’s prejudice against overexposing himself waned in the past year or so. He did too many films, too many awards shows. He hired a new personal trainer and stepped up his routine, cut out meat, started doing some yoga. All with the goal of getting some perspective, growing younger, changing the scenery a bit. None of it was working and Howard was getting increasingly depressed. He hated L.A. Thousands of actors desperately jockeying for position for the next role, and who would replace an idol like Howard in ten seconds flat. There were no roots in L.A. Howard’s feelings about the city were admittedly stereotypical—the town has no soul, it sucks the creativity out of you, it’s plastic, desperate, superficial, and utterly hopeless for all but a tiny fraction of the populous. For some reason it never felt as heavy as it does now.

Later that evening, Nancy came home and without even asking why the house wasn’t packed with strangers, friends, and other stars, proceeded to ask for Howard’s full attention.

“I fell in love with someone else,” she stated, simply and assertively.

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After a painfully long pause, without breaking eye contact, Howard responded, “Are you fucking kidding me? Is this a joke? Do you have any idea what a shitty fucking day I just had? And now this? What the fuck are you trying to do to me?”

“I’m sorry, I really am. I don’t know what happened,” she said without remorse.

“You been fucking this guy for a long time? Because that would really piss me off.”

“No. Yes. Not really.”

“Seven years, Nancy, seven fucking years.”

He felt like he ought to be more upset. A bomb like this should have more aftershock. But with all he’s been through, he may have been expecting it to happen. It’s not like Nancy was the love of his life. She was no overnight fling, but Nancy was one of the few women who could take Howard’s lifestyle, his past, his future, and his distant demeanor with a stride, and didn’t seem to want anything more from him than companionship and the occasional trip to Fiji. Nancy was currently a relatively successful make-up artist; and had been a former model and severe cocaine addict in another lifetime. She was markedly younger than Howard, but still not young—at least by L.A. standards. They made a good pair. When they attended openings or galas, Howard didn’t manage her every move; and by the second drink, they were off socializing at other sides of the room. She had her friends and he had his folk. It was a decent balance.

“Get the fuck outta here. Just get out. I can’t fucking believe this shit,” as he turned his back and walked away from Nancy, who seemed more stunned than Howard.

He grabbed his keys and left the house before Nancy even made her way upstairs to pack her things.

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Howard's usual means of escaping problems is to hit the bottle and go to the track—two habits he took and kept with him from Brooklyn to Hollywood. Back as a kid in the old neighborhood, he and his gang would spend their days ditching high school and hanging out in the pool room hustling and starting fights. When they didn't shoot pool well enough to cover their bets, they would find a mark and either hustle some more or flat-out rob them. Stores, apartments, businesses were all targets for their petty—and sometimes not so petty—thefts. When the pressure heightened to come up with more money at the pool hall, Howie dug himself deeper into debt with drinking.

Through the years, his addiction to pills, heroin, cocaine, and then prescription painkillers nearly brought his life and career to an abrupt stop in the early 1990s. Alan stepped in and spent nearly two years handling Howie's rehab in an exclusive facility in the desert outside Palm Springs. Alan's partnership at the agency came close to disintegrating, but he couldn't stand to see his friend eaten alive by drugs. Alan felt that Howie had seen and experienced enough that he could kick the habit and go back to focusing on the acting, so his strong faith in his friend pulled them both through. And they both came out better for it: Alan was profiled in *Time* magazine for his heroism in saving the iconic Howard Kessler; and Howie emerged as a newly polished star ready for A-list roles written exclusively for him.

The two had been unstoppable.

Not so much past the addiction but over it for the moment; and confounded about what to do with his life at this point, Howard felt for the first time like there was a clarity in his perspective that he should be taking advantage of. He wasn't distracted by lunatic women, drugs, or

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gambling debts. He had plenty of money. He felt at peace with so many of his demons. Why couldn't he just settle down and enjoy a quiet retirement? Wasn't that what all these signs were pointing to?

Howard couldn't just retire. He has more fire and energy now than he'd had since he first came to L.A. as a 22-year old hack in 1966 right out of the Navy.

* * *

Ralphie, Howard's stylist and a friend 30 years his junior, insisted that the best way for Howard to shake off this cloud was to get a tattoo.

"The last time I got a tattoo was when I was in the Navy almost 50 years ago. I'm not getting a tattoo. I'll look like an asshole," Howard responded.

Two hours later they were both sitting in the plush couches of one of L.A.'s most exclusive tattoo artists' dens, browsing the photo and design books. Ben, an artist from New York, comes out from behind the beads and nearly fell backwards seeing Howard in his waiting room. He's idolized Howard for his roles in some of the greatest mob films ever. Ben's ex-girlfriend's father grew up with Howard in Brooklyn, so he had followed Howard's career, stumbles, and highlights for several years.

"Uh, sir, um, hi, it's really great to have you here," stuttered Ben.

He didn't want to crowd the star, and there had been many celebrities in his shop before. But to him, Howard Kessler was the pinnacle of stardom, having taken roles that are now iconoclastic and studied in film school.

"Uh-huh, look kid, I'm not really interested in this stuff." Howard grumbled.

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Ralphie stopped Howard.

“What he’s saying is he’d like this scorpion here,” pointing to an over-sized flash of a scorpion stinging a voluptuous, naked woman. A hackneyed image, at best, Ben had remarked before, but kept it to himself. Howard rolled his eyes.

Ralphie decided on a panther tattoo and Howard passed on getting one done. While Ben was doing his work, Howard sat and watched and tinkered on his cellphone.

“So, Mr. Kessler, um, do you know a guy from Brooklyn, Karol Plotkin?” Ben asked.

Howard seized and stared straight ahead, his childhood consolidated into five seconds. He glared at Ben.

“I know Karol Plotkin. I know Punch. How the fuck do you know him?”

No one expects Howie’s responses to be as gruff as they are.

“I, uh, my ex-girlfriend, Jessica, she’s his daughter, she mentioned to me a long while ago—” he said cautiously, hoping to not further agitate the short-tempered Howard.

“I don’t fucking believe it. Punch. What the fuck is he doing now? Where is he? You know, he was the smartest guy out of all of us...” Howard reminisced, his words loaded with memories.

“I don’t, uh, he’s in New Jersey I think. Retired maybe. He was an executive with a big company or something.”

“Right, sure, of course. I heard he went to college. Punch, this guy, I tell you, he was fucking crazy. But smart. I knew he’d do something with himself.”

Howard couldn’t shake thinking about Karol “Punch” Plotkin for days. The good times they had together as an ad hoc gang in Brighton Beach wasn’t because they particularly wanted to have a gang, but because they had to stay together

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so they wouldn't catch a beat-down at every corner they turned. Tough neighborhoods spawn tough kids, and the kids found strength in gangs associated by block. Howard and Punch hung around together since they were in grade school. One of Howard's oldest memories with Punch was in hiding under the boardwalk at Coney Island looking up girls' skirts. They weren't alone, but they felt like they were the smartest guys on the beach.

It had been years since Howard had given the old days back in Brooklyn any thought. He rarely looks back, and there's nothing there for him. Today, the beach for Howard was a glorious view he had from his capacious deck overlooking the Pacific Ocean, from his mansion in Malibu. As a kid for Howard, the beach was Coney Island's crowded, sandy thoroughfare. Howard lived in a tenement with an extended family that was too busy to care for a troublesome kid. Punch lived in a basement apartment with his mother who worked three jobs just to put enough food on the table. She wasn't around much to supervise Punch, so the two kids stirred mayhem from an early age.

He had to find out how Punch was doing. A daughter. Punch has a daughter. What else does he have?

Chapter 2

Clear the Noise and Find Some Truth

Ralphie and Howard went out after the tattoo and had dinner in a trendy fusion spot and then on to a club with velvet ropes and no signs outdoors. They were whisked inside through an unmarked door, and shown to Howard's table, segregated away from everyone else. Howard sat there unimpressed with the scene, and felt out of place in the place he came on a weekly basis. He said his hellos, had a few drinks, tried to enjoy himself. Ralphie sent over so many women that Howard couldn't keep track and it didn't do a thing to distract him from the fact that Nancy left him just hours earlier, and he came to the realization that his career as he knew it was most likely coming to an end.

Howard left early and returned home. Of all the things, he couldn't stop thinking about Punch. He called Ralphie to have him get in touch with the kid at the tattoo studio to see about getting Punch's phone number.

* * *

Alan made a personal visit to Howard's home; quite a schlep from Beverly/Fairfax in West Hollywood to Malibu, but he was worried about his friend. He hadn't seen him in weeks and though he knew that Howard wasn't angry with him personally, just wanted reassurances that they were ok.

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He brought rugelah from a great Jewish bakery in L.A. hoping to warm Howard up and make him feel better. Howard answered the door with his usual greeting, a great hug and handshake.

“What the hell took you so long to come see me? I’m not a fucking leper.”

“Howie you know I love you. You said you wanted some time. Or some space. Whatever the hell you said you wanted I gave it to you. I always give you what you want,” Alan gratefully replied.

“I’m glad you’re here. We gotta talk.”

“No word from Nancy?”

“Nah, the slut. You know it’s not really a big deal she’s not here anymore. I don’t miss her. I don’t miss the company. I don’t mind having the quiet around here.”

“So what are you getting at?” Alan inquired cautiously.

“Nothing, I’m just...I’ve been thinking a lot. I think I’m going home.”

“What, home? Which one? The Island? Yacht in Amalfi? You wanna stay at my place in Maui for a while?”

“Alan I’m going back to Brooklyn.” Howard stood up and made the pronouncement resolutely.

“What the fuck is in Brooklyn? Of all the places, Howard...Are you going through some kind of crisis?”

They both laughed at the dramatic effect.

“You sound like a bad screenplay,” Howard joked. “I just thought I’d get the hell out of this town for a while. Get back to—”

“What? Get back to what? There’s nothing there. No one’s left. You know that,” Alan said, knowing that a trip home for all his clients and friends never meant anything good. They hadn’t even made good movies about the subject of going back home. It was trite. Going back home was a

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contrived context to too many bad stories. It was unlike Howard to fall for such sentimentality.

Howard sat back and basked in the imaginary sun in the enormous living room, soaking in every detail that his interior designer carefully planned, as if to look at it for the first and last time.

“I can’t say I have strong attachments here anymore,” Howard declared.

Alan stood up and appeared to take offense. He paced around a little bit. Howard didn’t look in his direction, but saw him from the corner of his eye and he knew his friend was planning a counterattack.

“Attachments? Howard Motherfucking Kessler, Attachments? Your whole life is here, your career, you were nothing without Hollywood and don’t pretend you would have made anything of yourself without your career in this town. You don’t attach well, if you hadn’t already noticed by now, you cold fuck,” he steamed. Alan inhaled and was about to continue the tirade but then Howard interrupted.

“I’m not saying that I don’t appreciate what you’ve done, or what I have. For chrissake, Alan, this is a \$10 million house I’m in; you don’t think I know what I have? That’s not my point. I don’t know what the fuck my point is anymore. I just don’t—”

Alan knew exactly what Howard was getting at, even if he himself didn’t know. And nothing against Howard, Alan knew he couldn’t articulate it anyway. Here’s a guy who was shrewd enough to get where he is today, but by brute force, talent, and intensity, not book smarts.

“Fine then. Fine, how long do you want to take? I mean, you know what happens to people out here when they’re off the circuit for too long,” Alan tried to keep Howard focused.

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“I don’t give a shit about the circuit. I’m 66 years old. 26 movies, countless TV shows, a fuckin musical, you think I give a shit about the circuit? What else is there for me here? Taking roles as a Grampa sitting on a porch reading stories to a snot-nosed ankle-biter in some schlocky period piece?”

He was right.

Howard was either too embarrassed or confused to admit what he was really thinking—if anything, Alan thought.

“You’re too old to have kids. They don’t even do that in Africa,” Alan said bluntly, angry that he couldn’t dissuade the headstrong Howard.

“It’s not kids. That ship left a long time ago. I don’t know, Alan, I just don’t have anything of my own. I keep playing these roles, they’re all the same, I’m tired and bored.”

“And those tired, boring roles are what’s gotten you this \$10 million home,” Alan retorted.

“I have nothing of my own, is what I was going to say. I mean, I’ve made a living off of a caricature of myself, and I don’t have any identity.”

“Oh, so that’s what you think this is about? Your identity? Listen to me—I mean it, Howie—listen to every word I’m going to tell you, and not just because I think Brooklyn is a useless piece of shit place, but because I know you better than anyone and I can see from a million miles away that you were about to hit this point—”

“I don’t want to hear it. Alan, thank you, really, I am thankful for your friendship. But I have to do this. I have to get out of here, and I just have to go back home and see what’s there for me.”

He stood up and looked out at the ocean, then turned back around and stretched his arms out to his side, clasping them behind his neck—pulling rather than hanging his arms.

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“I’ve got nothing to lose,” Howard said, almost in a whisper, trying to convince himself that it was true.

“Fine. I have strong opinions about this, Howard, I’m just telling you then. Just one last question though. Are you in trouble? I mean, you know, the numbers? I don’t wanna get another fucking knock on the door at 3am by a bunch of animals,” Alan asked, referring to the time a few years back when Howard owed every bookie west of the Hudson.

“No, I’m good.”

And with that, they bid goodbye.

* * *

Alan left the house and sulked back to his car up the steep driveway. He was losing his friend. Even if he came back, which he doubted he would, things wouldn’t be the same. Once you’ve turned on L.A., you can’t come back the same person who left. Alan couldn’t see anything good out of Howard’s decision to go back home. It had been 50 years and there was nothing for him there. A couple of altakaka’s who used to be hoodlums. Alan’s worst fear is that going back home would resuscitate the old feuds, or bring out the parasites who would suck everything out of his friend that there is to give--money, first and foremost, and the pathetic requests to be set up on dates.

A few quiet days passed. Howard’s phone rang and it was Ralphie with the phone number he wanted from Ben, the tattoo artist. Howard wrote it down on the back of last week’s copy of Variety in thick, black marker. Howard didn’t use pen and paper much for anything, so when he did, Sharpies were his choice writing tool.

He thought he should be clear with Alan, and gave him a call.

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“Alan, buddy, listen, I don’t think we had a straight conversation the other day,” Howard said sheepishly.

“What the hell are you talking about now?”

“About going home. Me, when I said I’m going back to Brooklyn—”

“Were you shittin’ me? Because if you were that’s a terrible trick, really, Howie—”

“No, I know you have problems with my decision. But honestly, the first time I thought about it was when we talked.”

There was a long silence. Alan didn’t know whether to laugh or hang up. He had to clarify, since Howie wasn’t a big talker on the phone.

“Wait, are you going back or no?”

“Yeah, I’m probably going back. The whole thing started because I just heard about a guy I knew, one of my closest friends before I left, he’s still around and I just, uh—”

“Alright, I get it, you’re curious. It happens to the best of us.”

“I don’t know if it’s just curious, you know, it’s like, I don’t know, I just want to get back to something I know,” Howard said, though wavering.

“I’m not trying to talk you out of it, but you already know my feeling about this. But I can’t help but tell you that it’s a stupid fucking idea,” Alan rebuked.

“I don’t know if it’s stupid. I have to get the hell out of here. I have to go learn something, find some new things, come up with a new project for myself.”

“Uh, Brooklyn isn’t where you go to learn stuff and find new things, you know, it’s a dead-end.”

“I’m just talking about digging up a couple of guys. Finding out what they’ve been doing.”

Alan had no response.

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Losing patience, Howie said, “Forget it, forget I called, I’ll be in touch.”

He hung up. Alan couldn’t change his friend’s mind, even if he knew that Howard’s mind wasn’t exactly resolute.

Several days passed before Howard had the gumption to call Punch. He didn’t even know what he would say. He didn’t obsess over it, though. He spent a few days packing some clothing, arranging for the artwork to be sold or sent back to the galleries from which he borrowed them. He had a cleaning service come in, his decorator arranged for much of the furniture to be packed away, and the management agency to come assess the property for an extended separation. Howard didn’t even know where he was going. His phone used to ring all day—now only a few calls a day from friends or his publicist. Things were winding down on their own, which is just the way Howard likes it.

Howard wasn’t going to stick around town to hear gawkers whispering that he’s a has-been.

Ralphie, who was much less of a mensch than Alan, called Howard out on Ben’s frantic search for Punch’s phone number. “What, you going back home to be a big star there, you don’t get enough of that here?”

“I don’t really know what the fuck you’re talking about Ralphie, so you can fuck off.”

But Howard felt he had to think about Ralphie’s inartfully-said message. Was that really why he was going home? Because he knew that he would get the fawning attention of a New York audience, his home-town? He tried it once before about 25 years ago and it went over well for a while until he overstayed his welcome. He owed money, was wrapped up in a horse-fixing scandal, landed a few punches at one of New York’s 3-star restaurants, smashed a borrowed Ferrari and never repaid the owner. He was also accosted by

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everyone who ever came through Brooklyn, claiming to be his best friend and in need of money. But most of all, his old friends always wanted him to hook him up with girls. Most of those guys were so desperate for women that they felt Howie was a silver bullet for dates. It was pathetic.

This time it will be different. He's not going back as a star. He's going back as Howie Kessler, to find his friends, clear the noise, and find some truth.

He picked up the phone and dialed Punch's number.

Chapter 3

Punch

“Hon, the mail’s here,” I said.

“WHAT? I can’t hear you! You’re talking but I can’t hear you! What?” yelled Adele, my wife of too many years.

Adele always talks twice as much as I do, at twice the decibel. My kids always make fun of us, as if we orchestrate our discombobulated conversations solely for their entertainment.

“It’s alright. I’ll get it,” I said in a whisper, hoping she wouldn’t yell back.

“WHAT?”

It’s not easy for me to get up out of this chair. I have no left leg. The docs took it off because of some godawful circulation thing caused by diabetes. But it won’t kill me to get the mail. So I open the door and look in the box, but there’s no mail.

“Oh goddammit, it’s the phone,” I remembered.

“WHAT?”

“For CHRISAKES, Adele, it’s the PHONE. The PHONE!”

The doorbell didn’t ring; it was the new cellphone.

“Karol the phone was ringing, I was in the back and couldn’t get it,” Adele said as she walked into the living room looking for me. “Where the hell are you?” she shouted as I rolled behind her.

“I thought it was the doorbell, the mail. So I got up and went to the door.”

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“So who was on the phone? Who called?” she asked.

“I said I went to the GODDAMNED DOOR, not the phone. There’s no mail yet by the way, it’s 3pm.”

Adele left the room in a huff. She came back a moment later with the cellphone and handed it to me.

“I don’t have my glasses, so I can’t see. Why do they make these things so small? Who reads the numbers so small?”

I don’t know who she was asking. Adele asks questions all the time. It’s like she thinks God is listening and will provide her answer momentarily. She looks up and around to see if anyone has an answer, but she knows no one ever actually does.

“H. Kessler, it says. I have no idea. It’s a wrong number or something. No one ever calls us on this number anyway.”

Kessler. H. Kessler. Howie? It couldn’t be. That’s a long time ago. I couldn’t stop thinking about the phone call. Something about it—I can’t put my finger on it. Would be quite a coincidence if the guy I grew up with who’s been a hugely successful Hollywood star for decades. I went to school with him, Howie Kessler. He was an old pal from Brooklyn. A long way back. Haven’t heard anything about the guy personally in 30 years. We used to tear things up as kids.

Adele and I ate a quiet dinner and resorted to our evening routine. Adele reading in the kitchen with a pot of decaf coffee; and I’m in the den watching Law & Order and other cop shows and doing the crossword. We went up to bed.

* * *

“Oh for chrissake, Adele, it’s that cellphone again.”

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“Well, what do you want from me? I’m not going downstairs, it’s 5:30am. If the kids need us they’ll call the regular phone. It’s probably a crazy person or something.”

It had to be Howie; I knew it at this point. He’s on the West Coast. Too much of a coincidence not to be. I wonder if he’s in trouble? Why the hell would he call me, then? It’s been so many years. And how does he have our cellphone number? Only the kids have that number. We didn’t answer it and sure enough when I checked the phone later on there was that same number as a missed call.

And then to pour on the coincidence, I received an invitation to my high school 50th reunion in the mail the following day, for the few of us still around after this long. This had to be why Howie was calling, but I had no intention of attending it this year. I’m in the wheelchair with no leg. It’s become nearly impossible to go to see an opera at the Met a few times a year, so I don’t know how I’m going to maneuver around the city for this event. We don’t even see friends in the city anymore, it’s just too difficult. Both our kids have moved out as well.

Art Raimi emailed me later that day to see if I got the invitation. He plans on going. Art and I get together a couple times year. He’s done well for himself over the years, considering where we came from. He’s not without his foibles. The guy has had his run of bad luck. But I’m sure he’d say the same about me. Fact is, we both got out of Brooklyn and we’re proud to say we have. I have to be honest; it’s painful seeing him because it brings back rough memories. We had good times together. But we had it rough. Clawing our way out of poverty in an immigrant ghetto wasn’t easy. Most of the guys we knew either died of drug overdoses, went to prison, or both. Art and I are probably

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very unique creatures to come out of that environment. And Howie Kessler, but he was different.

Me, I had a tough time. I was an only child out of an arranged marriage back in Poland. The way I understand it—only through whispers from my aunts after my mother died—is that my parents couldn't conceive. Once they escaped to America just as things got really bad in Poland after the Germans invaded, they went their separate ways. My mother apparently got knocked up, but she wasn't living with the guy, and he split. She tracks down my father—ok, not really my father, but for all intents and purposes here, let's just call him my father—when I'm about three years old. He hadn't remarried but was working in a pickling joint on the Lower East Side. He agreed to support her and me, but his heart was never in it. When I was 11 or 12 he split for good and moved to Baltimore and opened what was apparently one of the biggest pickling processing plants on the eastern seaboard. My mother got along by sewing, doing laundry and other errands for other poor people in the building. Later, when I could open the lock to our apartment by myself she got a factory job. She never married, never dated, and died an angry, poor, frustrated woman in her mid-50s.

So for me, family is most important. That's why the first opportunity I had to get out of the city with my wife and raise our kids in a civilized environment with good schools and trees and nice people, I did. I did everything I could to make sure my own kids didn't have to endure what I went through. They didn't, and they turned out great. I learned that the environment really does have an impact on who you turn out to be as an adult. I recognize that sounds simple, or simple-minded. But escaping those roots is not easy.

Like with Howie, for example. Here's a guy who acted out clearly because he got no attention at home. There were

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about 48 relatives in the Kessler clan living in what should have been a five-room apartment. I don't even think Howie knew the difference between his cousins and brothers and sisters—they were all the same. This wasn't a commune or a situation out of love; it was just a bunch of poor immigrants shackled up in tight quarters because they had to be. On the high holidays and for Passover Seders they actually pooled together some money and rented the basement of the Shuel, because otherwise they had to eat in shifts in the apartment. Howie couldn't wait to get out of his apartment and create his own identity out in the world. Once he found acting—or, more accurately, once acting found him—he truly found his identity and thrived. But the guy had to be the center of attention during any social event. Even when we were engaging in illicit activities, Howie somehow made his voice prominently heard.

* * *

Three weeks later, I met up with Art at the Marriott Millennium Hotel in New York City for the Lincoln High School alumni event. My wife dropped me off and she went dinner with friends and would pick me up. Since we only had one cellphone between us, she kept it and left me to borrow Art's to tell her when to pick me up. I'm not hopeful, since she can't hear the goddamned thing ring, and when it's buried at the bottom of her gargantuan purse it can take a year to dig it out.

We've gone to these things before. Our high school, Lincoln in Coney Island, is huge. There were so many people who graduated that after 50 years, it's hard to remember your friends, no less people you never really knew back then. But it's nice to talk about the good times and see what people are

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doing. And now, after this long, it's a matter of seeing what people have already done, since no one is doing much at our age any more.

I've spent my life trying to escape from Brooklyn. I didn't even enjoy that reunion last week. All of a sudden we—my contemporaries and peers—are dropping like flies. We're old, decrepit. What are we reuniting for? What the hell's the point, anymore? If we don't see these people on a regular basis, what could we possibly talk about after all these years? What, the sock-hops? The baseball games at Ebbets or the Polo Grounds? I don't really give a shit about their grown-up kids now, and I could care even less about their grandkids. Unless they're a quarterback for the NY Giants or sitting in the White House, nothing about anyone's kids is remotely interesting to me. Who wants to hear more problems?

Art gratefully met me at the door, so he could help roll me into the ballroom. The last time we went to one of these things it was 10 years ago. I think Art made the one 5 years ago. I was having real health troubles then, so I didn't go. The vestiges of our youth are indeed gone. We are all old, crumbling souls now. Ah, fuck it.

I hesitated to bring up the mystery call on the phone. I can't keep my mouth shut, though.

"You know, I think Howie Kessler called me a little while back."

"Howie Kessler? Our Howie? Are you kidding me? What in god's name could he want?" How many years has it been?" Art asked.

What could I say after that? I didn't want to make a big deal. But it was.

"What'd he call you for?" he asked again.

"I didn't speak to him. I'm not sure it was him. Was a few missed calls on the cellphone."

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“Of course it was Howie. Why didn’t you call him back?”

“He didn’t leave a number.” I paused a while. “I don’t know how to check the messages anyway.”

“Let’s call him now. You have his number?” Art said. What I didn’t immediately realize was that Art had a few in him and wasn’t really himself. He’s a big guy, so you don’t notice it until he starts slurring his words.

“No, Adele has the phone. I have to call her with your phone to pick me up when we get out of here later.”

I regretted bringing it up altogether. It seemed to cast a pall on our table, and between Art and me. Everyone was thinking independently of their memories of Howie, converging with the media reports, his movie roles, and everything else you hear about famous people. It was just such a mystery, though, why someone who has been out of contact for so many years would pick up the phone now. And why me? Why not Frankie?

I thought about it for a bit. Art’s relationship with Howie was never all that great. They used to get in fights even though we were all a part of the same gang. It was always over girls. Howie dated someone and Art stole her away. Art was dating someone and Howie stole her away. Sometimes I think they used to date girls just to instigate one another.

Art had a serious look of concern, “I hope he’s not in trouble.”

“Let’s go get some shrimp before these fat old bastards eat them all,” I said to Art, hoping to change the subject.

* * *

I’ll tell you now that I’m planning on calling Howie, but I won’t do it alone. The suspense is killing me, though I can’t possibly imagine why after all these years he would try and

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track me down. I owe it to Art to rope him in. I called Art and left a message.

“Art, uh, this is Punch, listen, I found Howie’s phone number, and I think we should call him. Together. Give me a call back, or come on by the house this weekend. You know me, I’m not going anywhere these days.”

I hoped he would call right back and give me all the reasons in the world not to call Howie back. I sat in my chair in the sunroom and thought of every single reason why not to call Howie. I sat there a long time thinking about the old days.

I was a big kid. I mean, I was tall, built, bigger than all our friends. Howie was shorter than us all—he was a real scrapper. Howie stole my bike when we were in grade school. When I went to his apartment building and threw a rock in his window with a note on it telling him to give my bike back, he came up and punched me in the face. That’s how I got the name Punch. You’d think that my nickname would be for throwing the punch, which I soon learned to do quite effectively. But from then on, somehow, we had a mutual respect for one another and that sustained our relationship.

Later on when we all got older and we’d start fights with other gangs, Howie would always throw the first punch and then run like hell. That would always leave me, the biggest kid around, to give and take the beat-downs. I never got to tell Howie that after a while, this wasn’t fun anymore, and it became kind of predictable. But then within minutes after high school graduation, I never saw Howie again.

I can’t believe he just ran out of there, just like that. How could he leave all of us after all we’d been through together? It’s been a question running through my mind for years and though I understand the desire to leave poverty, struggle, and the ghetto, keeping on with the relationships isn’t the worst

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thing in the world. You can't escape your own life and identity—it's always there, no matter how much you try to mask it. Howie may be a great actor and ashamed of his past enough to forget about his upbringing; but the few roles he's taken that veer too far outside his realm of experience have been bombs. I mean, he tried to be a British ship captain in the 1700s in some movie and it was ridiculous. Literally a joke. In another artsy-fartsy piece he tried to play the role of a gay Canadian cellist and again, no one bought it. But he tried—sure as shit he tried to shed the Brooklyn hoodlum typecast.

After all these years of festering resentment that I had just realized was there after an afternoon of contemplation in the sunroom, I still decided to pursue the phone call along with Art.

Art, god bless him, has it better than most of us at this point after quite a dramatic breakup with his wife. His kids don't even talk to him anymore. It's heartbreaking. But the guy literally is the boss of baseball. He's busted his ass all these years, traveling, negotiating, and knowing the game, players, owners and media inside and out like none other in history. He was a little younger than us guys, a year or two, so he was smart—with the books and on the streets. He got out of Brooklyn in a hurry after high school and broke his ass working for the New York Yankees. Started out cleaning up spit; now he's slated to become the next commissioner of baseball, that sonofabitch.

When I think about what losers most of us were; how much trouble we caused; how little guidance we had, it's amazing any of us got out of there alive. Come to think of it, a couple of us have done ok. I mean, there's Howie, of course. I did well enough, worked as an engineer AT&T for

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nearly 40 years before they lopped off my leg. Well enough that I haven't had to look back.

Frankie, well, I don't know what Frankie's up to, but I know he had a nice business going for a while in construction, until the mob found out he was skimming. Frankie wasn't the smartest guy, but he was generally a good guy and likable. I don't know what ever happened to Frankie.

And then there's Mo, who, if he's alive today, is a miracle. This guy was the biggest troublemaker of all of us. He never even intended on getting out of Brooklyn. Brooklyn gave him everything he needed—entertainment, girls, drugs, gambling, Coney Island. I don't think Mo ever left Brooklyn, though I don't know for sure. I heard he may have been in prison for a while, drugs or something. Mo's a survivor.

We're all survivors. It was a fucking jungle back then where we came from.

A fucking jungle.

Chapter 4

Art

“Art, uh, this is Punch, listen, I found Howie’s phone number, and I think we should call him. Together. Give me a call back, or come on by the house this weekend. You know me, I’m not going anywhere these days.”

I didn’t want to tell Yuri about the conversation I had with Punch about Howie calling him, and all the memories it brought back. But when I heard Punch’s message, I couldn’t keep it from Yuri. Yuri and I have been together for 10 years. It’s what precipitated my divorce from my wife. No one knows about our relationship. I’m going to be the next commissioner of baseball. How many commissioners are gay? No one even knows I’m gay. I didn’t even know I was gay. Alright, I guess I did. I think the only one who might have a clue would be Howie, so there’s a reason I don’t want him in my life again.

At a late dinner ending a hectic week of travelling and work, I thought I would drop this whole thing on Yuri and get it over with.

“I thought we could hang around this weekend and check out some exhibits downtown. Are you working or can we relax for a while; we haven’t had a real day in the city together for a while,” Yuri asked.

“I guess now’s as good a time as any to tell you what I had planned for tomorrow—”

“Oh, Art, I don’t like this,” Yuri said as he plunked down his fork.

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“No, it’s not bad. Listen, the high school reunion I went to a while back, with Punch—Karol—Plotkin, we got to thinking, see—”

Yuri stopped me there. He got up from the table and turned his back, “You can’t go back, Art. Look at you. You can’t go back,” Yuri said, with a sense of defeat and pessimism in his voice.

“It’s Howie Kessler. I think he’s in trouble or something. He called Punch, but didn’t leave a message. It’s been decades.”

“So why don’t you ignore it? What’s this all of a sudden you’re interested in your past—an inglorious one at that? Howie can’t be getting in touch for altruism. He must need something.”

“You don’t know Howie—”

“Art, *you* don’t know Howie. Have you even counted how many years it’s been? You have no idea who this guy is. You ran around as kids and that was 50 years ago. FIFTY years, old man.”

I stopped for a moment. I was remembering Howie as a smooth-talking hustler in high school; I hadn’t even thought about his aging and career—and adulthood. Then I thought about how much I resented the guy.

“I don’t know. You’re right. Maybe I’m just curious.”

“That kind of curious can only get you in trouble. Let’s talk about my day.”

But because I’m a stubborn old bastard, I went out to Punch’s house the next morning anyway. Yuri sulked and warned me he would told-ya-so me when I get disappointed by digging up the past. He couldn’t be more correct in his assessment of my approach and the situation. There’s a reason why I am successful though, and part of it is in pursuing ideas until I am certain they are dead. Once dead,

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then I move on to the next one. I couldn't let this one die without exploring it further.

I'm a busy guy. I have a lot going on. I work 80 hour weeks because I like to. Keeping busy is the key to my success and I intend on keeping it that way. But Howie had re-entered my mind, and all these years I had wondered what I would say to him when I saw him once again. Now I could have my chance.

I knocked on the door and waited a while, realizing I should use the doorbell for someone in Art's house to hear me. It was very early on this Saturday morning. I wake up around 5:30am and start my day early. I paced around the apartment before calling the garage for the car at 7:15am and rushed out to New Jersey. There was zero traffic and I made it there in record time. A few more knocks and a ding, and finally, a young man came to the door, must be Punch's older son.

"Hi, can I help you?" he said.

"I'm Art Raimi, an old friend of your father's--"

"Oh, right! You guys went to the reunion together last week! I remember. Gosh, you guys were friends when you were kids, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, part of the old gang. Your dad asked me to come by this weekend, I hope now's not a bad time?"

"No, of course not, come on in. We were just doing some physical therapy. It's great to finally meet you, I mean, you know, I've heard about you for years."

He must have seen my quizzical look. I'm not very good at hiding my expressions, so I try not to put myself in situations where my vulnerabilities will be read by someone.

"For his amputation, you know, there's still therapy he has to do in order to maintain healthy circulation and blood pressure, maintenance of the stump, prosthesis—"

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I couldn't listen to the rest.

"Right, of course, sure. The leg." My eyes darted away.

Art was the athletic one in high school. He played for the Lincoln High School basketball team before he was kicked off in his senior year. I can't remember why. He would have had a good chance at going to college for his ball playing, I think. He got into too much trouble with us. I wanted to be the athlete, but I just didn't have it. So I helped our little gang earn some money running numbers and taking bets. I followed all the sports around, professional down to our high school. I loved being around sports. Later I learned that I loved being around the athletes, too.

Art's kid brought me into the exercise room. He was laying on the floor on a mat wearing gym shorts holding one of those giant gym balls. There was only one leg. It underscored the fact that he didn't have a leg. It sounds ridiculous, but seeing him in the wheelchair was easier than seeing him helpless—legless—on the floor that day. Art realized how awkward it was for me to see him like that. He tried not to scowl at his son, who was his physical therapist as well.

"I'm sorry, let me come back later, I didn't realize you were in the middle of—I should have called—"

"No, not at all. Just give me a minute. Josh, are we through?" Art asked, somewhat feebly.

"Sure Dad, we can get to the other stuff later. I'll be around all day. Mom asked me to help her hang some curtains or something upstairs. Stacy's coming by with the kids at 5." He hoisted his father back into the wheelchair, rolled up the mat, and dutifully left the room.

"I'm sorry you had to see me like this," Art said, looking at the floor.

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I had nothing to say. My oldest friend in the world whom I cared for deeply was suffering terribly, I could see it.

“It would have been worse if the diabetes got you before they got the leg off,” I said, authoritatively.

“I dunno. This is bullshit. I don’t want to talk about it.”

He wheeled out of the room into the den, where I followed him and sat down. Art picked up his cellphone and fumbled with it for a bit.

“I’m calling him right now. Might as well just do it.”

“Yep,” I agreed.

I hoped he wouldn’t answer. I hoped the number would be wrong. I hoped Punch would have lost the gumption to call him back.

Punch’s hand was shaking. I couldn’t imagine he was this nervous or apprehensive about calling Howie on the telephone. Before I could even ask if he was alright, Punch dropped the phone and looked at me with a blank stare. He started to collapse forward out of his chair. I shouted for help as I supported him from falling from the chair while holding up his head. I had no idea what I was doing, and was terrified for my sick friend.

Hours later and a trip to the E.R., Punch was better and it was just a minor scare from an insulin imbalance. Everyone around him knew and understood what was happening, but I had never seen such an episode and it scared the shit out of me.

“Is this getting old?” I said to Punch in the car on the way back to his home, trying some attempt at levity.

“No, actually, it’s the fucking disease and my goddamned years of eating sour cream and breakfast, borscht and blintzes for lunch and dinner and that’s killing me now. Old? I don’t worry about old. We’re already older than our parents were when they died.”

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Punch had a beautiful way of breaking down the world into easy, digestible parts. To Punch, nothing seemed complicated or insurmountable. Even though he attributes this cool demeanor to years as an engineer, I reminded him that he's always been this way.

As kids, Punch would never get riled up the way we would. He would dissect the situation and come out with options for us. When we knew a rival gang would be coming into our neighborhood—say, for a girl, or just to instigate—we would leave it to Punch to devise a plan. And when it looked like we would be getting our asses kicked, Punch would always come out straight and tell us we need to be prepared; and to put some extra heavy rocks in socks.

So to see him teeter on the edge like I just did frightened the hell out of me. How am I going to react when my body starts breaking down? I can most definitely say not as calmly as Punch just did. It infuriates me if I can't control a situation. For Punch, he takes it all in and deals with it one step at a time. He's always been that way; even when faced with such enormous adversity, like the wheelchair and the disease now.

“Alright, we're back, let's get this thing over with and find out what the hell's going on with Howie. I'm curious as hell.”

“Punch, really, you should rest. I'm just going to head out and we'll do this another time.” By this point, I had actually gotten excited about calling Howie, but I didn't want to admit it.

“Nah, you kidding? You schlep all the way out here to take me to the goddamned ER? Hand me the phone. We're calling this bastard right now. Howie Kessler, you're on the list.”

Chapter 5

Howard

Alan drove by Howard's house every couple of days; and in between he had someone from his office drive by and make sure Howard was still in town. He didn't want to keep calling him. Alan's plans for Howard were up in the air. He's had clients who claim to make decisions to leave the business; or have been driven out of the business—only to have circumstances change overnight. So he never counted anyone out until they were actually out of the picture. He did not think Howard would actually follow through—especially with the extended stay in the Malibu home. The only thing different this time was that Howard didn't seclude himself or exile himself to a vacation destination such as his private island. He was just being Howard, but without the entourage. Alan had no idea what to do next.

Howard spent three weeks holed up in his cavernous house, piled with boxes, nothing on the walls, half the furniture gone. He lived on the couch in front of the 60" flat screen mounted on the wall, adjacent to the 14 foot glass windows overlooking the Pacific. Shirtless and wearing Adidas athletic pants, his aging body was toned and tanned well—a Hollywood torso. He kept active and ran up and down the beach for miles each day. He didn't read books. He went out each day to pick up the Daily Racing Form and kept

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up with the races, but didn't place many bets. By all accounts, Howard wasn't depressed; just disconnected.

He kept busy and didn't let himself become bored. He was not relaxed, but he rarely ever is. Howard felt edgy. He was waiting for something and he didn't know what. His ability to mask his thoughts and feelings was worthy of the Golden Globes he won. He dodges emotional probes with his abrasive reproach, so he has never been able to achieve a truly healthy relationship with a woman, or even with close friends, unless they can read him—a rare skill. Alan read him. Nancy didn't read him, but she didn't care. The only people in his life who could read him were the old gang and his mother.

Mrs. Rebecca Kessler passed away before Howard really touched stardom. He had been in a few small films and had done some stage work, but in 1975 Howard wasn't exactly a household name. His breakout film was in 1977 when he received national attention for the Oscar-winning *Kiss & Tell*. Howard's mother couldn't understand Howard's move to Hollywood. She recognized there were movies and actors and a whole industry, but it was absolutely inconceivable to her that her son would be a part of it. And since his films and his work never made it to Brooklyn by the time she died, she never actually believed he was at work to achieve the greatness that he did. He flew her out to Los Angeles in 1974 for a premiere of one of his films; but she wouldn't leave the motel. She took the bus back to New York after three days on the West Coast. They never saw each other again.

Howard was a no-bullshit guy, but he had Hollywood wrapped around his finger for a good stretch throughout his career. Whether he played the Brooklyn tough-guy for the accolades, or if he actually *was* the Brooklyn tough-guy was

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unimportant, because in this town you are what you appear to be, and that's that.

One morning on the way back from picking up the DRF, he stopped in at a Starbucks and sat down to read through the picks for the day. With dark glasses on and a baseball cap, Howard was still quite recognizable; but this time, he wasn't looking to be recognized. Losing focus on the horses and wondering what the hell he was doing with himself, his eyes drifted toward a couple of very young kids with their mother and grandfather, sitting in one of the cozy seats by the window. Howard caught the older gentleman's eye for a brief moment. In the man's face, Howard saw contentment that he himself felt that had never experienced. He watched as the family left the coffee place, with the kids holding on to their special drinks with large straws and colorful cups. Mom hoisted each kid into their car seat, and Gramps helped to buckle each one in. He kissed each kid on the forehead and handed a little toy to each from his pocket before shutting each door. He walked back around the car to Mom's side and kissed her and spoke for a few moments. Laughing and holding hands, he stepped back while Mom backed the car out of the spot slowly. As the wheels slowly turned and the car straightened out of the spot, Gramps waved and made faces at the kids who made silly faces and waved back at him.

Howard thought about what this whole scene would look like on screen—his character is seized with enormous thoughts of regret, dread, mortality. It was trite. Confused and with no patience for it, he tried to focus back on the racing picks for the day. He couldn't. He felt compelled to return to Brooklyn to recapture the connection and the identity he felt he'd lost all these years spent in Hollywood, in a life he never he expected he could have. The questions he

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felt he was avoiding for the past several weeks he was in this funk flooded his mind.

So was that it, identity? All he had to go on was his acting career, since he had nothing else to look back and judge his life. He broke it down: the successful roles he's played have been those characters he knows well. The unsuccessful ones were characters he didn't know and had never encountered. What does that say about his life experience? Is he limited? Is he not as worldly as he thought he was? Is he still the Brooklyn schlub he's been trying to escape his whole life?

Sitting in the coffee shop, Howard refused to be a captive of his own depressing questions. As always, when he is faced with questions or at a crossroads, he makes a decision and sees it through.

He drove back to the house with resolve, aiming to pack up some things and just drive back to New York. As he pulled into the circular driveway, his phone rang.

Chapter 6

Howard - The Phone Call

It was a 201 area code, and Howard didn't give a moment's thought to who else it could have been other than Punch. Where's the mystery any longer, Howard thought, with cellphones and caller ID?

"Punch, that you?" he asked quickly, as if to say, if it's not Punch, I don't have time to talk to you so get off my line.

"Howie Kessler? Howie? It's Punch Plotkin! How are ya!"

"I can't believe it, Punch, it's been so many years. You sound like an old man on the phone!"

"You! You're the old man, Howie! You've lived a thousand lives already. I can't believe you—a movie star! We've watched most of your movies. You had some weird ones there, you know."

"Yeah, some weird ones. I like doing the offbeat films; the people are interesting to work with."

There was a short pause, and another voice on the line, a quieter one.

"Howie, it's, it's me, Art. Art Raimi. I'm, uh, here with Punch. We got together—"

"Well holy shit, Art Raimi! I can't believe it's you. I can't believe I'm talking to you guys both. I'm just, you know, overwhelmed I guess." Howard was choked up. He was about to lose his cool and he knew it. Finally, after so many years of putting on his Hollywood front, he was ok with letting his guard down. These were his guys.

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“I’m coming back to New York. I’m coming back and I want to see you. I’m staying. I’m leaving L.A. and I dunno, I’m just done with it out here.”

Punch and Art looked at each other, hoping the other one would have something to say to lead the conversation in a direction that was agreeable to both.

Art said, “You’re not in trouble, Howie, right? I mean, we were a little concerned when Punch said—”

Punch stopped Art there, not wanting Howie to know how much deliberation had gone into the phone call.

“Howie we can’t wait for you to come back. I have kids, grandkids, I live in Jersey now, got out of Brooklyn. You just tell us when you’re back and we’ll arrange a dinner or something. We can barbeque,” Punch said, trying to ease up any tension that was already developing.

“Ah, you guys are great. I mean, it’s been a hundred years already and I feel like I never left.”

To Art, those words burned; Howard felt the tautness of the discussion.

“Listen, I’m packing up my place right now. I’ll call you when I get closer. Punch you’re in Jersey, so I’ll hit that before I get to the city. I’ll stop by.”

“You’re driving?” Punch asked.

“Yeah, I just can’t fly anymore. I dunno. I feel more connected when I drive. Should be a week or so. Maybe less. Hey you guys hear at all from Frank and Mo? You know what they’re up to?”

Frank and Mo.

The two names hadn’t been uttered in decades.

“Jeeezus, Howie, no, as a matter of fact, I have no idea where the hell those guys are,” Punch said, looking out the front window thinking of one of the last memories of the five guys together, smoking cigarettes, drinking booze on the

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rooftop of Mo's mother's apartment house, the night before graduation, 1962.

"Art, what are you doing these days?" Howard asked.

"I'm, uh, I'm still in baseball—" and before he had a chance to say he was going to be the next Commissioner, Howard jumped in.

"Not a ballboy, still, huh? Alright, guys, this is great. I have your number, Punch. Listen, I'll be out there soon. Keep a light on."

It was a bizarre conversation. Howard felt like the train was moving before he had a chance to board it. He fully knew he hadn't thought this through but wasn't afraid of the consequences since he was confident that whatever next step he took in life would net him benefits. Staying in L.A. and hoping for good roles was not going to give him any fulfillment.

Howard was resolute in returning to Brooklyn, but after a few minutes of talking to his two closest and oldest friends from his adolescence, he felt more distant than ever. They were strangers. What good could possibly come from a visit with these guys other than an evening of digging up old memories, he thought?

Chapter 7

Art

I wouldn't know how to find Frank and Mo if my life depended on it, I thought. I'm not even sure I want to find out where they are and what they're doing. These guys were bad guys. We were friends out of necessity. With Frank, it was like walking on eggshells. His temper was shorter than Howie's and he was like a freight-train of anger and violence. Frank beat on anyone he could given the opportunity, for no apparent reason. He was a funny guy, don't get me wrong, we loved having him around, but he was a gorilla.

Mo, well, he's just a fuck-up and makes his way through life, I'm sure, wheeling and dealing. What killed me about Mo was that he was the smartest businessman of all of us. I could do the numbers. Punch would do the planning. Howie was the bravado. Frank, the brawn. And Mo, he was the brains behind every scheme we ever hatched. He never had a guiding light, though, to show him how to use those skills outside of petty crime. Neither did I, but I had a seething ambition to get the hell out of the Brooklyn ghetto and I focused it on baseball.

I can't believe Punch was as calm as he was during the call. Hours before, he was nearly comatose in the ER and didn't even feel the need to bring it up on the call. He didn't tell Howie he has only one leg now. I wanted to tell Howie,

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so that if he sees Punch he doesn't go into shock. But after all these years, it would be crazy to expect things to be the same.

It's funny, we'll all recognize Howie because we've watched him in the movies. For us, we're just old men. We got old, fat, bald, and in Punch's case, lost a leg along the way. What the hell does Howie want with us, anyway? I have enough hangers on and I'm not even famous, yet. Howie, the guy can have anything he wants. He does have everything he wants. Why is he coming back? Is he having one of those crisis points in life? Mine came ten years ago when I divorced Sarah, my wife of 30 years and mother of my three kids; none of whom speak to me—either I was a terrible father traveling 40 weeks a year, or because I left their mother for a gay, Russian lover. I hope for Howie's sake he doesn't have that much on the line.

I couldn't hang on this any more today. This is a ridiculous consideration that Howie Kessler is coming back to Brooklyn to seek out his friends after nearly a half century of no contact. There's got to be more to this.

“Buddy I gotta get back to the city. I have an early conference call tomorrow to prepare for an onslaught of Players Association complaints on Monday. Thank you for putting this together.” I said to Art, holding his arm and not wanting to let go—partly out of my own fear of what he had experienced today.

But I wasn't even sure what I meant by that statement. What was I thanking him for? For inviting me out to New Jersey to go to the hospital with his family, and then to call Howie Kessler? I don't even know what we're getting into with Howie coming home.

“You think he's coming? I don't. I don't believe a fucking word he says. Nice guy, I'm sure. Maybe he's still on the drugs,” Punch said.

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On the drive back I thought about when we used to play basketball together, whenever we could fight our way to getting a court for a couple of hours. We played handball, stickball, and sometimes bust up other games or play dice instead. We trusted each other only to the extent we had to, meaning that there wasn't a whole lot of trust between the five of us. We each had friends outside our gang. A gang is an odd creature and I've spent a good part of my adult life thinking about what gang I can belong to now, for shelter and protection, for camaraderie, for identity. It can't be duplicated—it shouldn't be duplicated. We got into a lot of trouble back then.

I returned home that evening and Yuri had already prepared dinner.

"I'm sorry I didn't call earlier. It was a helluva day." I was hoping he would let me clam up.

"I can tell you don't want to talk about it. I won't bother you. Except you should have called to tell me what was going on. As far as I knew you would have been back in time for us to catch the 2pm movie at the Quad downtown. It's 8pm, you're M.I.A., and now you're clearly all mucked up in deep thought. I told you this Howie thing is a bad idea."

I didn't answer him, because I knew where he was going—if he was angry enough with me.

I thanked him for dinner, but he continued his line of thinking.

"I don't think I have to remind you what happens each time you look back."

I didn't look up because I didn't want to fuel this quiet outburst.

"You can't control other people, Art. Maybe in your job you can, but you spent 30 years trying to change people in

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your life and look where it got you—in an illegitimate gay relationship and ostracized by your ex-wife and kids.”

I put my fork down to make the point, silently, that I didn't want to continue this one-way conversation, but Yuri continued it anyway.

“Just leave it alone, Art, leave this one alone. Walk away now before you get involved beyond what you can control.”

On a few occasions throughout my career in Major League Baseball I've had the opportunity to weigh in on which celebrity delivers a speech to the owners, or which one throws out a ceremonial ball during the playoffs, or which one's name gets buried or leaked in a drugs or prostitute scandal alongside one of the players. I've often thought about Howie, since he was the only one who loved baseball—and the New York Yankees—as much as I did. I never sought him out and I never really thought about why.

There was the thing with his brother Sammy, who got into trouble betting over his head and I placed some numbers for him. He never paid up and I went to the bosses. I don't think anyone thought I could have done anything else. The guy was a degenerate and he was lucky he got into trouble with me and my guys rather than someone who would have thrown him a beating, or worse.

There were a couple of other things that Howie and I kept secret. Whereas sometimes secrets can bring two people closer together, Howie and I put up walls between each other knowing what we were keeping from the world. It's easier not to face your mirror image, I suppose, when there are some ugly things you know it will reflect. Neither of us actually graduated from high school. And then there's the thing about my interest in men. Howie may have shared it, too. Would it ruin us now? I'd have to give that some thought, and I don't

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really care to do so now, so I'm not altogether sure this meeting up with Howie thing is the best idea for anyone.

Chapter 8

Frank

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, these fucking kids, Dee, these fucking kids, it’s like they’re here to make my life a fucking mess.”

I pressed 3 and hoped the hold time for the insurance company wouldn’t be as fucking ridiculous as the last time one of my kids totaled the car. As I waited to speak with a human, they make me wait and listen to this fucking country music like I’m some backwoods hick who drove his pickup into a ditch. My wife, Deirdre, tried to calm me down but just agitated the situation even more so I walked into another room to sit on hold for god knows how much longer.

They finally sent a human.

“Yeah, uh, we got a wrecked car, and my fucking kid, is there some way you can make it so none of them can drive my car? Some technology? No, really, I’m serious. Like the opposite of Lo-Jack or something. None of these fucking kids is on my insurance policy and they keep driving and wrecking the cars. And you know—these are not cheap cars. This was the Lexus.”

After about 45 minutes of negotiating with these thieves I think I got something to go my way.

He was racing at 3am. I already had to pay the cop that arrived at the scene \$10,000 to keep his mouth shut about the drugs in the car; I didn’t need any more shit from the

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insurance company. I try to keep things above board these days. Dario is 22 years old, he doesn't need to be taking my fucking car anymore, but he can't keep a job, he can't kick the drugs, I don't know what the fuck he's going to do. The kid can barely read for chrissake. I don't know what happened wrong with him.

Not that the other three are much better. Petey's 25 and is slated to get caught stealing from FedEx over at JFK Airport where he's working and part of a crime ring to lift packages; Vanessa's 20 years old and has two kids from two different guys; Donna's 19, fat as house and has rings through her face. I don't even know what the fuck she does for money these days, but none of them are paying rent because Dee won't let it happen. Not that she's a softie, but rent is out of the question.

I realize I have to blame myself for some of them fucking up. I wasn't exactly around much for them. The construction business has had its ups and downs, and it hasn't been my sole source of income over the years; I spent some time hanging around the wrong people doing some bad things. Today things are much better, consistent; I have a lot going for me now. But the kids, they're going to make me die an early death.

Dee says I ruined their sense of responsibility and self-respect. I don't know what the fuck she's talking about. I work hard. I don't always play by the rules. I came from a tough childhood, and now I have a construction empire: Russo Works handles 90% of all the public school repairs in New York City. My father beat the shit out of me, the priests beat the shit out of me, and the mob beat the shit out of me. I don't go wrecking other people's cars.

I do feel bad about Petey. One of my guys got him the job at the airport and I knew it wasn't quite above board, but

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figured he couldn't get hurt—quite frankly, I thought he was too stupid to pull anything off. Next thing I know the kid's coming home with wads of cash and the occasional crate of MP3 players or some goddamned thing. He's not smart enough to keep this going, I keep telling him. I hope he doesn't get too greedy. Once the feds start sniffing around here again, I'm done. Too much in my past—I don't want them connecting any dots.

With my kids all messed up I've been thinking a lot lately about where I came from and what I could have done differently to help my kids grow up better. I don't articulate my thoughts well; I never communicated well with any members of my family. That shouldn't be a reason for them to be such deviants. What do I know, anyway.

“Petey, would you get up and fix that goddamned ATV on the front lawn for chrissake. It's been there for weeks. Can't you get the thing going? I'm having people over tonight. We look like a white trash neighborhood with shit out on the lawn. Just fix the goddamned thing and get it the hell outta here.”

“Get off my back, Dad, will you relax? You're like Mussolini over here with the orders. What's with you lately?” he said effortlessly, without even looking up from his video game.

“Aren't you too old to be playing games on the TV anyway?”

Deirdre walked in at that moment and immediately came to Petey's defense.

“He's just relaxing, Frank, take it easy. He's entitled.”

“Entitled? Entitled? Get a goddamned job and you'll be entitled. You're too old for this shit. Get the fuck out of here before I haul your ass out of the house altogether.”

“Jezus! Frank, Take it easy! Leave him alone!”

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All the while, Petey's engrossed in his TV game and doesn't even bother to engage. This is how he is all the time, always has been.

"Look, I'm just trying to take back my goddamned house that I work my ass off to keep. It's like the prisoners are running the jail here."

"Nice, Frank, they're your kids and you're calling them prisoners. And you wonder why they behave like animals."

Deirdre was probably on to something there, but over 20 years and four kids later, what the hell was I going to do about it now? They're all adults, I'm getting old, she's getting fat, and they're running us down. As I yelled to her to order enough food for 8 people from D'Angelos, she walked back in and looked at me funny.

"You go around yelling at everybody and humiliating your kids, and now you're buying everyone dinner on the night you know they're all going to be out?"

Though I wanted to take credit for buying everyone dinner, it wasn't my intention.

"No, tonight the guys are coming by and we're watching a couple of Howie's movies."

"Again? Didn't you just go over to Bobby's last week and do the same thing? What the hell do you guys do, jerk each other off? Jesus, Frank, you're pathetic."

"Oh yeah? Your ass is getting fatter by the minute, Dee, so you might want to do something about that."

"Fuck off. Have a nice night with your pathetic friends."

It's true, me and the guys watch Howie Kessler movies as often as possible. We have theme nights for his movies. We skip the faggy musicals though; I don't know what the fuck he was thinking then.

Howie was my best friend growing up. The lot of us ran around together, but me and Howie were the tightest. We

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lived right next door to each other. We had it rough as kids, poor as hell. But we had the run of the neighborhood for as long as I could remember. As kids we used to throw rocks from the rooftop of my building to anyone we didn't know. Then when we got older, we patrolled the block with baseball bats, certifying our territory. Every block had it, we were no different. But me and Howie used to beat the shit out of anyone who tried to steal our girls, our bike, or our territory.

Then came Art and Punch. Because we all lived on the same couple of blocks, we became our own gang, of sorts. It worked out; we each had our own friends and backgrounds—and for the gang, we each had our own skills. Art was great with the numbers and he was our money bag when we needed it. Punch was our planner and schemed the best ways to get girls, stake out territory, and rip off guys at the pool hall. They were also the biggest, so we needed them.

Mo was the guy everybody loved the most, but couldn't get close to enough to know what he was going to do next. As I remember it, most of the reasons why we ever got in fights was because of something Mo said or did. He instigated, he disappeared, he endeared everybody because he was such a smooth talker. Mo always had problems with the drugs, though. Howie tried desperately to help him with that, even when we were young. It killed Howie that Mo was so messed up much of the time. I think I resented Mo for taking up so much of Howie's time—time that he and I should have been spending together doing the things we loved to do when we were younger.

We all put some money together each month from our hustling at the pool hall to rent a room, our club room, from a mean ex-boxer who had extra space in his candy store basement. We did everything in there and just having it was our source of pride. One day, after playing cards for hours,

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Mo looked up and said we needed a juke box. He said that a club room wasn't really a club room unless there was a juke box. Howie agreed and said we could get girls in there if we have a juke box. We could barely scrape together enough money for the rent, so there was no way we were buying a juke box. Meanwhile Joey Klein, the boxer and candy store owner, recently complained that his rival candy store a few blocks away got a new juke box and that it was attracting his customers and hurting his business. Mo planned for us to hit the candy store the next night after closing. Howie stole Joey's dolly, Punch, Art and I broke into Mrs. Grossman's candy store, stole the juke box, and the five of us rolled it on Joey's dolly back to our club room. Joey never knew we had it in there since he was nearly deaf from taking too many punches.

So I watch Howie's movies now. I've watched his career ever since he left Brooklyn. We didn't hear from him for a few years after he left, but he wrote a few letters when he was in the Navy and sent pictures of Los Angeles once he moved out there permanently. I meant to go out there. But soon after we all split up, I got married and stayed back here. I know that if I could see Howie again, we would be tight as ever, as if no time ever went by, since 1963.

* * *

“And we are getting reports that the postponement of the shooting for Donnie Birken's new project which was being billed as the next Apocalypse Now is due to a switch in leading men. My sources are telling me that Howard Kessler is no longer on this film and we will report back as soon as more information becomes available on this developing story. This is Rena White in Hollywood. Michelle, back to you.”

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“Thank you Rena. Here at the studio our sources are telling us that Howard Kessler hasn’t been seen around town in several weeks, and calls to his manager and agent, Alan Shiner, went unreturned. Darren, what do you think of this? Where is Howard Kessler? And why isn’t he shooting what could be his next big blockbuster with Donnie Birken?”

“Well, Michelle, I don’t think it looks good for Howard to remain absent during this speculation. I don’t know why his team hasn’t come out with a statement about the film or his whereabouts. Frankly, this is all looking quite suspicious. We will continue to follow this story. And now on to other news: The new reality television series—”

“Dad. DAD. Yo, DAAAAAAA!!” Dario yelled from the couch.

“What? Can’t you get your ass up and speak like you’re not in the Grand fucking Canyon?” I said as I walked into the den.

“Listen, Howie’s missing in L.A. It was just on TV.”

“Go back, can you rewind it?” I said.

I watched the piece on Howie and wondered what the hell was going on. I hope he’s alright.

“You should call him up, Dad, after all these years he’d probably like to hear from you.”

I went back to my newspaper and didn’t think about Howie until later that night. My goddamned kids give me *agita* and I haven’t been sleeping for hours at a time. So in between the anxiety of keeping my business afloat as I try to extract myself from certain relationships that only mean more trouble; and how the fuck I’m going to afford my car insurance and Dario’s drug rehab, I sat up in bed and tried to think about why we lost touch. There had to be a reason. May be the first time in all these years I’ve stopped to think about those days and why we never kept in touch. I suppose I thought that one day back then I’d hear from him—but it never came. I never knew how to get in touch; ever since he

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left for the Navy I just waited for him to write to me. So now I thought, nearly 50 years later and no contact from Howie, my best friend growing up, why would he just leave us? And why didn't the rest of us stay in closer touch, either?

I do remember one thing. Art used to run numbers for some guys, but he also started taking bets on his own so he could earn more money. This guy knew sports and how to bet better than anyone I ever knew, including guys in the mob. But he had to be careful to keep his game quiet so his bread-and-butter didn't find another kid to take his place. Howie's brother, Sammy, owed Art's guys a lot of money and of course—like any degenerate gambler—thought that he could make it back by putting more money out there. Art took his bet, reluctantly, and against my opinion. When the horse lost the race or the team lost the game, whichever it was, Art needed to collect. When Sammy didn't pay, Art went to Howie. Howie told Art that he shouldn't have taken the bet. So where does this leave Art? With two pissed off bosses about to put the screws on.

To be honest, I don't know what I would have done if I had been in Art's shoes. Sammy wasn't a particularly likable guy and was such a loser that his fiancée stood him up at City Hall. Art went to the bosses and explained that he took Sammy's bet on the side. Art played it more shifty than I had even expected him to, and portrayed it in such a way that it was the only side bet he took even though it wasn't. Howie couldn't help but feel that Art sold Sammy out, for his own self-preservation.

Art and Howie obviously never got over that one.

I thought a lot about those days for the next few nights. I can't honestly say we really ever helped each other out all that much. Our group started to splinter before we even got out of high school. I never graduated and went right to work for

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my uncle in building the pavilion and other projects related to the 1964/65 World's Fair in Queens, and only came around the club room occasionally. We did shoot pool often, but once I started working, I had money coming in and didn't need all the pool hustling and fights that ensued.

That wasn't it, and I'm sure there were more fissures over those years than I care to remember. I did love Howie, though. He always looked out for me, and I didn't care that he started hanging around with a different bunch of guys later on. Things have always got to change a little, or else you go a little crazy.

I never went to the reunions because half the guys I hung around with didn't graduate and probably aren't even on the alumni mailing lists. Once upon a time I would have liked to hear about what some of the guys were doing, but now we're just old. It's been too long. I just don't care; I have my own troubles. I'd still love to see Howie.

Chapter 9

Mo

“Baby you still do it for me. You are still the greatest baby anyone could have in the sack,” I said to Sheila, my ex-wife, as she turned over in the bed and lit a cigarette, not bothering to cover her body with the sheet. What 62 year old woman does that?

We couldn't stay married. I couldn't be married. It worked out fine for the both of us, since she went off and married one of the richest guys in New York. And he's one of my biggest customers.

“Hon, I gotta get back, I hope you don't mind. Richie gets worried; and I still have to stop at Loehmann's before they close,” Sheila said, putting out the cigarette in her Scotch glass, devoid of Scotch but with melting ice cubes. “You'll give me the stuff, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. I'm flush this week. Good timing for you.”

“You're not in trouble again, right? I mean, what are you talking about, flush?” Sheila knew me and my business well. She knew who I did business with. It's partly why she left me.

“I'm fine, everything's good. We're good.” I tried to tell myself that, but I knew that by tomorrow night I'd have to come up with more money than I've handled in months and I had no plan to do it. “Are you going to make me rob you, again, though?”

“No! For chrissake, Mo, I'll leave you the money. Jesus, you know, you're going to give me a heart attack.”

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That was Sheila's favorite line, for years. Then she had a heart attack 8 years ago. She still says it, as if nothing happened, but it's just not funny anymore.

"I need more," I said, hoping she would understand the subtext.

"Hon, I told you I don't have time—Loehmann's closes at 6 tonight and—oh, wait, you need more what, money?"

"Jimmy's guys are coming by tomorrow night."

"What did you do? Are you stealing from them? You stupid fool, are you stealing from Jimmy Butler?"

"No, I borrowed and this is like a margin call. Richie understands that."

"You fucking idiot. I know what a fucking margin call is, Mo. How much? No, forget it, I don't want to know. Do you want me to call Richie?"

I didn't want her to call Richie. I hoped she had access to the money herself. I knew she didn't, but hoped anyway.

"I may just get out of town for a while," I said, half under my breath.

"You dumb fuck, they'll find you. Do you want them to blow up your goddamned boat again? Why do you do this? Why can't you just manage the club and be done with it?"

"Because you and Richie wouldn't have your coke if all I did was manage the club, that's why, Sheila, so don't give me that shit about quitting the business. I'm doing fine."

We did our business and Sheila wrote me a check to cash for \$9,999. I didn't tell her that it was just a fraction of what I owed, but I was grateful for it anyway.

I co-own a health club in Sheepshead Bay. Nearly all my customers are also my coke customers, so it works out. I know a lot of people, and more people know me. Things don't always go as smooth as they should. People don't pay. The good thing is that the contract on the health club

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membership agreement they unwittingly sign requires hefty up-front fees, their credit card numbers, and consent to garnish when appropriate. So when someone doesn't pay for their package and they don't show up on the treadmill, we charge one or more of their credit cards. Of course this doesn't always work, people cancel their cards or they're already maxxed out. If some asshole has the balls to try and screw me out of my money, I have a pretty successful track record of making them pay up. I've learned over the years who the types are who try to skip out. It's not because they don't have the money, but they owe so much around town that inevitably one of us is going to fall on their list of priorities. It's my job to make sure I stay on the top of their pile. Most often, just a little scare will put the money back in my pocket. It rarely takes more than that these days. A baseball bat is hardly even needed any longer. Sometimes just showing up at their office or home—usually on Sundays when the kids are home—works like a charm.

It hasn't always been this easy. Back in the day I handled a lot more money and enjoyed the packages just as much as my clientele. I got in over my head a few times. There were some misunderstandings. I didn't take the business as seriously as I should have. I lost everything to some very bad guys.

I've done my time. Two 18-month stints in the can, but that was long ago. Coming out was the hardest part. No one trusts you when you've been in prison. You have to prove yourself all over again. I was in my early 50's when I was convicted for the first time. It's not easy in there. Putting the business and my life back together after the second time, a year later, was the hardest thing I've ever done.

I don't worry much about getting caught any longer. I play a much cleaner game now than I did years ago. It was

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inevitable back then, I was sloppy and someone snitched. I should have seen it coming.

I'm only in trouble now because I spread things out a little too thin and I just have to step up collections. No skimming anymore. I know what I'm doing. I'm 66 years old, for chrissake. I'm in the best shape of my life, I fuck like crazy, I got no other attachments and the money's good.

Brooklyn, for me, is the center of the world. It all begins here and it all ends here. I don't need anything else. I have my own Chinatown, right up on 65th Street and 8th Avenue. I have the beach, the boardwalk, the rides, the girls in short skirts on Coney Island. I got fishing here in Sheepshead Bay and I live on my boat. I got Russian nightclubs with the best vodka and hookers on Earth in Brighton Beach. I got golf in Dyker Heights. I got discount shopping on Fulton Street. I got what little family is left who still talk to me in Boro Park. I don't ever need to leave this place—not for nothing.

I decided to go out and have a drink and figure out what the fuck I was going to do about the rest of the \$51,000 I needed to come up with by tomorrow. I went down to Benny's place and sat down at the far end of the bar, where I could see anyone coming in the door, and ordered a whiskey.

Benny poured it and leaned into me over the bar.

"You know Jimmy's guys came looking for you."

"When?" I wasn't worried, since my last conversation we agreed tomorrow night I'd bring the dough over to his place in Bay Ridge.

"Earlier today," Benny whispered, looking around as if there were anyone in the bar at that time of day who would be listening.

"They just come in to make themselves known, they're not going to do anything to me. I have until tomorrow, anyway."

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“Awright, if you say so,” he said as he drew back, shaking his head. Still with his arm on the bar, he turned away and looked up at the television. “I gotta get one of those flat-screens in here. This thing is a piece of shit.”

I looked up at the TV and watched for a few moments. It was one of those celebrity gossip programs. Oddly engrossing, Benny and I sat silently watching the show and not a soul was in the bar. There was a short segment on my old, old friend, Howie Kessler.

“Hey Benny, turn it up, there’s Howie.”

“And we are getting reports that the postponement of the shooting for Donnie Birken’s new project which was being billed as the next Apocalypse Now is due to a switch in leading men. My sources are telling me that Howard Kessler is no longer on this film and we will report back as soon as more information becomes available on this developing story. This is Rena White in Hollywood. Michelle, back to you.”

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“I can turn this shit off now, right?” Benny said.

“Yeah, Jesus, what’s Howie up to these days. Did you see the last thing he was in, last summer?”

“That war movie? Yeah, that was good. He’s good in those movies. Wonder why he never comes back here.”

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I hadn't thought about Howie in ages. It's been so long since the last time he came out here. We both got into a bit of trouble. I got people who still aren't talking to me because of the shit we stirred up. I had a friend whose horse was running at Belmont about 25 years ago and Howie and I got a little mixed up in fixing a couple of races. We cleaned up, but a few of the other players around town got wind of it and made some threats. Before we knew it, there was a grand jury investigation, Howie's big lawyers showed up here and made it all go away. But not without the media and local gangsters all wanting a piece of the action.

"Why don't you call Howie and get the money from him?" Benny asked.

"You out of your fucking mind?"

"You know he's got it."

"First off, I wouldn't know how in a million years to get in touch with the guy. *Hello, Hollywood? Yes, I'm looking for my friend Howie Kessler, I'm just a loser from Brooklyn so please patch me through.* Sure, that'll work."

"Hey, you asked."

"No, Benny, I didn't fucking ask. You always do that. You offer advice when no one asks for it."

"Hey, I'm a bartender, whaddya want from me? I talk it up around here, you cranky bastard."

"Just get me another drink."

It was ridiculous, and never in a million years would I ever do that. Despite the joking with Benny, I couldn't help but think about Howie—not only the good times we've had, but that he could really help me out now. I wondered if he would, even if I did know how to get in touch with him.

Nah, I mean, the guy had severed relationships with just about everyone here. No one I know has spoken to him since the last time was here in New York. And even then, he kept

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his exposure to the old gang limited—partly, I imagine, because we hadn't spoken to one another in ages. We've got nothing in common anymore. And I'm not even supposed to be in the same room as Frankie, a condition of the plea agreement.

My first real job out of high school was as a court reporter. I had tons of assignments and did them well enough to earn a living once my mother kicked me out of the apartment. I tried to prove to a girl I was with—more accurately, to her parents—that I wasn't the lowlife hustler they thought I was—that I could keep a straight job. After a few months we broke up. But I kept the job, because I soon realized that the information I had unfettered access to was valuable to certain people. I have a near photographic memory, which helps. But between the people I knew from Brooklyn and the information I transcribed, I was selling information from depositions and testimonies to the mob for quite a bit of money. I was able to keep this up for years, and never got caught. What stopped me was when a guy being deposed in a grand jury investigation was Frank Russo, my Frankie. The prosecutor must have seen our faces when they brought Frankie into the room. I hadn't seen much of Frank in years. He stopped hanging around our club room shortly after we graduated since he was working for his uncle. But apparently his uncle had him doing more than hoisting bricks. Though I never got caught selling my information, I thought that the world was too small and that was my warning to stop being greedy. I never got out from under the ties to the mob, though, since these guys wouldn't take no for an answer once I left the court reporting job. Either way, me and Frankie can't be seen together.

It's been a long time; we've all been through a lot. And we weren't exactly tight as a rope consistently as teenagers.

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We had our routs with each other and our own friends. I couldn't stand how Howie stood up for two of the dumbest guys we knew, Eddie "Slip" and Louis "Bean." If I could remember whatever dumb-fuck story it was that they earned those nicknames I would love to tell it. They were always getting into trouble because they were just so stupid—and Howie would risk a lot to defend them. His association with those guys almost landed him in jail—shortly after our senior year in high school, Slip and Bean got jobs as drivers for a new Oldsmobile car dealership that opened up on 86th Street in Bensonhurst. Not two months into the job did they try to steal a car. You don't understand—no one stole cars back then. It was unheard of. But these two idiots somehow thought they would get away with it. And where did they go with their brand-new, shiny Oldsmobile? Howie's mother's house.

We got sick of it and just stopped hanging around Howie because of this and other dead-end reasons.

So as I was saying, you just don't resurrect ties after 50 years. You just can't do it.

Chapter 10

The Road Home

Howard left Hollywood. With no ceremonious departure party, no warm embraces, he got on the road at about 6:30am after a short run on the beach, a quick shower, and a last look around his house. He left the keys on the granite counter, picked up two duffel bags, put on his Ray-Bans, and stepped out the front door.

Long distance is not something Howard is used to driving. In fact, he rarely even drives himself any more, accompanied by an entourage usually composed of any combination of publicist, agent, manager, and hangers-on wherever he goes. No simple ventures to a diner for a quick bite; no stops at the grocery store. Howard's public life has been choreographed, planned, and protected. The underside of that public life, however, has been a constant battle to maintain his own independence—the self-dependence that he cultivated as far back as early childhood, in a tenement full of older relatives with little temperament to mind a troublesome kid. Howard's mischief as a kid seeped into adolescent and adult life and took the form of booze, drugs, gambling, and hookers—since he couldn't maintain a solid relationship with a woman for any fixed period of time.

Over the years he worked hard to alienate his brother, Sammy, and his sister, Judith. Sammy moved out to L.A. to be with Howie and escape his gambling debts on the east coast, but soon life caught up with him. Howie couldn't get him a job that he could keep, and he couldn't escape his

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gambling addiction. Compounded with Howie's own substance addictions, Sammy's life was a thread away from total self-destruction and nearly brought Howie's down with him. He returned to New York in the late 1980s and had been living in the East Village with a heroin-addicted performance artist who later painted herself red and threw herself in front of a bus on First Avenue. Judith moved to Israel with her husband in 1979. Howard visited once, for Judith's kid's bat mitzvah in 1988. He felt humbled by Judith's abundance of faith in her and her family's life and the hardships they endured as Kibbutzim in a country rattled with mortar. He was relieved to return to L.A., slightly jealous of his sister's life in a way that he couldn't articulate. They didn't speak often; they probably just don't have much to say to one another.

Rarely alone, Howard never really came face to face the ugly facts of his life. Exiling himself to a car and a lonely road for more than 3,000 miles was a reckoning with himself that he hadn't faced since he was in rehab in the 1980s—and even then he never truly thought about what made him who he is and why. He questioned why he was leaving. He questioned what he was searching for. He questioned if going back to Brooklyn and finding his old friends was in his best interest. Most meaningful of all was his question of what he thought he could get out of seeing guys he knew as a kid, when they knew nothing about one another today.

Wait, what the hell was he doing?

Before he knew it, he was in Kansas City and it was time to stop and reconsider the whole trip, since he was spending more time in the car reconsidering the choices he's made than looking forward to seeing the gang. He remembered a movie he was in where the mafia set up shop in Kansas City in the 1940's and then continued to move west to Las Vegas. There

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was no shooting in Kansas City itself, though, so Howard spent a couple of hours that evening walking around the downtown areas making mental notes of how different the sets and the location shooting which was in Vancouver, Canada.

He got back on the road and called Punch letting him know he'd be at his house in a couple of days, maybe less. Punch sounded surprised or caught off-guard. Howard sets an objective and doesn't let anything deter him from reaching it as quickly as possible, regardless of who gets knocked down en route. His decisions are made promptly and assertively. This one, though, he started to question, and he was disconcerted that he was questioning his own decision. He wanted to get back to the state of mind he was in when he decided to track down the guys and come back—it was a settling feeling. Sitting in a busy steakhouse at a table alone in the corner was not a settling feeling, knowing that his objectives for trip weren't clear enough to warrant the plan he set for action. Maybe Alan was right, he just needed a month or two in Maui or Monte Carlo. Now he's in Kansas City en route to Brooklyn via suburban New Jersey to see guys he doesn't even know, or like.

He started to think about Punch, Art, even Frankie and Mo. There had to be reasons why he hadn't kept in closer touch—he just had to recall why. He couldn't even remember the last time they were all together in the same room. In fact, when he did, it was an awful rift that began what may have been the split-up of the group that he had initially forgotten about. He couldn't even remember what the incident was to start it, other than he and a couple of other friends had tried to gain access to Art's club room—a room at the back of a candy store that he and some others rented to hang out in. When Art got wind of it, he chased down Howie's friends

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and with the help of Frankie and some other grunts, shaved the intruders' heads. Though they didn't touch Howie, he was mortified. He thought Art was his friend and he could just go hang out in the club room with his own guys. In 1957, shaving a teenage boy's head was the ultimate humiliation. They would spend hours slicking their hair into perfect greaser styles.

Howard got in the car early the next morning. He knew definitively that returning to Los Angeles was not going to provide him with the resolve he sought. Not knowing where he was headed—or why—as he sat in the cold seat, he watched the steam of the hot coffee sitting on the dashboard cloud up a little oval on the window. Though he wasn't rushed to make a decision, he needed more clarity so he turned off the motor and thought about the reasons why he was so intent on leaving Los Angeles:

I have no career any longer because I have little desire to act, not to mention the paucity of significant roles for me.

I have no attachments to people—women—and can't seem to forge any. Except Alan, my friends in L.A. are not reliable, lifelong, trusted friends the way he thinks friends should be.

I really do hate a lot about L.A. It's desperate and shallow and reeks of anxiety and despair.

Without close connections and a real desire to continue living there, Howard's feelings were at best, apathetic. He thought that life is too short and challenge, passion, learning and new experiences ought to lie ahead—not repetitious tedium.

But none of this was good enough to justify returning to Brooklyn. Many years ago he was resolute in cutting many close ties, since he—and Alan—knew that destruction only breeds destruction. Though he was uncertain of what lie

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ahead, he was resolute that he needed to make a change. He wouldn't get roles, even if he wanted them. He wouldn't form meaningful attachments with women unless he changed his underlying desire to do so. He wouldn't hate L.A. so much if he wasn't so desperate, shallow, and full of anxiety and despair. So with that, Howard's fundamental pursuit of change was the reason for heading to Brooklyn, not to return there for sentimentality which—so many years later—would not provide enduring satisfaction.

He turned on the car again, pulled out of the hotel lot in Kansas City, and continued to drive east.

The next night he stopped the car was in Indianapolis. Howard was tired and there was nothing to do in the city. It was totally barren and the hotel desk didn't even recognize him. Howard isn't so much an egotistical movie star as keen on his surroundings: If people don't recognize who he is, they are most likely devoid of any culture, in his mind. All the better, he could use the rest and quietude. He pulled the curtains open in his hotel room overlooking Union Station and the main plaza in the city. It was lit up nicely. Because Indianapolis and its surrounding area are so flat, the clear night enabled Howard to see the lines of suburban light for miles. He pulled up the desk chair to the window, sat back and perched his feet up on the sill. What the fuck am I doing in Indianapolis? he thought.

Finally, after months of struggling with where he was in his career and his life, Howard finally took a few moments to think about where he had decided to go. Brooklyn. The dead-end, death-spiral, meatball-mentality, Brooklyn. From the moment he could pinpoint his self-awareness and presence in Brooklyn, Howard bristled and couldn't wait to get out of there. The projects, the stupid, provincial mindset, the fake attitude, the ethnocentrism, the xenophobia, the melting pot,

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the smells, the pizza, the El Train, the beach. It was home; he hated everything about himself that was Brooklyn. But he wouldn't have his career if it weren't for the Brooklyn in him—nearly every successful role he played was based upon a character he could have known in Brooklyn. The wise-guy, the gangster, the poor immigrant, the Russian mobster, the working-class aspirant, the thug, the victim, the killer, the lover, the chef. He couldn't have done them without Brooklyn; and Hollywood and the world loved him for it.

He wondered who he would see when he was back. He wondered if they could find Frankie and Mo, and whether he even wanted to see those guys—if they were even alive. Howard was aware that he turned his back on the gang once he left for L.A. years earlier. He realized when he was in the Navy that there was nothing really tying the group together. He could be his own person without them.

One question he pondered was whether any feelings they may have had of betrayal would linger if he came back. How does he justify turning his back on them after all they had been through? As a tight group, they were about 16 years old at the time, their club room was their home base and Art rented it from the owner of the candy store owner, a former boxer, Joey Klein. The guys pooled some money to give to Art so they could all call it their own, though Art managed the place and the relationship with the landlord—even by the time he was 14, Art was doing deals. The landlord was a middleweight champion contender, but lost his hearing after getting too banged up and retired. He was a monster, though. Income from a candy store in those days wasn't enough to support a drunken ex-boxer and a family with three kids. So his young wife—had to be no older than 21—worked numerous jobs to keep the family afloat. Joey used to beat her up, but no one had evidence enough to really do anything

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about it. One late night, the guys were in their club room playing cards when they heard Joey beating on his wife upstairs. Without hesitation or discussion, the five busted open the door and ran up the stairs. They beat this former champ with the kitchen chairs and threw him out the second-floor window onto the fire escape. They then packed up the family's things and put them on a bus back to the wife's family's home in Allentown, Pennsylvania. This was one of the few times the five agreed and needed no negotiations or compromises to accomplish something. This was also one of many painful memories—there was nothing bittersweet about it.

But it still hung in Howard's mind that his leaving without any contact with the group wouldn't go over well.

Frankie idolized Howard before he was an actor. Frankie followed Howard around when they were in grade-school together. They were inseparable. Frankie always looked out for Howard—more so when they were in the gang together because Frankie felt responsible for Howard. He never picked a fight. He never went after his girl. He never challenged Howie. Because of that, Howard was loyal to Frankie. But once he left, he was gone.

Howie figured Frankie was still in Brooklyn. He got up from his chair in the hotel and called the operator to help him find the Frank Russo he grew up with.

Minutes later, the phone rang in Howard's hotel room and he hesitated to pick it up—what would he say to Frank, he hadn't even thought about it.

It was the operator. There are 17 Frank Russos in Brooklyn.

Howard's first instinct was to call Alan, who would be able to arrange an answer or solution to any of Howard's questions over the past 20 years. Alan would have a minion

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do the research or make the calls. But he was on his own now and had to make a decision.

He had the hotel operator send him the 17 phone numbers and addresses of the Frank Russos in Brooklyn. One of them would be the guy. He would call when he could get his head together on what he would say. Maybe he would wait until he saw Punch, though he didn't think Punch would have any opinion on it one way or the other. Or Art, who never really liked Frank, though.

Planning the next few days, weeks and months of his life came down to sitting in the hotel room in Indianapolis. Howard needed a new project to call his own—shape it, develop it, and see it to fruition. He knew he could take on something spectacularly consuming since he had little else going on in his life. Taking on the gang would be the next project. Howard was going to write a play. He couldn't possibly re-engage with them without a reason, and he didn't have any other reason than to use the stories and perspectives to incorporate into a play. He would reinvent himself, again, with a piece he could truly call his own. It's about time.

He left Indianapolis and thought that there could be nothing ever in the world that would make him go back there again. Driving east and on the last leg of his journey, Howard decided that he would wait to call Frank from Punch's place and that way he would have better grounding to get the old gang back together. He was still uncertain about what to expect; though his decision to return was final and he didn't waver.

Howard could remember the last time he drove up the New Jersey Turnpike. It was 1962 and he and the gang packed in Punch's girlfriend's car to Atlantic City. It seemed like a world away; and for many in the car, it was the first time out of Brooklyn, including Howard. He, Frank and

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Punch in the front seat, their girlfriends in the back seat. They went fishing on the steel pier, compared the boardwalk to Coney Island's and played some games at the casino. They were young and though they had cleaned up at the pool hall the night before and felt loaded with cash; it wasn't enough to get them all dinner and entertainment like they had planned. They spent one night at the Claridge and ditched at 5am the next morning without paying for the room. It was a nice memory—but that's all it was, a memory, and Howard refused to be tethered to nostalgia.

In a few short moments he would be pulling into Punch's driveway. Nearly 50 years had passed since these once-close friends had even talked in person.

Chapter 11

Howard and Punch

Crunchy leaves. I've been dying to step on crunchy leaves ever since I lost my leg and I can't walk. Being a city kid, we didn't have many crunchy leaves in the autumn, so whenever I had an autumn trip outside the city I loved to step on crunchy leaves. It's one of the things I cherish being out here in Jersey. Adele and I were sitting on the side porch, partially enclosed with screens and glass, and watched the neighbor's kids play ball next door. Apparently Howard is due here any minute. Adele was furious with me because I didn't tell her until late last night that he was supposed to be coming. I still don't believe we'll see him. She's been fussing all day with the house, shopping, the guest room.

"I have to fix the towels in the guest bath upstairs and turn the roast, you need anything?" she asked.

"First, Adele, we don't even know he's staying. Or coming for that matter. You're going crazy with this. Relax. No, I don't need anything. Just sit down and enjoy the weather while we can still sit outdoors."

Any opportunity I had, I liked to be outside. Working in an office for 40 years and living in a tenement before then has driven me to hate being inside when I don't need to be.

"And? And what if he does come? And what if he does stay? What, are we going to put him on the couch? Or make

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him share our bathroom? Sometimes, Karol, you just don't have any sense."

So I let her go on with her business. It can't hurt anybody. She stepped inside and I heard pots clanging.

I spied a large, black, SUV with blacked-out windows driving slowly up the street, and then a few moments later back down the street. Then up again. For the love of god, it's Howie.

I would give anything to stand up right now and walk across the lawn. I would give anything.

I feel so old, tired, and worn down. Like a whole life has run me over and dragged me under the wheels. And here I am, unable to move and for the first time in decades, I want to run. Tears started running down my face as I saw Howie stop the truck and get out, looking up at my house. It was the same look he had when he got out of the car when we all made a high school trip to Atlantic City: awe, mixed with skepticism.

"Howie," I tried to call out, but my voice cracked, "Howie," not much better. "Adele, get the door, Howie's here, ADELE!"

She comes running from the kitchen holding a rag and sees through the front window Howie standing there looking at the house and she runs back into the kitchen.

"Adele, where the hell are you going? Would you get the door?"

"I gotta put on some coffee and put the cake out! Jesus, Karol, why didn't you tell me he'd be here now!"

I fumbled with the folded up newspaper in my chair and rolled through the dining room to the front door. As I opened it, Howie was stepping up the walkway, holding a duffel bag.

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“I don’t fucking believe it!” he said as he opened the screen door and stepped inside. Either Art told him I was in a chair or he’s just remarkably cool in his reaction, because he didn’t blink. He leaned down and we embraced, I couldn’t get a hold of myself.

“Punch, baby, look at you, full head of hair, you bastard! What is it, 30 years? More?”

“Howie,” I bumbled, “It’s just so great to see you. I can’t get over it. I really didn’t think you’d come. I mean, you know, I just didn’t really expect it.”

“Hey, I said I’d be here, and I’m here, aren’t I?”

By this time, nearly every neighbor on the block was peering out to catch a glimpse of Howard Kessler, in Karol and Adele Plotkin’s foyer. I realized that Adele couldn’t help but call her friends and neighbors—this was the most exciting thing to happen to her since the two grandkids were born. She came hustling out of the kitchen with a huge tray full of pastries, cookies, and the silver serving set from our wedding that had been used maybe twice before.

“Is this Adele? Jesus, you look just like I remember you when you were 17!” Howard said, kindly. I knew that the actor was coming out now.

“Oh, Howie, you too! It’s so nice of you to come back and see us! What took you so long?” she said.

There’s a loaded question, I thought. Without missing a beat, Howie answered. “I been busy but I haven’t stopped thinking about you guys.”

Terrible answer. I couldn’t think of a more insincere way to ingratiate himself to his hostess. It went right over Adele’s head, though, since she’s pretty much desensitized to comments that require a rebuttal. She smiled and set down the tray with the mountain of cholesterol and sugar.

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“I’ll let you boys catch up,” Adele said, and ran into the kitchen, no doubt to get on the phone.

I didn’t even know what to say to the guy. He looked so familiar, but not because I knew him. He leaned over and took my hand, and put his head down. I didn’t know if he was praying or would start weeping.

“Punch, you don’t know what this means to me, after all these years, seeing you. I’ve missed so much,” he said.

To be honest, I wasn’t altogether sure I wanted to be sitting here dealing with this right now. I immediately sensed an ulterior motive. Recognizing, however, that I am slightly neurotic and that sometimes people do not always have it out for me, I gave this a shot. And not entirely unfazed by the flood of memories, it could be good for me to remember the good times instead of focusing on the shit that I have to handle now with the disease and my lopped-off leg.

“Remember when we used to run around the old, deserted Coast Guard station in Manhattan Beach?” I asked, hoping to start up an easy chat about the dumb things we used to do.

“Yeah, and that time it wasn’t deserted and the federal Marshalls chased us in trucks out of there?” he answered back. I wasn’t sure if he was being polite, but it was a remarkable time to remember.

After the war, the Coast Guard closed the station at the tip of Manhattan Beach. Though it seemed excluded, we cut the fence and tore the place up and stole as much stuff as we could get our hands on. We were about 13 or 14 years old at the time so playing cops and robbers on a real base using fire extinguishers as guns was a blast. It was also federal trespassing and vandalism, so when the Marshalls came to hunt us down after they spied a giant hole cut in the fence; we used the fire extinguishers on them and ran like hell.

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Post-war Brooklyn was teeming with experiences for untethered kids.

We talked for a long while about the old days; and the conversation kept shifting back to Howard. No surprise, I guess, since my life isn't all that glamorous.

It was getting late and Adele poked her head in and asked if we needed anything. I said no, and Howie stood up. I expected him to bid goodbye, and be done with us. I have a cardiologist appointment in the morning, Josh is coming by in the afternoon for more PT, and Law & Order is on at 8pm with a new episode. I don't really want to be bothered with whatever it is that Howie Kessler wants from us.

"Adele, thank you so much for your kind hospitality. I really mean it. You've kept a good house all these years for Punch!" Howie said, with a sweet smile that I didn't trust from a million miles away. Adele, however, melted.

"Oh, Hon, you're welcome! We're just so happy to see you after all these years. I mean, a Hollywood star right here in New Jersey—" Adele gushed.

I stopped her there, before she got carried away. It was now officially an awkward moment, like on the steps of the front porch when the guy drops his date off. What does he do now?

"Ok, Addie, Howie's tired, I'm sure," I said, hoping he would catch the send-off. I made eye-contact with Adele, hoping she would also catch my message.

"Howie, I have your room all set up upstairs, with new guest towels, and fresh new sheets. You're staying, right? Come."

Oy. This can't be good. Howie smiled, grabbed his duffel and turned to follow Adele up the stairs.

"I gotta leave here around 7:30am to head into the city for my cardio appointment. Will you—"

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“Great, I’ll go for a run, get the paper, not a problem. I’ll be here when you get back. Any joint around here I can get the Racing Form?” Howie said cheerfully.

It was a beautiful, autumn Friday. Josh called and said he’d come over on the weekend with the kids and we could do PT then, if it wasn’t too much trouble. Of course, I said, since I hate the PT. So Adele and I stopped for coffee and some pastry at a diner in Ft. Lee on the way home from the doctor appointment. The cellphone rang; it was my daughter, Jessica.

“Dad, I’m so glad you picked up. I’m standing in your living room and there’s someone sleeping on your couch. I would say it’s a stranger, but it actually looks like Howard Kessler. Is Howard Kessler on your couch?” she said calmly, but with her voice cresting with the tension of not knowing what to do—as she has always done since she was a child.

“Jess, I didn’t know you were coming over! What a nice surprise!”

“Dad, the guy?”

“Hold on, your mother and I were just leaving the diner, can I call you back? It’s a hassle to get out of here with the chair—”

“Um, yeah, no, it’s not—can you tell me what’s going on before I start to freak out, please?”

I handed the phone to Adele, as I wheeled myself to the back exit.

“Jess? Jessie? Hi it’s me, your father handed the phone to me—”

“Tell her we’ll be back in 20 minutes,” I yelled to Adele. “Would you bring the car around please? There’s a step on the curb back here.”

When we pulled into the driveway, there was Jessica sitting on the front steps looking pissed and confused. Jessica is a writer and has been very successful as a freelance journalist,

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ever since she broke out on her own. I think she is successful. She is forever beating herself up and is never satisfied with her career. She put herself through graduate school after I subsidized a couple of her business ventures which didn't work out. She was always a good writer, and I'm pleased she's gone back to writing. She moved to Jersey City which isn't too far from us so we see her a little more often now when she's not on a deadline or travelling for a story.

She stood up to meet us in the driveway.

"Hi, I think that guy may be awake. Is that Howard Kessler, Dad?"

"Hi Jess, it's so nice to see you!" I said with a big smile. I just didn't want to explain.

"Why aren't you explaining this? You're avoiding my questions."

Adele walked in the house after giving Jess a big hug.

"It's Howie Kessler. But he's not the movie star, while he's here at least, he's an old friend from the old days in Brooklyn."

"I don't understand what you mean by that. He is Howard Kessler, so he is a celebrity. You have a celebrity in the house. Does the press know? Do you realize there will be paparazzi here any minute now? Can you even deal with that?"

I hadn't thought about paparazzi. It sounded ridiculous. She wheeled me up the ramp and sure enough, Howie was at the door waiting.

"Oh my goodness, is this your girl?" he asked, with as charming a disposition as he could muster in what appeared to be an increasingly awkward situation.

"Hi, I'm Jessica, it's really nice to meet you Mr. Kessler. I just didn't expect to see you here, sorry if I alarmed you—"

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“That’s alright! I can understand if your dad doesn’t want to say anything,” Howie said as he smiled and put his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m just surprised there are no photographers around,” Jessica said, probingly.

“Yeah, I’m with you,” Howie replied, peering out the front as if to spy someone shooting an illicit photo. “But I don’t think anyone knows I’m here, yet.”

We all looked at Adele.

“I just told a few neighbors and friends that you might be coming,” Adele said sheepishly. “Come, I’ll put some coffee on, and we have pastry from the place in Ft. Lee, Jess, the Danish you love.”

Howard probed Jessica about her job and her travels around the world. They enjoyed talking since he had traveled quite a bit and was sincerely interested in her thoughts and experiences. She can hold her own with conversations with anyone. While they were talking, I was wondering what the hell I was going to do with Howie, and for how long he was going to stay. Jessica read my mind. Later that afternoon, she asked what I didn’t want to ask.

“So Mr. Kessler, what are your plans? Are you going back to Hollywood? Is there another movie in the works?”

“Ah, you get straight to the point! Smart girl you have, Punch,” Howie said as he laughed. “I’ll tell you what. I’m here on the down-low and hoping to avoid exposure, so your folks’ gracious hospitality is really helping out a lot. I’d like to stay out here for a while, see the boys, catch up. I don’t really have any plans.”

“Really? Because I thought you might have a movie planned or something,” Jess continued.

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“Nah, my last project was cancelled, or I was fired, or something. My days are probably pretty numbered,” Howard responded lightly.

“Punch, let’s see who else we can dig up. That ok with you?” Howard shifted the conversation. I caught Jess’s eye.

“Yeah, I’m not doing anything and Art wanted to see you, too. He was around a while back when we called you back.”

“I’ll let you two have your time together, I’ll be in the other room,” Howard started, “I’d like to take you all out to dinner tonight, you have a local place you like? It’s on me.”

* * *

Jessica was laying on the couch in the sunroom when I rolled back in, kicking the hassock as she toyed with her camera in her lap.

“That a new camera? It looks fancy.”

“It’s not mine. My photographer left it in my bag, it’s his backup. From our trip last week to Montreal. I don’t know shit about cameras, Dad.”

“I don’t know, you always have something new you know about.”

“I got that from you, Mr. Engineer,” she said as she tinkered with it. “You need to find out what the fuck Howard is doing here, Dad, you know that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I should write a book about this whole thing. It’s so bizarre, that he just shows up like this. And he’s really famous, I mean, like, *really* famous. When I was in Nairobi they were showing his films in a retrospective last year at the state theater—the STATE theater,” she said.

I watched a squirrel outside in a standoff with a crow over what looked like an acorn on the neighbor’s driveway. They

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were shouting at each other the way Mrs. Grossman would shout at us kids on the block playing ball, breaking the occasional window. Jessica would probably write something about this bizarre occurrence. I couldn't tell if she was joking, or musing, or trying to get a rise out of me.

“Write whatever the hell you want. Just don't do it to exploit him or me.”

“You don't trust him any more than I do, why are you protecting him?”

“I should ask myself that question. We'll see, we'll just have to see.”

Chapter 12

Frank

My phone rings the other day, I'm out on a site and had no time for bullshit. I don't recognize the number, it's something in Jersey so I figure it can wait. By the time I could sit for a few minutes and listen to the message, I'm driving home in traffic on the Belt and aggravated.

“Frankie, Frank, this is Howie Kessler. I'm with Punch, I'm in town, let's get together and see what we can drum up. Would love to see you.”

I almost drove off the road. I must have listened to the message a dozen times to make sure it wasn't a joke, or even one of the kids messing around since we were just talking about Howie last weekend. I dialed the number and hung up equally as many times, since I just couldn't put together the words to say after so many years—and I had so many questions.

I just couldn't deal with this after a day like I've had. It was too much. I felt like a movie on that channel my wife watches during the day where all the women cry.

I tried to get some resolve and clear my head a little, so I packed up the truck and drove upstate to do some fishing at the cabin. I mean, what do I need this shit for? My best friend – my last friend – calling me after 50 years and a whole career of fame and in the movies and all, it's off. It's just off. Something's off about the whole thing. And Punch? How the hell is he in touch with Punch? I haven't heard from that guy in years, either. He left us almost as quickly as Howie did,

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tearing out of Brooklyn to go to college. It was unheard of in those days for one of us to go to college. And we had no idea he was planning it. Like Howie, he just up and left.

So with the quiet weekend ahead away from the calamity of my family back home, and the ride up the Thruway past the trees turning colors, I think can finally think straight. If I call Howie back, I'll have nothing to say. I have nothing to offer. What, are we going to talk about the Yankees? Are we going to talk about his movies, each of which I've seen at least 3 times?

I haven't really changed since we were kids. I still get in trouble and do a little skimming here and there. I'm still a bit of an asshole. I'm no brain surgeon, either. I like my Italian food and that's about it. I like fishing up here in the country, but I like my flat screen TV and digital cable. I like football, baseball, and a little basketball. I follow New York teams, except the Mets. I still fool around on the side. I read the Post every day because it has the best sports section and I'm not interested in anything else other newspapers have. So like I said, no different than in high school, except I have less hair and a bigger belly. I stopped smoking, after the lung cancer scare about 10 years ago.

I like to pretend that if Howie came back, we'd be friends again, but that we'd be cruising around Bensonhurst in his Escalade and living the high life instead of shackled up in tenements like we were as kids. But I'm being realistic and there's no hope of that now. We're old, different people with a whole lot of shit in between us now.

* * *

I woke up today and thought about my decision last night not to call Howie. I think I'll call Howie.

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“Yeah, hi, I’m calling for Howie? Is this—”

“Who is this?” the voice on the other line asked.

“It’s Frank Russo, who the hell is this?”

“Frankie? Oh Frankie! I can’t believe it! It’s me, Punch.”

“Holy shit, Punch Plotkin! How many years has it been? My god, this is incredible, you know?”

“Yeah, I’m—how are you? How are you?” he asked.

“Me? I’m good. I’m over here—I’m up in the country, upstate, at my cabin fishing this weekend.”

I thought that was a nice place to start. I hadn’t expected to get Punch on the line first. I didn’t think about Punch at all, to be honest, because my memories were dominated by Howie and though I knew he mentioned he was with Punch in the phone message, I really didn’t give it a thought, because it didn’t make much sense.

Now I really couldn’t figure out what was going on.

We talked for a while, about our kids, about the Yankees, and Art at the helm now, the reunion he attended a few weeks back. It was nice talking to Punch, I remember what a good guy he was back in the day and how he was always there to listen to the crap we each had to deal with.

“So how did you get back in touch with Howie?” I asked him. He paused before answering, like he was trying to choose the right words.

“He called me up. He didn’t leave a message. I guess someone out on the coast who knew my daughter, an ex-boyfriend, ran into Howie and gave him my cellphone number. Anyway, long story short, I told Art and we called him back together. We got him on the phone, and he had already planned on coming out here,” he said, changing his tone. “He’s staying here. Been here about a week now.”

“He’s staying at your house? In Jersey?” I just couldn’t get over it. Why wouldn’t Howie Kessler be at one of those fancy

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joints in the city? The guy can't possibly be broke again, he's got to be sitting on millions.

"Yeah, he's here. A fine houseguest, I suppose. He's out now, does a lot of jogging. He's in great shape, by the way. I don't know what you're up to, but this guy runs like he's 21."

"Eh, they have trainers out there in California. I mean, Howie's got people he can hire to do all that stuff. What are his plans, anyway?"

"Well, he wants us all to get together, first, and then—"

"Who, us? You me and him? And Art?"

"I think he also wants to track down Mo."

Now there's someone I haven't thought about in ages, either. I didn't even know if Mo was still alive. The guy could be dead 30 years for all I know. Last I heard was through my lawyer, and I had to sign some papers stating I wouldn't be in Mo's presence because of some prosecution agreement or something. We were both messed up with some raunchy people.

"You know if Mo's, uh, uh—" I asked Punch.

"What, alive? I have no idea. He showed up at one of the reunions so many years ago wired and drunk and he was a mess. He brought a hooker. Years ago it would have been funny, but it was just bad news."

"I don't know if I know how to get in touch with him. I heard he had quite the drug business. You know we aren't supposed to even talk to each other because of a legal thing from years back. I doubt it's still in effect, but who knows," I said, wondering if the friction between us then would have any effect today. I don't even remember what the hell went wrong back then.

"No kidding? What happened between you?"

"It wasn't between us, it was between the people we were working for. When Mo was a court reporter downtown, he

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was stealing information and selling it to the mob. I was under threat of indictment if I didn't speak up about some of the things I was involved in. No one knows, still, really, though I'm not sure much of it matters anymore, but it could be, you know, sensitive. I don't know."

"Well, we'll just have to look him up somehow and see what's what," Punch said. He continued, "Look, I don't exactly know what Howie expects, or why the fuck he's even here."

He caught me by surprise. I perked up.

"I mean, this guy comes floating in after all these years, eats my goddamned coffee cake and drinks green liquid from the blender he makes with god only knows what, and lounges around here like we've been roommates for the past 50 years. What the hell am I supposed to make of this?"

"Jesus, Punch, why didn't you say that earlier?"

"I don't know, I don't even know what I'm saying. I'm in this goddamned wheelchair and I get moody sometimes. But I don't know what's next here," he said, sounding resigned and exasperated.

"Ok, then, sounds like I'll make a trip in and we'll get together. I haven't talked to him yet, you know, but you have my cell so have him give me a call when he can. Like I said I'm up in the country this weekend so all I'm doing is fishing and sleeping. I have a court date with one of my fuck-up kids next week but otherwise I'm around, so we can meet out at your place, or my place, or the Spumoni Gardens, whatever's good."

Chapter 13

Howie Calls Alan

It had been weeks since Howie was in touch with anyone on the circuit back in L.A. He didn't even keep in touch with the news and hadn't picked up a *Variety* or *Hollywood Reporter*. He just wasn't interested. He had other things planned. He wanted to let Alan know about his revelations while he was on his cross-country trip, get his thoughts, and move forward. Over the years, Howard rarely made a big move without running it by Alan first—not that he was looking for Alan's approval, but out of respect, he didn't want to surprise him.

“Hiya, buddy, I'm just checking in to let you know I haven't gone off a cliff,” Howard said.

“Well it's great to hear from you, it really is, I'm so pleased you finally got off your high horse and called me, you fuck,” Alan replied, with love.

“Yeah, I know. Hey, listen, I've been thinking a lot—I'm in New Jersey now—”

“What? You're where?”

“New Jersey, I made a cross-country road trip. I stopped in all the Midwest states, or something like that, drove alone, in just two and a half days. It was interesting. I did a lot of thinking—”

“I'll say.”

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“Yeah, well, ok, here’s the thing, see, I’m tracking down some of my old buddies, from back in the day and I’m going to do a movie about it. I’m going to write a script. I’m going to direct it. Produce it. Everything. This will be my magnum opus, Alan, and you’ll be with me all the way.”

“Jesus, Howie, I mean, this is all a surprise. I’m still stuck on you driving out of L.A., how did you even manage that?” Alan asked, not sarcastically.

“No I’m serious, Alan, this is what I want to do. I’m doing this thing. Are you with me? I mean, we can do it, right?”

“Let’s break this down. You’re writing a script? First, what is the story about? Have you ever written before?”

“It’s about our gang, what we used to do, and then about how one guy becomes an actor, like me, heads out to Hollywood and makes it big, then comes back decades later to see the decrepitude of what he left, and the whole thing, you know.”

“Sounds alright, you gotta do something about the ending, I mean, something’s got to happen. Something good, you know? We’re still Hollywood, after all.”

“Yeah, yeah, I can do that. I don’t have it all together now. I’m staying with a guy out here in Jersey and I’m meeting up with some of the other guys. I’ll have a storyline together.”

“You want me to get a writer? I mean, you haven’t written before. A ghost-writer. The guy who wrote the Vietnam thing you were in years ago, he’s good. Expensive, but he’ll write it and you put your name on it. We can go that route.”

“I don’t know. I want to do this myself. I want this thing to be my own, you know.”

“Ok, we’ll see then, you work it out and let me know where you are. I can get you help, is all, so don’t muddle through this. You know, no one writes these things alone, except writers.”

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Howard would do the project on his own. He's had people holding his hand and treating him like a child. He needed to embark on his own creative project to reinvent his identity in Hollywood.

He came back into the house after making the call out in Punch's back yard. Adele was in the kitchen reading the Star Ledger at the table. She sits on the edge of her chair as if she's about to pop up at any moment, but that's just how she reads the paper at the breakfast table. Howard peered in through the screen door and observed the kitchen. Everything was neatly in its place, not a speck of grime—the countertops and appliances scrubbed. But none of the appliances or cabinetry had been updated in at least 25 years, or longer. The shine was scrubbed off the metal. The dish towels and plastic tablecover contained designs and colors—green, brown, orange flowers—that hadn't been in fashion since the late 1970s. There was a cabinet mounted on the wall of trinkets. The kitchen wall clock ticks, but not in unison with the other ticking clocks throughout the house, so the combination of ticking tones creates a din.

Howard stepped inside and smiled at Adele as he walked slowly by her into the dining room. Hands clasped behind his back, he stepped sideways between the table and the mirror-lined hutch that holds the displayed plates and glassware. The dining room is cramped. He stepped back and squinted to imagine entertaining in there with people seated around the table.

He walked through to the living room where the walls were covered in a shiny patterned wall covering. It was so ugly he was glad there were framed photos nearly floor to ceiling. He glanced at the photos, but didn't really care so much about them. Photos of other people's families didn't make any sense to Howard. He walked down the short stairs

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to the den. This was a split level home, so the layouts are all nearly identical. The homes were all built in the 1970s, so Howard had never been inside one. He was on sets built to look like interiors, with little sets of stairs everywhere.

He sat down in the den on the reading chair adjacent to Punch, who had dozed off moments earlier. He wondered if this is the life he would have had if he hadn't taken the path he did. He wasn't sure if he was actually envious, but there was a serenity and a calmness that he hadn't ever experienced before staying with the Plotkins.

Howard sat and enjoyed the light streaming in to the den that morning, and skipped getting the Daily Racing Form or watching the news. He didn't talk; he only listened to the quiet, and the ticking of the clocks.

Chapter 14

Jessica, the Writer

“Can I call him, then, Dad, directly, I mean?” I asked my dad.

“Honey, he’s busy, he’s a busy guy. The next commissioner of baseball is a busy guy.”

“So you don’t want me to talk to him? Because I thought you were onboard with this project.”

“No, it’s ok to talk to him, go ahead, talk to him. I’m just telling you he’s a very busy guy. I don’t know if you’ll even be able to get in touch with him.”

I had decided one day last week when I came over to Dad’s house and Howie was on his phone in the back yard, furtively. I didn’t like it. I don’t like the guy. I don’t see why my folks are buying this, but I can’t convince them otherwise and Howie is truly an absolute charmer. I didn’t know what his intentions were with my parents; I didn’t really care about the other guys but I didn’t want my dad getting hurt. This thing was so weird already. I mean, there’s one of the most successful (but admittedly on the downside of his career) celebrities sleeping on my father’s couch in Englewood, New Jersey.

“Ok, I’ll start with Art but also work on interviewing someone else while he takes his time to get back to me, how does that sound?”

“Fine, it’s fine, whatever you want, you’re the writer.”

I hate when he does that.

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I thought I would start with Mo, anyway, since he seemed to be the mystery that everyone was really interested in; and from how my dad describes him, he was really the smartest out of the gang, so his perspective on Howie is probably the most interesting. I'm trying not to project and turn this into fiction, but I want to make a brutally honest and comprehensive account of Howard Kessler—through the eyes of his childhood friends—as I can.

Mo is also the one that no one knows how to get in touch with.

One phone call to a friend at the D.A.'s office and I had a couple of phone numbers and a work address. I drove out to Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn on a sunny Thursday morning. I had never been there. Dad was never interested in taking us back to where he grew up, and having spent my formative years in Bergen County, I didn't make it to Brooklyn with the exception of the hipster clubs in Williamsburg and frou frou restaurants on Smith Street in Carroll Gardens...another world away from Brighton Beach, Bensonhurst, Coney Island and Sheepshead Bay.

Mo's work address listed a large health club. It is a freestanding building right off Emmons Avenue with a huge yellow neon sign, and floor-to-ceiling windows on its three floors. I walked in and asked the receptionist where I can find Mo. She looked at me like I had ten heads.

"Does he work here anymore?" I asked.

"I don't know what you mean—he doesn't work here, he owns here. He doesn't come in probably next week though."

"Can you tell me where I can find him now?"

"That bad, huh? I can give you a cell number, I can't tell you where he is though. He's usually good about answering his messages."

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As she was writing down the number on a card, I couldn't figure out what she meant by her comment. Sometimes people just say weird things so I didn't think about it much. But it was something to catalogue for when I do meet him.

It was a different number than the two I had from the D.A.'s office. As I exited the building and walked to my car, a thin woman in spandex pants and matching jacket called to me.

"You're looking to find Mo?"

"Yes, that'd be great."

"Who are you?"

"I'm just the daughter of an old friend of his and was hoping to speak with him about some news," I answered, not thinking that what I was doing could have been construed as illicit in any way.

"If you go out to the harbor, past the charter boats, you'll see a couple of house boats. The one with the blue and white flag is Mo's."

"Really? A boat? That's great—thanks so much, I really appreciate it. Can I tell him you gave me the info?"

"Please don't do that, I'm not on his favorites list right now."

I didn't delve further, even though I wanted to, I wasn't writing a story about Mo, I was writing a piece about Howard and needed Mo's experience and perspective. But there were certainly enough details already that made me think I'm writing the wrong story.

I kept the car where it was and walked through the damp morning air to the harbor. I found the boat that the woman had mentioned, but I had no idea how to board it. There was no doorbell or anything, and it was just attached by a couple of ropes. I stood there for a few minutes wondering if I should just jump on.

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As I walked closer to gauge the distance of the jump, I saw someone walking around inside through the windows. I stepped back a moment to watch him. This has to be Mo. He has his shirt off and is holding a cigarette and a take-out cup of coffee in one hand and his phone to his ear in the other. He looks pissed. I can't hear anything because of the water slapping against the boats and the pier and the wind across the harbor. In his animation yelling into the phone, he spills his coffee and fumbles with the cigarette, the now half-empty cup, and the phone, still arguing verbally and physically.

I stood and watched for a few more moments just voyeuristically without having any intention of boarding the boat to speak with him at this point. I'll come back. I turned to walk back to the car. A few steps down the pier someone grabbed my arm and swung me around. I didn't even hear him coming.

"What are you doing here?"

It was Mo, presumably. What the hell am I getting into? There isn't a soul in sight. I don't know this guy. He could be a fucking murderer, and may have been one back when my dad knew him. My heart raced and I had trouble spitting out the simple words that I needed to in order to defuse the situation.

His grip was tighter on my arm and he raised his voice. "Who are you? You better be fucking lost, girlie."

I took a deep breath. "My name is Jessica Plotkin. You knew my father, Karol, I think—are you Mo?" I said feebly. I am unused to being scared. I haven't been one of those journalists on the front of a warzone, and my exposes haven't exactly probed into the underworld. The most dangerous situation I was in was getting stuck in the airport at Phuket before the torrential storms in Southeast Asia when I was doing a story on girls' secondary education in Cambodia.

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“He’s dead?”

Those words seemed to snap us both out of my fear and his suspicion.

“No, my dad? No, he’s not dead—”

“Then why’d you say ‘you *knew*’ him? You made it sound like he’s dead—”

“No, I’m sorry, it’s just that it is my understanding that you guys haven’t been in touch in years, so it would have been weird to say you *know* him, because, well, really, you probably don’t.”

He looked at me quizzically.

“Sorry, this wasn’t the right timing, I had a whole different speech prepared—”

“Let me get this straight, Punch is not dead; you’re his daughter you said?”

“Yeah, I’m here because I wanted to talk to you about—”

“How is Punch?” he smiled and instead of gripping my arm like he was going to break it off, he grasped both my arms and stood me in front of him to inspect me. “You look like him! Same nose!”

He obviously didn’t know that I’ve been conscientious of my nose for years so it wasn’t the way to my heart.

“He’s good, he’s, uh, lost his leg and rolls around in the chair quite nicely now. Diabetes. He lives in New Jersey and retired a couple years ago from AT&T.” How could I summarize my dad’s past 50 years (especially when I’ve only been around for 30) to this guy?

“His leg? Wow, I can’t get over that. Punch was so athletic. He kicked my ass all the time over on the courts,” pointing in the direction, of Brighton Beach where they used to all play pickup basketball. “He OK otherwise, though? Hey I’d love to see him—”

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“He’s fine, yeah, and he’d like to get together, too—Howard Kessler is here and also wants to get together, but I’ll let you guys chat about that.”

“What? What is all this going on? Howie’s back? I was just thinking about that guy,” he sounded confused and I guess it was all too much at once. Whatever he thought I was doing spying on him, plus the blasts from the past, it seemed like his head was spinning. He wasn’t wearing shoes.

“You have a few minutes?” He asked. “I’ll buy you a cup of coffee. I’m sorry for jumping on you like that, it must’ve scared you a little. You wouldn’t believe the people out here--” he trailed off but I knew that he’s got people after him. You don’t act like that, live on a boat, and come running barefoot after people on the dock, if you’re an innocent bystander.

We walked over to a diner across the street for a coffee.

“I’d like to write a story about you guys, and Howard. I was hoping to get your thoughts, memories, experiences. Raw, unbiased, as you remember them. Are you up for that?” I asked bluntly. I didn’t want to insinuate anything about Howard, and how I didn’t like what I thought he might be up to.

“What kind of story? I mean, I don’t know what your dad has told you about me, but I don’t exactly want any spotlight on me.”

“No, of course, I understand. If you’d like to remain anonymous, that’s fine, I think I can work with that. It’s the recollections that are important. Above all, I want to be truthful.”

I can’t believe I said that. It was like Journalism 101. And, frankly, I’m not so sure I wanted to be truthful, but I had no idea of the background between Mo and Howard, or between any of the gang, so I tread lightly.

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“Lemme think about it. I’m a busy guy, you know, I own that health club over there.”

I could see his full-of-shitness and was a little disappointed he thought I would buy it. I was straddling a fine line: a journalist and a subject’s daughter. I had to be a little more flexible than I ordinarily would have been.

“Well, I came all the way out here hoping at least to get a little background on your relationship with Howard back when you were young, and the last time you were in touch with him, you know, some basic stuff.”

“You don’t have a microphone or anything, a recorder, right?”

“No, not this time. I mean, not for this project. I recognize the sensitivities. You can attribute when and where you want. I just ask you one thing in return: that you don’t tell Howard about this in any form at all whatsoever.”

He put his cup down and glared at me. I was scared again. I got the confidence to confront him on my terms, and he then squashed me without words. Jesus, this guy is powerful. Why am I doing this story, again? If I feel like I’m in over my head before the interviews even begin, I should go back to covering NPR stories on woodcarving artists’ communes in Wyoming.

“What the fuck are you doing? Who do you think you are?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

I stared back at him for the longest few seconds in the history of time. I felt my body temperature rise to the point I thought my ears would combust. The whole story is a bust if Howard finds out about it. This thing could go down the drain before I even put pen to paper.

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“Eh, I’m only kidding. Lighten up, will ya? How about some blintzes? This joint makes great blintzes.” And he motioned for the waitress.

Chapter 15

Jessica Meets Frank

“Mr. Russo, please?” I asked the woman on the phone. I thought this was his cellphone, but a receptionist answered so I asked for him.

“Who’s calling, please?” she asked.

“This is Jessica Plotkin, the daughter of an old friend of his, Karol.”

The line sounded like it went dead for a moment. I stopped to look at my phone to see if we were still connected.

“Hello?” I asked.

After some shushing and the apparent sound of a hand covering the phone, Frank answered the phone. It sounded like he was in bed.

“Yeah, hullo?”

I straightened up to not sound like I was suspicious that he was sleeping with his secretary in the middle of the day, and she answered his cell like she would have his office phone. But I didn’t know enough about the guy to make that assumption. I just like imagining.

“Hi, Mr. Russo? This is Jessica Plotkin, I believe my father had let you know I’d be calling? To talk about, um, Howard Kessler?”

“Oh, of course, honey, sure. Right—”

“I can call back another time; or come meet you at your convenience. I can understand if now is not a good time,” I

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said, hoping he would agree, since I could tell by his voice that he was laying down.

“Uh, maybe, I’m in the middle of something now—”

I didn’t want him to have to explain any more. If he was this bad at lying at home, I would be amazed at how his wife stays around, unless she’s out doing the same thing.

“Why don’t we meet tomorrow afternoon? Can you come to Brooklyn around 3 in the afternoon? Cristoforo Columbus Bakery on 18th Avenue.”

“Sure, that sounds great. I love cannoli.”

I was looking forward to the cannoli, but not so much in meeting this guy.

My dad said that Frank was Howard’s loyal soldier. I didn’t know what that meant. I thought it was better for me to go into this without as much context as my father would have been able to provide, since I didn’t want to write it with his perspective. But I needed a little background, just to connect some of the dots.

We met and he was a gracious host, at a bakery he seemed to own—when I pointed out what I wanted in the case, he walked back and retrieved it himself. He helped himself to the espresso machine and made me the best cappuccino I’ve ever had; and for himself an espresso.

“So, honey, what are we talking about?” he said as he smiled, looked down at me, and seemed a bit smug.

“First, I want to thank you for all this and for taking the time. I know you’re busy with your work.”

“Eh, I’m hitting that age now where they don’t let me go out on the sites as much as I used to, so taking the time during the day isn’t a big deal. Fire away.”

“Since Howard’s back in town, I just wanted to get your initial thoughts. I’m writing a piece on Howard and would like to keep it as much in draft form until I have something as

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polished as possible before I let anyone else know about it, so—”

He sat forward in his chair and put down his espresso. The clang of the cup against the saucer caused the little spoon to jump off it onto the marble table, making a louder noise than I expected. I’m not sure if it was deliberate.

“You should know that I don’t talk to journalists. I mean, I have avoided the questions about my own life and the people I know for years because of certain, uh—”

“Sensitivities?” I finished the sentence for him. I hate when people struggle for words and I know what they’re trying to say.

“Yes, that’s a good term for it. I’m glad you understand.”

“I won’t pry into those areas, then, sir, I am just interested in your relationship with Howard then and now; and in getting some context into what you guys used to do back then.”

Not really, but at least that was a good enough introduction to try to make him feel comfortable. I learned my lessons from Mo.

“Howard and me were best friends. Closer than anyone. Don’t let anyone tell you different. Howie and me grew up together since we were kids. Really young. Lived next door to each other. We looked out for each other. He had too many parents, I had none. We were out on the streets hustling for money as early as I could remember. We stole bikes, balls, jackets, whatever we could get our hands on. We had no one guiding us to do good or bad.

“For me, the worst memories--Howie always got the girls, I got his seconds.”

“And the best?”

“He’s Howie Kessler, it was all good.”

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That's when I knew I wasn't getting the truth out of this guy as easily as getting a cannoli.

If I could just get everyone together, I could document the dynamic, the reunion, the emotion, and it could be really compelling. But so far Art's schedule has proved difficult to accommodate; and with all this time going by, Howard is just hanging around my dad's house like a piece of furniture. I can't tell if he's depressed, or just waiting. Waiting for what? My dad doesn't seem to mind so much. They each now have their routines; Howard even helps my dad out with his physical therapy. It's really nice, actually. But it's been two weeks. What the hell are this guy's plans?

Finally, we hear from Art.

Chapter 16

Art

Admittedly, I've been avoiding the Howie situation for weeks now. At first I was curious—it was such a novelty I couldn't stay away. I don't have much else going on in my life besides Major League Baseball. My partner, Yuri, and I are like passing ships in the night and with all my travelling, we hardly spend any time together. I almost feel like giving up on renewing any relationship with either of my kids, who seem more and more estranged every day. I've realized it's not my relationship with Yuri that repulses them, it's everything about me.

So when the call from Punch came, I jumped at the opportunity to cultivate some warmth and connections. I wanted to resurface my own identity again, now that I'm in my 60s. I've been lost for a long time and I thought that Howie, Punch, and the other guys could fill that void.

It wasn't just talking to my therapist that dissuaded me from attempting to pursue this route to self-healing. It was one phone call with Punch's daughter, a writer.

“Well it's great to meet you over the phone. Punch has told me about you over the years. You know we get together about once or twice a year to catch up.”

“Yes! That's right! I'm just now putting the names to the faces, so to speak, so it's all coming together for me,” she said, sounding enthusiastic about the call, though I still wasn't sure what the intended purpose was. I had only spoken with Punch for a few minutes a couple of weeks ago when he

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called me to tell me how bizarre it was to have Howie staying at the house.

“So what can I do for you? Your father tells me you’re interested in writing a story about Howie?”

“Well, yes, not really, I’m a journalist and I’m putting together some facts for a story about Howard’s return to Brooklyn, you know, with his leaving Hollywood and all.”

“Ah-ha. It is interesting, I think! I’m not really in the business so I don’t know much about Hollywood. In fact, had your father and I not pursued Howie’s call a few weeks ago, I wouldn’t have even known about him leaving Hollywood,” which wasn’t true, since Yuri is sadly addicted to People magazine and would have no doubt mentioned it to me if I hadn’t first.

“I know you’re really busy and have a demanding schedule with your travelling. But is there some time soon I can come meet you and we can talk about some questions I have about you, Howie, and the gang back then?”

“Sure, I think we can manage something. I’ll put you on with my assistant in a sec so you can work out with him when works best. I’m in town for the next week or so and it should work out fine.”

“Oh that’s wonderful, thank you so much, I promise this won’t be a waste of your time. I—there’s a lot I’d like to learn about you, and with Howie at my dad’s house, you know, it’s been hard to get a real 360 on the guy.”

I knew at this point she had an angle. My very first instinct was of defense. But I thought for just a moment, what am I defending? I’ve been working with journalists for a good portion of my career. I know what they do. I know that there is never anything you can tell them which will appear as unblemished as you had intended it. So generally, my distrust is relatively high, so I am guarded. But this was one of my

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oldest friends' daughters, and I sensed a tension in her tone that wasn't the professional tension of a hardened journalist getting to a story. She was out to protect her father. After all, here's a Hollywood star living in her father's house, with no apparent objectives. *Apparent.*

Jessica met me at my office and we went for a late lunch around the corner at Naples 45, a frequent stop for baseballers at the north end of Grand Central Station. Her interest in the game or business of baseball was nil, so I didn't waste time on a tour.

"How on Earth does your father, a die-hard Yankees fan, not train you to follow baseball?" I had to ask, before we got started.

"Eh, I just couldn't sit still for that long to follow a game. I collected the cards because my brother did, but I was into writing and journalism, the arts, very early on. My dad never pressed me. As long as I did well in school, he was happy!"

"That makes enough sense I suppose. Well, then, what can I tell you?"

"Do you know what Howie is doing here now?"

I was a little shocked at her forthright question. I didn't know how to answer it, since, if she was as good a writer as I thought she may be, however I answered it was going to frame the whole conversation.

"I don't know. When we spoke on the phone a couple of weeks ago he sounded like he was just fed up with Hollywood and yearned for a trip home. You know, we're all getting older, in our 60s now, and I suppose there's a little soul-searching happening. I have no idea about his career now, though I guess it's still going strong. Fewer tough-guy roles, but that thing he was in last year, the war movie, was perfect for him.

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“Why do you think he’s here?” I asked, probing for her temperature on this whole deal.

“I have no idea,” she seemed annoyed. “It’s given me a great story to write, I think, but I can’t get a handle. He’s charming, sweet, generous, and yet at the same time I feel like he’s planning something. I don’t know. I just don’t want, you know, it’s my dad—”

“No, I hear you. It’s a valid concern. The whole thing’s a little weird.”

“You know, I talked to Mo, and have his story, and to Frank,” she seemed to be opening up to me less as a journalist and more as a concerned party. I’m not sure I had anything to offer in the way of mitigating.

“Really? Wow, you’ve hit the ground running. What are those guys up to? Eh, I’m sure I’ll find out when we get together – do you have any details on that?”

We spoke for a good hour and then I had to get back to the office for a conference call.

I think Howie is planning something, so now although I’d like to bow out and excuse myself from whatever festivities are planned, my curiosity is getting the best of me. And for the sake of my good friend, Punch, I’d like to ensure things don’t go off the rails.

Chapter 17

The Gang

They finally all agreed to a date and a time. The place was easy to agree on—The Peking Duck House on Mott Street, one of New York’s great Chinese restaurants. Punch was unsure if Jessica could be there and she was anxious to record the reunion, but at the same time acknowledged the desire of the gang to stay intimate. Two days before they were slated to meet, Alan called Howard to confirm with him that he didn’t want any media to meet him at the restaurant. He recommended that the publicist brief Howard in the event someone at the restaurant called paparazzi and the press during the dinner.

“I don’t need that crap anymore, don’t you see? I’m starting on a new venture and if the press come meet me, then fine, I can handle it. I feel like I’m working for myself now. No studios to answer to,” Howard said.

“Don’t make me remind you, but Lew has to finalize that with the studio. Don’t jump the gun,” Alan gently nudged Howard. Lew is Howard’s lawyer and wasn’t happy about the recent contract action by the studio in axing Howard, so he was chomping at the bit to get back to them with some demands.

“Listen, I can’t think about that crap now, I have to go meet these guys soon. I have to plan out how I’m going to frame this thing.”

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It was Alan's job to keep Howard Kessler, as a business entity, in healthy condition. He wasn't convinced Howard was making the best choices for his career. The least Alan could do was to stop the bleeding. Alan also wasn't convinced that Howard could write a screenplay—if there was even a story to write about. He held out hope that the rendez-vous wouldn't go well and that he would scrap the idea and come back to L.A.

"You're one stubborn bastard, Howie," Alan said.

"You should come out."

"Huh?"

"No, I mean it. You should come out. You gotta see these guys to believe them. I know you're not behind this movie, but once you meet them, I promise you'll understand where I'm trying to go with this. These guys, they're—they're actually pathetic."

"You gotta be careful. I mean, from what you've told me, these guys aren't exactly pussycats."

Alan thought about Howard's invitation. It may just be the best way to reign him in, to go to New York.

"When do you want me? I have meetings, you know," Alan said sheepishly.

"Tomorrow. Get out here tomorrow."

* * *

They were already running a bit late for the 7pm reservation. It was pouring rain; out of place weather in the mid-autumn, so Alan's plane was inevitably late coming into JFK Airport. It had been years since Alan had been in New York.

Howie Kessler walked in the restaurant and shook off the rain, handing his umbrella and jacket to the first waiter who

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walked by. He had hoped to come earlier so he could grab a drink or two at the bar before going to the table. Then he figured he was late already, he could still grab that drink.

Chapter 18

Alan

I don't like this at all. I've seen people try to reinvent their careers by doing really stupid things. Facelifts, haircuts, younger girlfriends, stupid PR stunts. But Howard Kessler writing a screenplay just didn't sit right with me. I listened to him when he said I should see these characters in order to believe them, so I kept an open mind and hoped that he was right. The other half of the equation lay in the question: is there a story there and if so, could he write it? I'm trying to contain any disasters. This is my career. I still have a few years left in me. If Howard goes down, I go down. Skipping town like he did is just not done—it leaves the door open to speculation. And with Howard's past, the speculation wasn't good. I've worked too hard to build up what I have to see it come to an end because some Hollywood schmuck gets old and wants to revisit the fame and adulation he had years before.

Not that Howie is a schmuck. We are loyal friends and partners in his career. But it's time I get an insurance policy.

Howie sent a car to pick me up at the airport and since I was so late, I had to go straight to the restaurant and not the hotel first. I am sticky and tired so this food had better be good. I get out of the car and it's pouring, cold, and crowded on the street. Horns are honking because there was nowhere for the driver to pull over and Mott is a one-way street. I had to schlep my bag into the restaurant and give the guy \$20 to

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put it in the back and make sure no one walks away with it. I knew I wasn't in L.A. anymore.

The guy was showing me to the table, but I noticed Howie in the bar first. I'm glad I did, because I don't know what kind of introduction Howie had intended on making to the guys or if they even knew I was going to be here.

"What's the matter, you can't face your past?" I said, slapping him on the back and only half-joking.

"Ah, thanks a lot for coming out here. I know it's a long trip, but it really means a lot."

"I'm starving. You say this is the best Chinese joint in New York?"

"Yeah, it sure is," he said, looking straight ahead and seeming a little dazed.

"You ok?" I asked.

He seemed to snap out of it, though I could tell he was distracted.

"These things aren't always easy, even if you have an agenda planned or an exit strategy," I said, sensing that a reunion was what was bothering him.

"Nah, it's not that, I—"

The headwaiter tapped me on the shoulder to show us to the table.

"I guess everyone is here already, we should go," I said, not wanting to cut him off, but at the same time I knew that once he starts thinking too hard about things, he could get a little destructive. Especially at the bar.

As we walked to the large, round table in a secluded corner of the restaurant, Howie picked up his pace and I could see his grin.

"Holy Christ, look at you guys! Look at you! You old bastards!" Howie said and embraced and shook hands all

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around. “Punch I see you every day now, but all together I can’t get over this! The whole mishpucha’s here!”

One guy started to tear up. He was a big guy and seated on the other side of the table and had a stunned look on his face and tears started streaming down his face.

“Buddy, I—I’m, this is what I’ve been waiting for for so many years, so many years,” he stood up and reached across to give Howie a hug. He held on for that awkward extended moment that you see in movies.

“I hope you guys haven’t been here too long—you could catch up without me! Hey listen, this is Alan Shiner, he’s my agent and just happened to be in New York tonight for a client, so I hope you don’t mind if he joins us,” Howard slipped in.

“No, of course not, great to have you, Alan,” said a gracious man in a wheelchair, who I learned was Punch, the guy Howie had been staying with for the past couple of weeks.

“We were just getting used to the gimp, here. He certainly hasn’t lost his piss and vinegar, though!” said a man with the largest hands I’ve ever seen for someone who isn’t a professional athlete, I later learned was Mo.

“Yeah, jesus, what a surprise, huh? I mean, you look great, otherwise, buddy!”

“And that’s Frank, Alan, the guy with the least tact—” Howie joked.

They all talked as if they hadn’t spent a day apart. They joked about the games they used to play as kids and how they used to have the run of the neighborhood. Then about how they used to shoot pool and hustle at the pool hall; their club room; mischief.

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“You know, I never knew how bad I had it as a kid until I got to high school,” Punch said, “we had such a good time and I have such warm memories.”

“Yeah, you pretty much turned into an asshole when we got to high school,” Howie joked, “I’m serious, you really hardened in high school.”

“I think you did, too, Howie, later on, I mean,” Punch retorted, but non-confrontationally.

“May have been when he set his sights on Hollywood,” I added.

“Oh Howie had been a showman in one form or another for years,” Art said. I couldn’t tell, though, if there was a subtext, though I suspected there was.

“You know, Punch, you’re right. I think I felt the same way. I mean, we used to run around and have a great time together when we were young kids. I remember realizing when we got to high school that we really had nothing. We grew up with nothing. I didn’t even have a toy, between me, my brother and sister, and my eight cousins I grew up with in the apartment, we didn’t have one toy,” Howard recollected.

Howard seemed sincerely touched and excited about the whole evening.

Until a certain point.

I don’t know if it was because they were all putting away the booze (and who drinks for Chinese food?), but the ease of the conversation in the beginning—as if they were picking up where they left off 50 years ago—didn’t continue seamlessly. I thought it would. Everyone was getting along so well. I sat silently enjoying the conversation and the recollections of the old days—much of it mirrored my own experience and I was delighted to revel in some very similar memories.

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“I wonder what ever happened to that fat and loud girl you dated, Frankie, I forgot her name—” Howie asked, “What a pig,” with a guffaw I hadn’t heard come out of him in years.

They all seemed to go silent for a moment that felt much longer than it was. Before anyone had a chance to make eye contact with Howie, Frankie answered back, with a look on his face of utter anguish.

“I married her. She’s my wife. She gave me 4 kids. Four fucked up kids, but my kids, still. Dierdre is her name,” Frank said, looking down.

Now I didn’t know this guy before tonight. But I have to say, I’ve never seen anyone so deferential to Howie before. And he’s a tough guy, I can just tell. But around Howie, he’s like a puppy.

“Aw, Frankie, I knew that! I was just kidding you.”

Everyone knew Howie wasn’t kidding. Though I don’t know if he really didn’t know her name and if Frank had married her.

I felt at that moment that Frank could have flipped the table over and strangled Howie with his bare hands. I think he actually felt compromised. The other guys were visibly uncomfortable, too. And needless to say, I wanted to make myself invisible, so I feigned coughing uncontrollably to deflect. I blamed it on the hot mustard.

Art had the good sense to try to change the subject.

“So I’m the second-most famous one at the table tonight and no one’s even asked me about baseball, you sons of bitches!”

“Jesus, Art, you’re right—I heard about that. I meant to ask you earlier when you told the story about the first time you left New York when the Yankees sent you out to Kansas City in 1960—what was that for again?” Mo asked.

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Mo can't seem to keep any thoughts straight. He has a memory like a trap, but he doesn't seem to keep it together.

"It was where the Yankees farm team was located before Findlay bought the Athletics—then a KC team. He was pissy about the trades that made KC look like the farm team after he bought them in '54, so the Yankees sent me and a couple other guys higher than me to negotiate with Findlay to get one more round of young players. It's where Maris came from."

These guys were all baseball fanatics. Me? Dodgers. Before they even moved out to the coast. I hated the Yankees and I still do. But it was a successful divergence away from what I had hoped was Howard's last flub in conversation. I was humbled by Art's position in major league baseball, so I hung on to every word he said. The guy was a veritable encyclopedia of statistics, history and strategy. He was fascinating to listen to. It's all he seemed to talk about. Conversation in any other area didn't engage him, until Howie brought it home.

"So too many baseball trips for your wife to handle, huh, Art?" Howie said, with that same glimmer in his eye instigating a confrontation.

"Yes, probably—"

"Among other things?"

"Sure. I don't really have all the answers—"

"Oh you probably do, Art—"

I leaned over to Howie, "What are you doing?"

"What about you, Howie? Where's your wife?" Mo said. Mo was surprisingly affable. My first impression of him was that he's a gorilla and a hustler, but his knack for nuanced conversation struck me as a pleasant surprise. He was quite a character. He was like a lawyer—he would ask questions and lead conversations in a direction you didn't think it was

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supposed to go, and then make you think about what you said. I don't know if he did it intentionally but it was clearly a style of his lexicon.

"I mean, we heard all about your run-ins with dangerous women in Hollywood! So any of 'em worth more than one fuck?" Mo continued.

"Yeah, do you actually follow the gossip? Is there any truth to that stuff ever?" Punch inquired.

"I, uh, lived with one for a long time. She left right before I came out here. She was alright—"

"Until she started sleeping around!" I said, hoping to lighten the tone. I didn't anticipate Mo's response.

"So you never settled down, huh? A career man through-and-through" he said.

"Whaddya mean by that?" Howie said, unjustifiably defensive.

"I don't know about you, but I've eaten enough Chinese tonight to last me to next year—" Frank said.

"Remember that Chop Suey joint in Coney Island we used to hang out at?" Punch said, relieving all the tension in just one sentence. It seemed that bringing everyone back to the old days was the common denominator, because they just had nothing to talk about of current.

"Oh that old lady in the front who yelled at us each time we came in?" Mo recalled.

"She was a witch, just a witch," Howie said.

"She made great Mai Tai's though—" Punch said.

"Did they even call them Mai Tai's?" asked Frank.

"You know I used to meet my guys there, it was a dropoff joint. You know, when I was working at the courts downtown," Mo said.

"Really? I thought it was here in Chinatown—" Frank said.

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“Nah, we always met out in the boroughs. It was a pain to get out there, you know, courthouse at Foley Square—” Mo said, but then hesitated and looked at Frank. “How did you know about Chinatown?”

Frank then hesitated.

“You just said it—it’s right here, by the courthouse.”

“Yeah, because that’s what the Feds thought, too, so they bugged every place around here,” Mo responded, with a little too much irony in his tone.

Frank shrugged and took a drink. Everyone seemed to know what Mo was getting at. Howie told me about Frank and Mo, so at least I had a little background on them, though I played dumb.

Art continued talking about baseball, and the 1961 Yankees, but Mo wouldn’t drop it.

“I gotta ask you, Frank, after all these years—who the fuck did you tip off? I mean, you had to be playing both sides or else you’d be dead or in Ossining. I’ve always wondered—”

“Jesus, Mo, it’s been 30 some-odd years and you’re still stuck on this?” was Frank’s only answer.

“He did time, Frank,” Howie said matter of factly, “He did time for you—”

Frank looked at Howie with a stunned expression, worse than the one before.

“It’s not like he was exactly innocent in this deal, you know,” he said to Howie, then turned to Mo, “I mean, you were stealing information and selling it to the Mob—” Frank said.

“Yeah and you were telling them *and* the Feds I was doing it, you sonofabitch—” Mo growled as he stood up.

“Hey, hey, let’s take it easy, eh? We’ve been having such a good night—” Punch said in vain.

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“I don’t need this, I really don’t need this shit anymore,” Howie said quietly and got up from the table.

He stepped around Mo, and patted Punch on the shoulder as he walked out of the restaurant.

“Mo, you can’t believe I was talking to the Feds about you. I didn’t know it was you. I had no idea you were involved,” Frank said apologetically. He was defensive no more, but Mo had already turned away. He shook hands with Art and leaned down to hug Punch.

“Gentlemen, it’s really been a wonderful evening, I--uh, goodbye” I said feebly, having no idea how to make an exit without the painful awkwardness of the situation.

I stepped out of the restaurant and thankfully it had stopped raining, but the air was cold. I looked up and down the street for Howard but couldn’t locate him. I figured he’d headed to a bar. If it wasn’t so late, I could imagine him heading straight for the airport to get back to L.A., the way things went tonight. Though they were all interesting characters, there was no story there, at least from what I thought Howard’s perspective was on the night.

Sure enough, I caught a glimpse of Howie sitting at a bar in a restaurant down a few stairs. The place looked like it was there 100 years and it smelled like whiskey and spare ribs.

“What the fuck just happened in there?” I asked.

“Didn’t take you long to find me.”

“Listen don’t play games with me, you old shit. You drag me out here for this tonight? What the fuck are you thinking? I have a roster of clients who actually need me to do what I’m paid to do—I’m not your fucking sidekick.”

“Oh yeah? You seemed to enjoy yourself with those clowns. I’m pinning a lot on this, you know, and I can make it happen, but not if you’re working against me.”

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about. There’s no story there. Unless these guys are inspiring fictional characters for you and all of a sudden you know how to write a coherent story with an arc, you’ll be pushing a boulder up a mountain if you try to write something—not to mention they’ll probably have you killed if you piss any one of them off.”

“They’re harmless. They’re old, has-been tough guys who haven’t done anything with their lives since high school. They were from the gutter then, and they are from the gutter now.”

“Really? Because I don’t know where the fuck you were for the past four hours, but I was sitting in a restaurant with the next commissioner of baseball and three other guys who scare the hell out of me.”

I ordered a drink and we sat together silently for several minutes at this awful, stinking bar that I wouldn’t be caught dead at if it was in L.A.

“Do we need to talk about this right now? I just need to know you’re with me.”

“I’m with you. I’m always with you. But I have to say, if you go through with this screenplay thing, you’ll have to convince me much better than you did tonight that this is a decision that will benefit you, other than going through a futile and painful exercise.”

Howard looked into his drink. I could see his walls were going up. I hadn’t seen that look in him since before the last time he went into rehab years ago.

“What are you going to do?” I asked, not specifying for a reason.

“I don’t know. I may lease a place down here. May go back to L.A. I don’t know.”

“Ok, but I meant tonight,” which I really didn’t, but I was hoping to get through to him somehow. “You going back to Jersey? That a little weird now?”

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He didn't answer.

I finished my drink and it had started to drizzle again outside. I realized that not only was my umbrella back at the Duck House, but that my suitcase was, too. It was late and I didn't think the place would still be open and I panicked. I jogged down the street in the rain back to the restaurant. The lights out front weren't on, but the front door was still open so I went inside hoping I could just grab my stuff and go. The headwaiter was there and remembered me and my bag, so he told me to wait just a minute while he got the keys from the manager to unlock the back closet where they had put it. I peered around the bar and saw that the table we were at earlier wasn't empty. I stayed out of site to try to hear what was being said.

"I dunno, I mean, it was a long night but what do we really know about the guy at this point? Will she even have enough to go on?" I think that was Art, whose voice was recognizable because he was the only one of the bunch without a terribly thick Brooklyn accent.

"She's good, I promise you, she's very good. Investigative, I'm not sure you—us—are the only sources she'll have," said Punch, whom I could see in the reflection of the mirror on the wall.

"I trust that, sure, she's really got it together and I've read some of her other pieces," Art said.

"Look, if she's not careful, she could be in a lot of trouble," and that was most definitely Mo.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" asked Punch.

These guys really don't trust each other, I thought.

"No what I mean is, she puts an article out there, good or bad or otherwise, and this guy has an army of PR people, they could crush her and the magazine this thing is printed in," Mo clarified.

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“Mo, you’re absolutely right. I deal with the press all the time, and the PR people that the players hire. They are sharks. It’s a game to them,” Art said, slamming his large hand down on the table.

“She’s a big girl, she can handle it. If it’s not a good piece, her editor won’t let it out,” said Punch.

“What a night. If I didn’t say it earlier, I’m really glad we put this together, despite everything. Mo, I’m sorry about you and Frank,” Art said.

“Eh, look, I don’t care how many years it’s been, if I could go back and undo whatever I could to take away those years in prison, I would. To hear it from Frank’s mouth that he informed the Feds, I mean, I knew it all along, but he said it. It’s heartbreaking, really,” Mo said. “But listen, I’m glad we got together, too, so let’s stay in touch. Punch, I think what your kid is doing is great and I wish her the best of luck. I hope she gets the thing published everywhere. Good for her.”

Chapter 19

Howard's Honeymoon is Over

Meanwhile, Howard's bottomless drink at the seedy bar in Chinatown finally came to an end and he had them call a car service for him. He got in the backseat of the Towncar and didn't respond when the driver asked him where his destination was. He leaned forward and said, "I have nowhere to go. I have nowhere to go. Just drive around for a little while, we'll figure it out."

When the driver turned around to kick him out of his car, he recognized him. He put the car in drive and proceeded to drive around Manhattan. Howard eventually passed out in the back seat, though, and the driver was given no directions. He called his dispatcher to tell him he had Howard Kessler in the back of his car passed out at 1:30am. This wasn't L.A. No one knew who his agent was, no one was calling his publicist to come pick him up and get him out of the press' way. This was a Queens-based car service with mostly Dominican immigrant drivers who didn't particularly care about Howard Kessler's VIP status. They wanted the fare, and didn't want any trouble.

"Well I don't have no fucking idea what to do with this fucking guy, Jose, I don't know why you fucking call me," said Naheem, the dispatcher for CitySite Car Service. "Why don't you just drop him out the fucking car, man, and you can be at your next pickup early, for the clubs."

"That ain't going to work, man, this is a celebrity, I can't just drop him out. Plus I been driving for half an hour and

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the tank's half-full. This guy got millions of dollars, and I ain't going to be responsible for it, man, Naheem, you hear me?" Jose said assertively.

"Just take him to a hotel then, and let them handle it. Get his credit card number," Naheem said.

"Which hotel?"

"Take him to the fucking Soho Grand or something like that. You're down there now, right? Fucking Jose, man, why you get these crazy motherfuckers all the time, man?"

Jose drove a few blocks west to the hotel Naheem mentioned. He prayed they would have room for him, or at least know what to do for him. He pulled up in front of a doorman who scowled at him. He put the car in park and got out to speak to the doorman.

"Yo I got Howard Kessler in the back of my car, man. You gotta help me. He's passed out drunk, or something. Ain't making no sense. I don't know where he staying or where he live, I got no idea," Jose pleaded to the doorman.

"He got bags with him?" he asked.

"No, man, nothing. He ain't got nothing with him."

"Where'd you pick him up? Anyone with him?"

"We got the call from a nasty bar or restaurant in Chinatown. He come stumbling out the place hanging on to an old Chinese guy who push him in my car. And that's all. I got nothing else."

"Hold on a minute, lemme see what we can do. Stay here, man," the doorman said, who had perked up and was interested in helping if only because of the marquee name slumped over in the back seat.

Jose lit a cigarette and paced under the overhang in front of the hotel to stay out of the drizzle. The doorman came back a few minutes later with a young woman in a black suit

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and stilettos, holding a phone/organizer into which she was typing furiously.

She leaned over to peer into the back seat and put the phone to her ear. Emotionless and speaking in hushed tones, she ended her call and typed more into the device. The doorman stood like a watchguard over the car while Jose paced and smoked like a first-time father in the maternity ward awaiting news of the new arrival.

She disappeared into the hotel again and came out a few minutes later with a man in a suit who also peered into the back seat of the car. They stepped back under the heat lamps and conferred for a few minutes. They each got on their cellphones. She ended her call and walked back into the hotel. He ended his call and walked over to the doorman.

“Take him inside, but tell the driver to go to the back delivery entrance in the 2nd bay. Stay with him, don’ t take your eyes off this guy until you drop him in room 1545 and close the door behind you. Above all, make sure no one is following you.”

The doorman conveyed this to the driver who quickly jumped in the car, with the doorman, and sped around the corner.

It turns out the woman in the suit is the hotel’s VIP concierge who knows every publicist and agent who is important. She was able to locate and speak to one of Howard’s publicists in L.A. who had been seeking Howard’s location for nearly 2 months since his disappearance from L.A.

And like that, Howard’s honeymoon was over.

Chapter 20

Frank

“Honey, that you?” Dee said.

“Why are you up? It’s 2am.”

“Why are you so late? Everything ok? You have fun?”

“That was three questions with three distinctly different answers. What do you want to know?”

“Well that answered one of the questions. By you standing here and giving me attitude in the middle of the night answered the other. And by this point I really don’t care why you’re late, so I guess we’re done.”

“I’m sorry. It was a shitty night. I mean, it started good. Howie showed up and that was great. I mean, the guy hasn’t changed—” I realized as I spoke, right in mid-sentence, that all the memories I had retained purposefully were good ones. A healthy choice, I think. But in stating that Howie hasn’t changed, I experienced a flood of not so great memories triggered by his instigating tonight.

I stopped for a moment and thought about those memories. Why was I only holding on to the good ones?

“How do you mean?” Dee asked, I suspect not-so-innocently.

“He’s an instigator. He likes seeing people go at it. Like he goes for the jugular every time. No one can have a conversation around him without him turning everything around to the negative. I’m not saying it right. I’m tired.”

“You’re just figuring this out now? Jesus, Frank, I couldn’t stand the guy when we were in high school for that reason.

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Why would you think that 50 years of cocaine, Hollywood, and famous people would turn him into a pussycat?” Dee said, as if she was finally saying what she wanted to when we were 17 years old.

“Mo was there and that didn’t go well, either. That’s what basically ended the night. The guy is still hot about the D.A. stuff.”

“You didn’t tell me Mo would be there—that was to be expected, you know,” she said.

“I didn’t know he would show up. He’s been like a ghost for years.”

The night left a bad taste in my mouth. Seeing the other guys was nice. It’s sad about Punch; I always liked him a lot and it seems like he’s just had so many health problems. And he was the most athletic and in the best shape out of all of us. He could have played basketball for Brooklyn College, but he chose to leave and go to college far away. I don’t even know where he disappeared to. And I enjoyed talking to Art about baseball. I knew about him; his name is occasionally in the sports pages. The last I saw Art was when he walked into the club room late one night, and I was in there with a girl. I had her up on the table in a very compromising position and she didn’t see Art walk in. He stood there for a second and looked at me, and then turned and slowly walked out of the room. I heard him lock the door behind him. I never bothered going to the reunions after—I knew who I wanted to stay in touch with and if we couldn’t, then it was fate. Life goes on.

We woke up in the morning to my daughter banging on the bedroom door yelling about someone at the door.

It turned out to be Punch’s daughter, Jessica, the writer.

She had good timing, since I was just in the mood to talk about Howie.

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“So what happened last night? I can’t get the words out of my dad, who pretty much organized everything—nothing dramatic, I hope?” she asked sincerely.

I poured us both some coffee and sat her down at the breakfast table off the kitchen. I stared out the kitchen window, my robe hanging drably, and tried to figure it all out before I said anything.

Dee came down and introduced herself to the girl. She touched her hair and complemented the coloring. Only Dee could get away with that. Total strangers, she touches their hair.

“Frank, you can’t put clothes on? Look at you, you look like a hobo, we have a guest.”

Jessica laughed and tried to cover it unsuccessfully.

“I’ll tell you what happened. Howie came back and stirred up shit, as he always had, and then sat back and watched the storm.”

I looked at Dee who stared at me like I grew ten heads.

“It’s true, Dee, I mean, I love the guy, and I’ve admired him in the movies and stuff over the years, but spending last night with him just reminded me of all the resentment I had. The other guys, too, probably, though I don’t really know that anyone else had the friendship I had with Howie back then.”

“So you’re saying that Howie mistreated his friends by instigating arguments or by exploiting fissures?” Jessica asked.

“Whatever you said it probably is right. I don’t know.”

We spoke for about a couple of hours. I did more re-thinking than I did recounting, so I’m not sure how helpful it was to Jessica who is writing a story about our relationships as kids, I think, related to Howie.

“Sounds difficult. But it’s over now, right? Or are you seeing him again?”

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“I don’t know. We all exchanged information. I don’t know what’s next, if anything. I got my own problems, you know what I mean?” I said, half hoping that the whole episode was behind us. “I don’t even know what you have to write about, but—”

“Oh I have plenty to write about, don’t you worry about that, you’ve been very helpful,” she said.

“You’re not turning this into something ugly, are you?” I said after I thought about what she just said.

“I’m just documenting what things were years ago according to your collective memories, and then an account of Howard Kessler’s re-emergence in your lives, if even for a few short hours.”

It sounded legit, so I gave her my blessing and went back to bed.

* * *

A few days later my cell rings, it was pretty late.

It was Howie asking to get together to talk.

Because I was overwhelmed I guess from hearing from him, I agreed to meet.

So he comes by the following afternoon when the house was empty, oddly. I didn’t know for how long my parasitic kids would be out of the house and I never know where my wife is, but at least we could have some peace together. Maybe I could get my head straight about all this. I’m confused and I don’t think you can blame me for that. I feel betrayed in a way, but I can’t put my finger on what, since it was my own memories that betrayed me, not Howie. So I tried not to be mad at him. I had to be honest—I didn’t even know the guy. I mean, he’s talking at the dinner about yoga and traveling to India and having dinner with Sylvester

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Stallone. What do we have in common anymore? I've been laying bricks and contracting construction my whole life, surrounded by people from Brooklyn. Howie? He's been living in a different world, with different things, a different perspective, and different people. I can't put my finger on it; I just don't know how to articulate how strange it is to revisit this part of my life.

I had been hanging on to a memory of Howie since grade school. When in all honesty, the guy has been an asshole to me, my friends, and most of all, my wife. Even back then. I don't know who I was kidding.

It's all very disorienting, really. I spend my life looking up to him. Now, all of a sudden, over some fried rice and moo shu pork, I realize that my idol, my oldest friend, my childhood friend, is a selfish asshole and I never meant a thing to him?

It can't be true. I have to be experiencing some sort of late midlife crisis.

* * *

The leaves were wet and they hadn't come to scoop them up from the street yet. With last night's wind and today's rain, the streets were a mess. I could hear skidding up and down the hill all morning. So it's no wonder that Howie, who's been living in rainless California for years, has no idea how to drive in this weather.

I was sitting in the front room reading Newsday when I heard the thud of two cars colliding. There was no screech of brakes, just the thud. I peered out the front window and saw two guys arguing standing out in the rain. One car was a large, black Escalade and the other was a tricked-out late-model Accord. I tried to see if I knew anyone, but neither car

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rang a bell to me. I sat back down and continued reading for a moment.

I stood up to look out the window once more and sure enough, it was Howie. I hesitated for a second before putting my shoes on and grabbing an umbrella, just to see him interact with the little thug whose car he punished. I ran down the driveway and over to the accident. There was plenty of broken glass and ugly dents, but nothing serious, since both guys had the energy to stand toe to toe shouting at each other. By this time a few other cars were stopped and everyone had their cellphones out. They recognized Howie.

This couldn't be good.

I tried to intervene, but I don't exactly have the best temper, either. I tried to pull the kid away from Howie and do the old "do you know who this guy is" routine, but he wasn't from this neighborhood and was already defensive. Plus I didn't know if he had a gun on him.

I tried then to get Howie to back down. Though he was more obliging, I think it may actually have been the kid's fault, with the direction of the car, he looked to be speeding down the hill and Howie was coming up. Either way, neither was backing down. People started to crowd around at this point despite the rain and they were taking pictures of Howie and this whole scene. I told Howie he should just play down who he is, I think the kid was so hepped up on adrenaline that he didn't recognize him, and that he should throw a couple hundred bucks and walk away.

The next thing I know, fists are flying and three other people are in the mix. In no time flat, the kid was on the ground, bloody nose dripping down into the mess of flattened leaves, leaking oil, and rain. Howie takes out a wad of cash from his pocket and throws it at the kid on the ground, gets into his truck, and drives it up my driveway. He

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told me to close the gate. I think he finally realized the size of the crowd around the scene and the implications of cellphone cameras.

We walked inside and heard the police siren.

“Oh, come on, I didn’t hurt that kid, I just knocked him a little. He threw the first punch.”

“He’s a black kid, Howie, and this is Bay Ridge. What the fuck do you think people are going to make of this?”

“Jesus, it was just a little fender bender and the kid was shooting down the hill and didn’t stop or stay on his side of the road.”

“I hear you. It still don’t look good,” I said.

“Eh, let’s wait and see. I didn’t get you in any trouble, did I?”

I wasn’t sure he meant that, but I realized I couldn’t be suspicious of everything he said. I was already being more standoffish than I wanted to be. I wanted to keep more of an open mind today.

“So what’s on your mind?” I asked, pretending not to hear the commotion outside since I really wanted to get to the bottom of things with Howie and get some closure, as my wife calls it.

“I came back here, you know, to, uh, to find out what I’ve been missing all these years. I’m looking around at your house, and pictures of you and your kids and stuff and it’s something I don’t have—”

“Oh, shit, Howie, you can take my fucking kids. I don’t know what happened, but these kids—”

“Nah, I don’t mean that—I mean, the life. Your life. You worked hard, you bought this house, you go on vacations, it’s—I can’t explain it. I don’t know—”

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I had no idea what he was talking about. I didn't know what to say in response. Even with suspicion, I couldn't figure out what his motivation was.

"I'm at the end of my career, Frank. I'm not going to act anymore. I need something to do."

"Why don't you just relax? Don't you have a house in Italy and Hawaii or something? You don't want to work anymore, just enjoy yourself."

I could have been talking to a stranger. I had no connection.

"Nah, I just—I don't know. Listen, it's great to see you. It really is. I can't believe how many years it's been—"

There was a few loud knocks at the door. It had to be cops. They never use the fucking doorbell. They always bang the shit out of your door.

Howie and I looked at each other. We broke up laughing. He slapped my knee and we joked about how it's like the old days again.

* * *

The cops left after they saw that it was Howard Kessler; it was nothing to be concerned about. I would have blown a gasket if I had an Escalade with a dent on it like he did, but it didn't seem to concern him a bit. His phone kept ringing, buzzing, beeping for the afternoon. He didn't flinch or pick it up once. I finally asked him about it.

"Who the fuck keeps calling you? Should you answer one of these calls?"

"The press, Hollywood, the world, everyone knows I'm here."

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“HERE? Here?” I got a little nervous. I’m not exactly someone who wants too much attention, after my run-in years ago.

“No, well by now probably, yes—” he motioned out the window where the crowd of people standing in the rain outside the gate at the end of my driveway seemed to be camped out, “They know I’m in New York.”

“Is that bad?”

“I wanted some time alone, with you guys, away from the crazies, you know. I want to write—” he hesitated, as if he let something slip that he shouldn’t have. I couldn’t pick up what it was.

“That’s understandable. Why can’t celebrities just do what they want, sometimes?” I realized what I said was a little stupid, so I kept my mouth shut.

Howard told me about the incident at the hotel in Soho the other night.

“And the worst part of it is, my goddamned agent, Alan, was in town—you know, you met him, at the Duck House—”

“Right, I remember the guy. Seems like a good guy—”

“Yeah, he’s been protecting me my whole career. The one night I really needed someone, I fuck up. It’ll be out on the news soon enough.”

“Why wasn’t he around?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. Probably my fault.”

I could see Howie wasn’t talking to me at this point, he was talking to himself. I didn’t really care too much either way. Somehow, the conversation always went back to him. Not that there was much I wanted to talk about, but there are other things in the world besides him. Apparently he isn’t aware of that.

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We called it a day once my fat daughter came home from work and started jumping when she saw Howie on the couch. I told her not to call her friends, but these kids are addicted to their cellphones.

We didn't really discuss much. Howie asked me a few questions about my life, general stuff. I don't have anything to hide. Things have been tough. The work, the indictments, the kids, going straight and narrow—tough for keeping this family business afloat.

And that was it. Never saw Howie again.

Chapter 21

Jessica Meets Alan

Alan felt a tap on his shoulder and was so startled he knocked a glass over on the table he was leaning on to eavesdrop on the others. It was the headwaiter returning with his bag. But the commotion caused the guys to look back at the bar. Alan tried to hide behind the curtain and motioned to the headwaiter not to say anything—they locked gazes for a moment until it appeared that the guys weren't investigating the eavesdropping.

Alan felt like the moment had passed and that he was safe. He thought it seemed legitimate enough that the headwaiter had dropped the glass. What he didn't realize was the mirror behind the bar reflecting him in plain view to Mo, Punch and Art. Alan scrambled out of the restaurant with his suitcase. He checked his watch to see how many hours it would be before he could jump a flight back to L.A., but it was only 1am now and he couldn't leave for several more hours. He hopped in a cab to his hotel in midtown. Holding his head in his hands, he tried to straighten out what he had witnessed during the whole evening.

He stepped into his room, dropped his bag on the bed, closed the curtains and opened two tepid mini bottles of vodka, downing them in the hopes of falling asleep, aiming to sort out his thoughts in the morning. He lay back on the bed, he was tired. But too much had gone on this evening. He had a kid in college and twin two-year old grandkids. He wanted them all to have more than he ever did, so he had to keep

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working with a series of successful representations before he hung it up. He wasn't prepared to end things on a sour note right now, after Howie's burnout over the past few months. He could already sense that his Midas touch wasn't as effective as it once was—waiting longer for tables, didn't get his season tickets to the Lakers through the studio this year, having to leave messages. He never had to leave a message before—the studio execs always took his calls.

He had been in Hollywood—on the insider's inside circuit—and knew what happens to agents, and stars once the gloss starts to fade. He saw the telltale signs of it in his own career—facts that he was denying for months now. This trip to New York was probably the strongest wake-up call he could have had, before the shit really hit the fan.

Alan faced his choices and realized that perhaps he should be distancing himself from Howard. He retraced the steps over the past two years and from a slightly different perspective, it appeared that Howard's downfall truly began back then, and that Alan's actions to keep Howard artificially afloat probably just prolonged the inevitable end of a Hollywood star's career. Alan was hanging on for dear life.

On the flight back to L.A. Alan was glad not to run into someone he knew. All too often on the cross-country flights there is someone he gets stuck talking to about the business. Why couldn't someone talk baseball? Or politics, even? It's always deals, deals, and gossip. Today was a clear day and no one was around. He was seated next to a young woman with a laptop who was typing furiously and otherwise quietly kept to herself. The last thing Alan needed was a wannabe writer bugging him for representation.

When the drinks cart sped by, Alan thoughtfully tapped his neighbor on the shoulder since her headphones most likely filtered out the clinging and clattering of the cart.

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“You want, anything, honey?” he asked.

“Oh, wow, thank you so much for poking me. I’m in my own world over here—isn’t that the stewardess’ job though?” and they both laughed.

“What are you writing, if I may ask? You are so intense!”

“It’s a piece about my dad’s friends and a celebrity—I’m just transcribing some interviews now so I’m not writing anything yet. It’s so frustrating. You just can’t find an affordable transcription service out there with quick turnaround so I usually just do it myself.”

“I didn’t even know that was still a problem! Years ago we had dictation machines, and every office had a pool of secretaries who were experts in dictation. You don’t see that anymore.”

“Oh my god, I couldn’t imagine. That’s a sight right out of *Mad Men*.”

“Don’t get me started on that!”

She looked at him quizzically. Most people Alan talks to already know who he is; he realized he hadn’t made an introduction yet.

“I’m sorry, that made no sense. I represent the writers for the show—they’re nearly all women—”

“Really? How interesting. I suppose you can’t really get away with making a show like that with male writers. I don’t know much about the entertainment writing world. I’m a journalist—you know how we’re like oil and water!”

“So what celebrity is your piece about?”

“Um, I’m trying to keep it under wraps, at least until my contract comes through on it and I get more thoughts down on paper—I’m not trying to be—”

“No of course—I totally understand. Listen, I’m in the business of telling people that I can’t tell them things, so that’s fine!”

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“So you are a lawyer?”

“No, not at all. I’m an agent, a manager, for actors and few screenwriters.”

“Like Ari Gold in *Entourage*?”

“Yes, but 25 years older and with much less energy and a smaller office.”

“What an interesting line of work—”

I could see her mind connecting dots and I wanted to deflect.

“So what other pieces have you written?”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s nothing you’ve heard of or seen. I contribute to NPR so I go out on reports and do painless exposes like woodcarving communes in Wyoming, girls’ education in Cambodia, the people who fix road sign overhangs on interstates, that kind of thing. I’ve had pieces published recently in the San Jose Mercury News and in the now-defunct New Jersey section of the New York Times. My big claims to fame.”

“That’s great, very good publications. My wife listens to NPR.” Not really, but I thought that it would be nice to show some level of interest in her work. She was no slouch, obviously.

A couple of hours later I woke from a short doze and she was asleep. Her hand was still on her keyboard so her screensaver hadn’t come on. I couldn’t help but glimpse at the transcription.

I couldn’t believe what I saw. I had to get up and walk around, biting my fist, because I could not believe the odds of sitting next to the daughter of Howie’s oldest friend. She was the one writing the article that I overheard the guys talking about. I absolutely couldn’t get over the obscene coincidence.

I read a little bit of the interview with Mo. I leaned over a bit to scroll down, hoping to god she didn’t wake up. I’m not

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a small man, so the leaning over part without nudging her was painfully difficult. My curiosity got the best of me and I had to read more. It was fascinating, what they were saying about Howie. My Howie.

I decided not to push my luck any further and I cut it out. I got up once more and paced up and down the aisle a little. I noticed her stirring and so I rushed back to the seat. I plunked down hoping to rouse her a bit, and I was successful.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, did I wake you? I—”

“No, not at all, I’m just a little hazy. I’m up.”

She slugged from a bottle of water in her bag, squirted some Purell in her hands, ran her fingers through her hair and sat up straight and peeked out the window.

“Still clouds,” she said.

“Are you headed out to L.A. for business?” I asked, hoping to re-start our conversation about the article.

“No, it’s a friend’s wedding this weekend and I’m in the bridal party so I had to go out a day before. There have been 700 fittings for this dress and it’s still awful.”

“You should take some meetings, for your article, while you’re there.”

“Yeah, I probably won’t have time. That’s not true. I will have time, I just don’t know anyone. I do have a proposal in at Hello magazine and they’ve expressed a lot of interest, and that’s probably my best shot for this piece. I’m supposed to meet with them on Monday first thing.”

I couldn’t wait to see the information she had. She mentioned earlier that there was nearly 40 hours of interviews. Who the fuck was she interviewing? Did those four old guys have that much on Howie?

My heart started pounding as she continued her response. I still don’t know where I stand with Howie, but after so many years, I want to protect him. I can’t stop her from

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writing the article—and I don't; clearly she's talented, connected, and has the information already. I want the tapes.

"A friend suggested querying the editors at People, Us, and a couple others and Hello was the only one to get back to me. No one responded when I sent to GQ and Esquire, which I thought would be shoo-ins. Tough business. So I just have to get some more down on paper, like I was saying earlier, before they contract me for it."

"I see. Sounds like the right mix of publications. Do you have an agent?"

"Me? No. I don't—uh, never thought about it. I mean, freelance journalism is what it is. No agent would spend a second considering me! I don't write fiction. I do pieces for PBS affiliates and NPR, and that's my sweet spot."

"I don't know anything about the piece you're writing, but if it's anything better than Access Hollywood, and it's true—that's the key, if it's true and you can back it up—then you might want to option it. An agent could also get you into a publication like Vanity Fair, which holds, you know, a little more cache than Hello."

"I don't know what option means."

"Optioning it means that you have an entertainment lawyer, agent, and manager shop it to studios to see if they're interested in paying you for the story, and they develop it—or not—but you get paid either way, if your lawyer structures the agreement well!"

"That's just out of my league. I mean, I haven't even thought about it—gosh, it's another world. What do you mean—like develop—a movie?"

"It could be. You wouldn't believe where producers get their ideas for commercials, TV sitcoms, series, movies, shorts, comics, web series, there are tons of ways to get content out there. If it's your idea, though, you have to claim

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it early on and shop it to the right places so they won't sit on it just to lock out other competitors from developing it.”

“Then what happens? I mean, why not take the money and run?”

“There are syndication rights to be negotiated, spin offs, sequels, or scripts you may want to develop yourself, as a writer, so you want to keep your hand in the game.”

I stopped for a moment realizing that her head was spinning. She was a smart kid, I could tell, and appeared to be weighing what I was saying literally and seriously. That, to me, meant she had something.

“Here's my card. I want you to call me the next couple of days, or whenever you go back home, to discuss what you want to do with this story.”

I looked at the tapes; they were sitting right there in her unzipped bag. She got up to go to the restroom right before we landed. I could reach down into the laptop bag and grab the tapes. I could have made a terrible decision, but I didn't. I left them there, like a civilized person.

“I have stuff all weekend with the wedding and everything but I'll call you when I have had some time to think about this. I have a verbal with Hello and they seemed really excited about it, but you're right, I really do think there is a lot to this piece, once I've gotten everything down I have from the tapes and my notes.”

I get a call on Sunday afternoon and I picked right up—I knew it was Jessica. I was relieved; but at the same time I was ambivalent. I didn't know when to tell her I still represented Howard and I still wasn't sure about the ethics of representing her or even in referring her to another agent. Nevertheless, I had to find out more about her project. We agreed to meet for coffee.

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“I think it’s worth looking around at other options ,to the extent there is any interest. I’ve killed myself over the past couple of months, and pretty much ditched the wedding in focusing on this piece this past weekend. I’d really like to do something with this.”

“I’m happy to hear it – I really am. It’s a good choice looking out for yourself like this. Look—I am not promising anything. Let me have a look at the draft, the tapes, everything and I’ll give an assessment of what we can do.”

All of a sudden she shut down. I admit, I was trying to get a glimpse at the project and had less interest in helping her career. But it was a compelling story. I had to ease up.

“Here’s how it works, standard procedure: I can sign a non-disclosure agreement with you and you retain all copyright, of course. You just have to trust me. If you don’t trust me, we just can’t do business together. I’ll look at your project and tell you what I think we can do. I’ll advise you. It’s about you. It’s all about you and your work.”

I thought that might go over a little better.

“I know this is your magnum opus, so far in your career. You’re holding it close, I can see that. I respect that. But if you hold things too close, you may lose opportunities.”

And that was it for my sales pitch. I wouldn’t go any further than that.

“Thanks, Alan, I appreciate it. I think it’s worth a try, then. Let’s do it. What do you need from me?”

When do I tell her about my relationship about Howard...dammit.

“We can walk up to my office, around the corner on Wilshire, or you can come by tomorrow?”

“I’m headed out tonight on the red-eye. I have the meeting with Hello tomorrow morning. I don’t intend on cancelling that just yet.”

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“Good—don’t cancel. Hello are good people. But don’t sign anything that will bind you. Let’s take a walk.”

There’s someone at the agency seven days since deals get done at every hour. The moment we exited the elevator, she was starstruck with the photographs along the walls. I gave a little tour and she was impressed. She printed out the draft and notes.

“Do you have a minute? I mean, can I go through some of this right now? Why don’t I put the new Tom Hanks movie for you? It won’t be in theaters until next March. Come, it’s great. Private theater over here.”

How could she say no to that?

Halfway through the piece—which blew me away—I wanted the tapes.

I walked over to her bag. Should I reach in and just take them? Should I ask her?

“Jessica, dear, let me have a quick listen to the tapes—few minutes. Then we’ll talk.”

Chapter 22

Jessica

Instead of spending my girls weekend together with friends and celebrating my old roommate's wedding, I was holed up in the hotel room transcribing and writing and transcribing and writing. I just couldn't hold out writing the piece until I was done transcribing all the interviews. There was still some missing pieces, but there was enough here to seek the contract I was promised from Hello.

Was this going to be my magnum opus? A story about my dad's famous friend? I had to admit, it was pretty compelling and nothing like I'd ever come across before. It was a live story—happening right now—so there was actually some gossip-news appeal to it. News that makes news is always good. After speaking with the man on the plane I realize I just don't have the gumption to be a Hollywood player. I don't know if a story like this could ever land in my lap again, though, so I should probably milk it for all I can.

I'll worry about this when I finish it. I have to head back to New York and get the contract first.

My dad called me shortly after I landed; it was late. I was sitting on the bus in traffic staring at the orange substance smeared on the woman's leg next to me. I couldn't tell what it was. Then I peered into the plastic bag between her feet on the floor and there was a giant bag of Cheeto's, open and halfway empty. I would give my left arm for Cheeto's right

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now. All weekend I drank smoothies from the hotel gym and ate nothing else—for no other reason than convenience and cost. In the bridal party, they didn't let us out of our cage in the suite until after cocktail hour was over and somehow the tray we were supposed to get never quite made it. So I was starving, sleep deprived, shaking from coffee, and anxious to get to the meeting. I realized this was not a good time to be headed to a major meeting; my mind was mush after this weekend and the red-eye flight.

As I stumbled into their gleaming offices, about 20 minutes early for my meeting, I realized I left my laptop on the bus. Or the plane. Or the luggage area. Oh my fucking god. Holy mother of Christ, this is my life, the past two months of work, I am going to die.

Where is it? Bus? Phone number? Bus number? Thieves? Russian mobster identity thieves? Did it fall down the luggage chute? I had it on the plane, I put it in the bag, I can't even fucking remember. Is it sitting on my seat on the plane—I reached up for my carry-on in the overhead, did I step out into the aisle and exit without my laptop? I can't fucking remember, holy shit holy shit holy shit.

As I'm having a total mental breakdown in the lobby of the building, my contact walks in the door with a tall coffee in her hand. She gave me a big smile, must have taken one look at me and handed me her coffee. We exchanged pleasantries and she understood my clusterfuck state of affairs from the red-eye. I failed to mention the missing laptop.

I am shaking at this point. Sweating palms, feverish, nausea, I felt like I had a sudden onset of the flu. She asked me how the article was going and I said it was amazing, over the moon about it, yadda yadda yadda. I was totally unfocused on the meeting.

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All I had was the first third of the article that I had emailed to her. Her boss walked in, the managing editor, and immediately hugged me.

“I love this piece. I absolutely can’t wait for it. This is going to be big. I mean, this is, this is what I call journalism. You really did some work on this, Jessie.”

No one calls me Jessie. Why would he think that Jessica is Jessie? It’s not common. Did I look like a Jessie? I looked like a fucking train-wreck, so maybe that’s what made him think of Jessie.

“And those interviews—I can’t wait to see the rest,” said my contact, who had held back when we first met. Though I wasn’t sure of her thoughts since she could have been kissing her boss’ ass.

“I’m—uh—thanks—you know, there’s still a lot of work—it’s um—”

“She’s really tired, just flew back on the red-eye—” my contact gracefully excused me. She opened a folder and offered me the contract to sign. I didn’t even know if I should be signing it here or having a lawyer look at it first? Fuck it, it’s just an article, which is lost somewhere.

I signed a signature that looked like the scrawls of a drug addict withdrawing with a pen on paper, but it was done.

The false and temporary sense of relief lasted until I got to the elevator when I realized that the laptop case also contained the interview tapes. And of course I didn’t make a backup.

Holy motherfucking shit.

The elevator doors opened and I ran out and nearly through the revolving door of the building out into the cold morning and screamed “FUUUUUUUUUUCK!”

I sat in front of the fountain at a nearby building for I don’t even know how long before I got my shit together

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enough to make some calls and actually try to make an attempt at finding the laptop. I left messages with people at the bus company and with Continental Airlines, as well as Newark Airport. The best I could do was wait.

I bit off all my nails as I thought about everything that was lost, and the implications of their loss. The worst part about the tapes is that they are labeled H. Kessler. All the more intriguing to anyone who comes across them. Worse than that is the contents of the tapes. There was so much off-the-record banter about Howie, the D.A., potential criminal stuff—admissions of guilt. Raw memories, realizations. Nothing that was supposed to be revealed, no less in an article—and certainly not on tape. Though Mo eventually agreed to be taped, I really pushed him just for my own convenience.

Really convenient when I fucking lose them.

I waited. I got a bag of Cheeto's at a nearby deli and chomped away hoping my phone would ring with some news.

Nothing. So far, nothing.

Fuck.

Chapter 23

Howard is Writing

The recent turn of events was evidence enough for Howard that he needed to be alone and stop destroying shit around him. When he emerged from his drunken stupor, alone and wallet intact, on the bed of a strange hotel room and fully clothed, he knew something was wrong. He spent the next couple of days in the hotel room trying to figure out what he needed to do in order to get his screenplay off the ground. He scribbled some notes here and there and tried to plot an outline. But he couldn't get it out of his head that Alan just wasn't on board with the idea. He couldn't shake the notion that Frank, his Frank, might have stopped looking up to him. Here's a guy Howie hadn't thought about in years, yet one evening in a Chinese restaurant and he's immediately attached to the dynamic that they shared when they were kids. It wasn't a healthy dynamic. Howie was addicted to Frank's adulation.

He decided to call Frank and try to win him back—though he didn't have any rational reason for doing so because pragmatically he intended on developing a caricature out of Frank for his story—so there was no real need to ingratiate himself to him. Nevertheless, Howard needed a clear head before he could step forward.

Meanwhile he had to find a place to call home for a while. This was a decision only he could make and he had to face it that he just couldn't stay at Punch's any longer. He regretted having stayed there for the past several weeks because it

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reinforced a connection. Howard had his career to look out for, his name and reputation.

I'm laying down here thinking about these guys—these losers—and how pathetic they are. They wait 50 years for me to come back to Brooklyn. And for what? So I can insult them all over dinner. And Frank, like a little puppy-dog, keeps following me. This guy's the biggest loser of them all.

That was it. That's the beginning of the story. Howard was going to narrate the play-by-play of the dinner. Mo, Frankie, Punch and Art all showed their colors and the story would emerge from there.

He returned from a visit to Frank's house in Brooklyn with a car accident and the media on its way to trail him, so he had to move fast to find a home base to work from in order to finish the script. But by the time he parked his car in the hotel garage below, there was a pool of photographers stalking him out and it was unavoidable if he got out of his car—there was only one elevator out of the garage.

Howard backed the car up and left the hotel. He drove right back to Brooklyn. Barrelling down the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the stretch from Prospect Park down to Bay Ridge, past Sunset Park, the road was patched and if you drove on it at a constant rate of speed, it sounded like budump-budump budump-budump for miles. He listened to the rhythm as it comforted him. Visiting Frank in Bay Ridge was one thing—it wasn't even close to where they grew up and it was a relatively close drive. South on the BQE, roping around the southernmost part of Brooklyn was one of the more beautiful views, under the Verrazano Bridge. He remembered the building of the bridge in the early 1960's and what a phenomenon it was to see such a massive structure join two geographies—Brooklyn and Staten Island. Like another world. He passed underneath it and continued on the

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Beltway and exited at Cropsey Avenue, Coney Island. His palms were sweaty. He felt a lump in his throat. At first it looked like a lot had changed—new projects, few kids playing out on the streets, different storefronts, the movie theater's gone. But at second glance nothing had changed. Still poor, still disconnected. He drove up and down the streets, remarking old landmarks and letting the flood of memories collide with his feelings of resentment, sadness, and anger of his childhood.

The area was immigrant-populated as it was when he was a kid, though there appeared to be markedly more black families. There were few Latin American immigrants there when he was growing up. Now it looked like the neighborhood was entirely Spanish. Into the Brighton Beach area Howard continued and he noted that the signs abruptly turned from Spanish to Cyrillic letters and recognized it as Russian. He'd heard about the influx of Russian immigrants, mainly Jewish, into a concentrated section of the area. Businesses were thriving, markets were bustling, and the restaurants and clubs looked lively.

He parked his car close to the boardwalk and hesitated before he got out. He didn't want to run the risk of being recognized again—he couldn't have the press after him: he didn't have any answers, good or bad, to justify why he was here. He just didn't want to know himself. He was here and that was it. His mission is to write the script and find a quiet place to stay. It was Monday late afternoon and there was no one around except old, Russian ladies sitting on the benches overlooking the beach. They looked like they were sitting there since 1959, with scarves wrapped over their heads and under their chins, heavy coats, and ruddy cheeks.

He strolled the boardwalk and caught a glimpse of a banner hanging over a large high-rise tower on the beach

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advertising long- and short-term leases for luxury condos. He walked in and asked to see what's available.

"I want the higher floors, the highest. You have something on the top floor?" he asked the clerk in the leasing office.

"You want penthouse? We have one available. You must take it now, before other guy comes back with money. You want it? You have to take furniture though. We aren't taking it out."

"I gotta see it first. I'm sure it's nice but I gotta see what I'm buying first."

The clerk took him up the elevator to the top floor, walked down a long hallway and opened the double doors to the penthouse.

Though it wasn't a Sunset Strip penthouse, it was a huge, sunny 2-bedroom apartment with the most ridiculous furnishings he'd ever seen. Over-the-top, rococo, flashy white leather couches with mirrored coffee tables and statues in every corner. It was laughable that this was the model apartment. No wonder they were advertising on the side of the building. Nevertheless, Howard took it for three months. This is home, he thought.

I don't believe I'm in fucking Brighton Beach again. I don't feel like I have anywhere else to go. I'm not saddened but I'm not happy. I don't feel anything quite frankly. I step outside onto the boardwalk and I hear the ocean and the wind together—I don't know what's louder but together they block out every other sound. It's like standing in a vacuum. The air is cold and it makes me want to take giant breaths, or run. What the fuck am I doing here? What the fuck am I doing, period?

At least I know that if I had any questions about loyalty to old friends and those connections, well, that's all for shit. They never sought me out. I was easy to find, I'm fucking movie star. Never got a letter. Never got a call. Forget a visit. I spend my goddamned life trying to get their attention and show them how talented I am and that I'm not just a thug. I've made a whole goddamned career around my talent. Millions

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and millions of people pay money to see me in movies. I am a fucking industry. My name is on restaurants, cologne, and shoes. Ford made a Kessler edition truck. I've been on Saturday Night Live countless times and for two years in the 1980s they had a satirical character modeled after me. I've inspired dozens of imitators, some having seen success themselves. But it was because of me. I made the new gangster movie—it's my genre. No one could have pulled off those characters but me. Writers spend careers making characters for me to play. I've sustained the livelihoods of dozens of agents, managers, businesspeople, publicists, stylists, drivers, assistants, hookers, bookies, and actors. Howard Motherfucking Kessler.

And here I am back in Brooklyn after making the trek back east to show my four oldest and best friends who I am and who I grew to be. And the night turns out to be a fucking mess. Weeks at Punch's house and the guy doesn't ask me one question about my life in Hollywood. I know at least they've seen my films; but who the hell hasn't? You have to live under a rock not to see them. And they treat me like shit; the way they did in school. I don't have to put up with it anymore.

“Why do you think they owe you, Howie?” Alan said. “I mean, these are grown men, everyone has their problems. So they weren't there for you during your tough times in your career. They were there for you as a kid because they were literally *there*. The world doesn't revolve around you, Howie, how many times have I told you?”

No one is supporting me. I'm out on my own again. It's been a long time.

Chapter 24

Alan's Turning Point

What I heard shocked me. At first I thought that it was just Frank's small-mindedness and relationship with Howie. Then I heard the others speak about him. I had no idea what a bastard he was to everyone as young kids. He started fights and ran away. He stole girlfriends just to get the negative attention of his friends. He stole everything he got his hands on. He had a drinking problem even as far back as junior high school. He joined the Navy after high school to avoid going to jail. He never actually graduated from high school. He may be gay. He had sex with his cousin. His name is Kesselbacher.

Holy shit.

So of course I couldn't get her out of my head. I hope she calls me, but I know she won't. She has to be Punch's daughter; I suppose I could look him up and find her, and tell her who I am. The whole thing is so awkward. I feel like I'm playing both sides and betraying Howie. It's really my job to find him a way to make his script work somewhere, somehow. I just don't believe in it, and I don't believe in him.

I said to myself years ago when I first started out in the business that I would fail if I stopped believing in the projects I was selling to studios. I didn't have to like them, I just had to know they would succeed. Otherwise, if I become known as a peddler of shit, the good stuff won't get recognized. So I owe it to my other clients to keep the shit out of my office.

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Granted, I don't know what kind of shit Howie is writing right now—if he's even writing. He mentioned something about staying in Brooklyn and leasing a place by the water. I just can't see this thing happening and I can't envision looking him in the eye after hearing all the stories about him. These four guys, almost none of whom have been in touch over the years, have the exact same recollections of all the awful attributes of Howard—so it's not like they colluded to pitch the same story to this journalist.

I can't figure what her motive is. I have to speak to her.

Chapter 25

Jessica Finishes the Article

I returned to my apartment in Hoboken later that evening and threw the keys on the counter and collapsed on the couch. I walked around the city all day in total disarray. I dragged my bag behind me all the way down to Washington Square Park, where I watched some terrible street artists hustle tourists for change. My cellphone batteries were totally dead. Contemplating the loss of my laptop, I had hoped to find some lesson or redeeming blessing. In nine hours of deep thought, I found nothing good could possibly come of it.

Hopeless, I plugged in my phone and went to sleep. I didn't wake until the following day around noon when the lady who comes to feed the cat opened the door and called for Queenie in her high-pitched voice. Of all the thousands of people I called yesterday to get my laptop, I didn't call the cat lady to tell her I was home. I didn't rouse, hoping she wouldn't notice my suitcase still sitting in the hallway. Sure enough, she didn't call for me. I heard her play with Queenie for a little while, and then some clanking in the kitchen as she fed her. Just when I thought she was gone, she was shuffling around in the closet where the cat's litter box was. It seemed to take forever, and now I had to pee. She played with the cat some more. How fucking long could she be here? Didn't she have other animals to feed? My apartment isn't that nice.

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Finally I heard her bid Queenie goodbye. I lay in bed listening to the banality around me: the super was sweeping (or raking?) the sidewalk out front with heavy, violent brushes; the beeping of a truck backing up; and the faint echo of voices and keys in the hallway coming up the stairs. I felt like I couldn't go back to any of this without successfully completing this article. And now I had no tools. I had committed to the guys—I couldn't imagine having taken so much of their time and not writing an article that is amazing and well-received. All of the soul-searching they had done about themselves, their childhoods, their relationships with one another and with Howie—I had to provide some kind of objective, the article, so they could understand their own thoughts and validate the time and consideration they put into the interviews.

Some of the interviews were painful, I could tell. Ringing out the old memories and pushing them to think about the memories that weren't so gleaming with joy, well, that's my fault. I kept pushing. I kept urging them to think back about all the times they had together, not just the funny and spectacular times. Not one of the guys could come up with one example off the bat. They had to think about it. Some even had to come back to me days or weeks later with a recollection of something that really disturbed them about Howie.

I then realized how much of a journalist I wasn't. I was using a reductive method to get these guys to provide answers to questions that were leading to only one place: Howard being a prick. There's an angle, and then there's an agenda. I was using both. But why was I so interested in nailing this guy? What did I have against him? The whole thing started to make me uncomfortable. I'm sitting at my

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kitchen table nursing a chocolate milk and staring at the wall. What the hell was I doing this whole thing for anyway?

I thought back to when it struck me that doing an expose on Howard Kessler would be my next project—without an assignment, without having worked on any celebrity pieces before. I had been sitting at my folks' house when Howie was there. I remember seeing him skulk around the house and then jolt outside when he received a phone call he appeared to be waiting for. I watched him pace the back yard absentmindedly kicking some wet leaves while on his call. He started to kick with a rhythm, but I don't think he really even noticed it since he appeared to be very engaged on the call. This wasn't a "Hey how are ya" call. It was important. I could see from the window in the den when he walked back up to the porch, put his phone back in his pocket, and stood at the back door for a few moments. I couldn't tell if he was hesitating to go inside or if he was looking inside without engaging.

At that moment I knew there was so much more to the guy than met the eye. I mean, there always is. But I didn't trust him. I didn't trust the whole scenario with him staying at the house, charming my mother. I didn't trust his fucking yoga and morning jogs. I didn't trust his fucking green smoothies he made with my mother's 30 year old blender. I know my brother and I have been very protective of my dad ever since he lost the leg. Really ever since this disease started ravaging him. But he's not softie, my dad. He could take a hit and get back on his feet. I never recalled him talking about Howie much. I knew they were friends, but there never seemed to be an occasion when I remembered my dad seeking his old friend out, despite his fame. I don't know if that meant anything at all, and I suppose I was trying to find out.

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I've always been driven. Not too much and over the top, but driven to acute objectives. Zeroed in on them like a laser and picked them apart to analyze and examine. Putting them back together, unfortunately, was never successful. My career in journalism has been interesting. Every story I've covered I've left an indelible message. At first it wasn't deliberate; and my mentor kept steering me to be less conspicuous. Having attended Columbia Journalism School I have a principled approach to journalism, but my own imprint has been more than just a signature. So in a way I'd like to be more of a Theroux than a Cronkite.

When it struck me that the story about Howie and the old gang reuniting was unfolding before my eyes, I couldn't pass up the opportunity to document it. Though I realized—after getting some unintended distance from the project—that I was doing more than documenting. I was influencing the characters in this real-life story and how they thought about their own lives, and Howie's. I was changing the story.

Not sure how I feel about that.

* * *

I spent the next couple of days making a few phone calls to line up my next assignment. I postponed a call with a producer for a story with no pressing timelines because I just didn't have it in me. Wednesday night my phone rang and it was a representative from Newark Airport. After I had lost nearly all hope and couldn't even decide if I could even piece together a story with what I already had written, plus my own recollection without it sounding totally fabricated, they found my laptop!

Apparently I didn't grab it when I hung it on the back of a bathroom door stall in the luggage pickup area. After the

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exhilaration and embarrassment wore off, I asked why it took three days. She said that budget cuts had led to the elimination of daily cleaning of restrooms in certain sections of the airport. I couldn't believe a public restroom at Newark Airport hadn't been cleaned in three days, but OK. And of course now that it was 5:45pm, I couldn't just hop in a car and run over there to pick it up. I had to wait until office hours tomorrow.

It was the longest night of my life. I sat at my desk, *sans* laptop, staring at where it should be, eagerly awaiting 8am when I could reclaim it and get on with my work.

It will be the last goddamned time I ever save anything on a hard-drive without making daily backups to the web. Never again.

I walk into the office beaming with glee. After I present identification and answered a series of really dumb, irrelevant questions, the woman handed me my laptop case. I sat down and opened it to ensure it was indeed mine and that nothing had been erased.

Fine, looks good, still my baby.

I got home and went to get right to work on the piece again and reached in for the tapes.

No tapes.

Where are the tapes? I still hadn't even unpacked, so I ran over to the suitcase still sitting in my hallway and tore it open, knowing about four seconds into ravaging the bag that the tapes weren't in there because I was listening to them doing the transcriptions on the plane.

After countless calls and two more visits back to Newark, I had to admit that my tapes were gone.

I'm not sure there's anything ok or good about that, either.

Focusing on the article, I thought I was actually in OK shape since I had actually listened to many of the interviews

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and logged especially interesting quotes already. So the comprehensive transcription was for context. But they were now gone.

I didn't even think about whether they would get into the wrong hands. What did that even mean—the wrong hands?

I spent the next few days in total seclusion and finished it.

I had to put all the distractions aside that were clouding the objectives of this piece. Not my everyday distractions like Oprah, HuffingtonPost, or Twitter. Distractions like the thought of who had these tapes with my name, Howie's name, and the subjects' name on each tape. The revealing details of the contents of the tapes. The sworn-to-secrecy oaths I took with Frank, Mo, Art and my dad that only the on the record stuff would appear in the article—which didn't preclude me from still recording (with disclosure) the entirety of the conversations. These were unedited, raw tapes to be used as context for me as a writer. These were not tapes intended to disparage Howie—though they absolutely could, as an unintended circumstance. Or maybe intended.

This is one project that has sucked the life out of me. I have never submerged myself in such a project that was simply an article. Emotionally, though I didn't know these subjects, they were all a part of who my dad is. All those years growing up we were close, but I felt there was a huge part of his life that he didn't reveal easily to me because, well, it was ugly. He protected me from even knowing about the details that for him, and the others, were so agonizing. The poverty, negligence, chaos, from which he ran and aspired to escape. I learned that he pushed my brother and I hard to excel and provided an overbearing hand of guidance that he never had. He didn't want us to struggle through our youth and wander through our adolescence without the tools to make the right decisions. My dad learned the hard way how to make the

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right decisions. He never learned to take care of himself, physically at least, and here he is rolling around in a chair.

I have a beta-reader group I usually use for writing before I get it to an editor. This time I sent it to my dad, instead, to get his approval first. I decided to bring it over in person—since sending by email couldn't assure he'd get it.

I handed him the print-out of the article, double-spaced and stapled. He looked at it for a moment as if he'd never seen a piece of paper before. He knew I was bringing it over, so I'm not sure what his hesitation was.

"You sure you want me to read this? I mean, is it done—or, is it really for me?"

"What do you mean? I want you to read it. You're in it. You are the eyes that I saw this whole thing from. You have to read it."

"Hm."

It was the most loaded "Hm" I'd ever heard. He does that. He does it in order to have me—or whomever he's questioning—ask all the questions he wants to ask, but without having him have to ask them. Like a brilliant lawyer, except not one.

"Do you *not* want to read it?"

I know he wanted me to ask that, so I hesitated a moment, but he held the article and looked at it as if he had all the time in the world to sit there holding it.

He wavered his head. "No, I do want to read it. I just want to make sure that—"

"Dad, enough, ok, I get it, I understand you. I hear what you're saying. Just fucking read it, please."

"Ok, ok." He paused for a long while. "Now?"

"Oh Jesus," I exclaimed as I stood up and walked out of the room.

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I looked around for my mom who I found was cleaning the stove.

“Hi, Ma. I finished the article, you know, and Dad’s reading it now. Inside. I’m going to wait here.”

“Oh that’s fine. That’s just fine. You want something? I have some chicken in the fridge.”

“Really? Because I am kind of hungry. It’s been a weird few days.”

“You don’t look good. I mean, you’re thin, what happened to your hair?”

“I haven’t taken care of myself—been really trying to eke out this article. It’s been a little rough.”

“Well that’s just crazy, you know, crazy. You can’t travel around like that and work and not eat or take care of yourself. This article isn’t worth that much to anyone.”

Yeah, it started out ok, but in seconds the conversation went south, as usual.

“Some chicken sounds great, Ma. You have some potatoes? Or noodles?”

“Of course. Which would you like? I’ll get both—”

There, that’s where the conversation should stay.

After I ate I actually felt better. I hate when she’s right.

I started to become anxious about my dad’s thoughts on the article. I tried not to focus on it, but conversation with my mom wasn’t a good distraction. So I went upstairs to watch some TV and surfed around a bit. I fell asleep on my parents’ bed—it was the first time I’ve taken a nap in about 20 years. It was perfect. I was starting to feel like a human being again.

I groggily came downstairs just as the sun was leaving its colorful mark on the sky to rival the fiery autumn leaves. My parents were both sitting at the dining room table. My mother

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was leaned across holding my dad's hand. His other hand was propping up his head, it seemed.

"Everything ok?"

The both looked startled.

"Oh, honey, yes, fine—" my mother said.

"Jess," he started, "This is one piece of work."

I wasn't sure what he meant. I became terrified that he thought it was shit. Or worse, exploitive or untrue. I couldn't actually tell in my yawning state if he was being sarcastic. I sat down at the table one seat away and perched my elbows on it and leaned in, hoping he would continue, which of course he didn't.

"I can't believe these guys said some of those things. They did say them, right?"

"Of course, I have the tapes—" I almost choked on the words, but decided to keep on rolling, "Nothing is fabricated." I still didn't know where he was going. "Dad, did you like it? Is it publishable? Are you angry?"

He didn't reply.

"Ok, now you're hurting me—"

"Jessica, no, please. It's—this is very hard, you know."

"What? What is hard? Expressing feelings? Are you going to turn me into Dr. Phil?" I heard my own impatience and sounded like an impetuous teen waiting for the answer to her request for the keys to the car for the night.

"This is my youth you have here. This is the pockmarked, ugly, sad, lonely, abusive youth you have in here and it's just hard. It's hard to read."

He didn't look at me.

"I need your approval to move forward on this. If it's not right, if you don't feel right about this, please be explicit with me and help me decide what to do next," I said in my most

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woken-up, together and with-it tone. “This could be pivotal for me.”

I had no idea what I meant by the last statement. I then thought of the guy on the plane, and the optioning and scripts and development and studios. I was becoming quite full of myself. I think I really finally had the confidence in my work without needing my father’s approval. I just needed him to think I needed it before I moved forward.

“It’s a beautiful article. It’s really, really incredible. I’m stricken with overwhelming memories that I think you helped me stir up. Some I’m not so happy about, so just forgive me if I don’t sound so pleased here. It’s not your work; it’s the actuality that hurts. I spent a good part of my lifetime trying to forget, and here it is all plain and in neatly typed words. It’s hard to digest, again. As I’ve told you a thousand times, you are an excellent writer.”

I stayed at my parents’ house for a couple more days. I called the cat lady first, this time. I got my energy back, rested and ate well, and got the gumption to call Alan Shiner, the guy from the plane, to send him the article to see if he was interested in reading it. I called my contacts at the magazine and told them I was delayed a bit and would be back in touch.

Chapter 26

Howard

Howard knew that writing wasn't a strong point. He had a story to tell, but with most start-up writers, couldn't put pen to paper. He had dozens of sheets of paper piled up around the apartment, random thoughts, quotations, statements.

He also discovered the Russian nightclubs. There were few people who recognized—or even cared—about him. Though he continued to evade the aggressive press, he knew that there would be a time when he came down to the lobby of his building that there would be a cache of paparazzi there. He'd already gotten a new cellphone number in the hopes of avoiding his own publicist. He was beginning to feel independent and liberated for the first time in his life. He made dinner for himself. He drove himself around to the store, the track, and the nightclubs. He didn't have to answer to anyone, as long as he kept a low profile and didn't cause any drama. It was a new life and he was sorting out how he felt.

Without a purpose, though—a reason for getting out of bed in the morning—he knew he didn't have long before he'd slip into what he and his shrink in L.A. called 'recession.' He kept a routine. Morning run, yoga, breakfast. News. Daily Racing Form. Coffee. Track. Lunch. Track. Nap. Dinner. Nightclub. Hooker. Sleep.

He occasionally found some time to scribble down some notes about the script, the characters, or a plotline. He knew it couldn't continue. Though he had more than enough

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money to continue on a losing streak at the track and with the routine he had, Howard's ego wouldn't let him fade away into the background like he was beginning to feel he was.

He was alone.

Though he constructed a wall around him for years, he still had companions and a support network in L.A. He never felt anyone was honest with him, so he kept everyone at arm's length. In the month or so he'd been really on his own and alone, he wasn't sure it's what he really cared for. He liked arguments and debates. He liked conversation. These days he spoke to hookers and waitresses more than anyone else.

It wasn't working. And he wasn't finding a direction in the screenplay. He had to rescue himself from obsolescence.

* * *

He hadn't been over to Sheepshead Bay since he was in high school. He was a little surprised at some of the development. Before he parked his car, he drove back down Emmons Avenue to go into Manhattan Beach to see the houses. As a kid, this was the ritziest neighborhood anyone knew of, and they were in proximity to it. While they used to run through Manhattan Beach to get to the old Coast Guard base, Howard used to stop to look at the homes. The yards, the trees, the different styles of facades. The cars parked on the street and in driveways. It was another world. He never even knew anyone from Manhattan Beach. Though Art's cousins lived there and Howie had always hoped to be invited to an extended family celebration of Sukkot, he was never asked.

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He was surprised to see the old Guard station was now Interboro College. He lamented the open space and dunes and trees that used to be there behind the fences.

In a flash, he turned around and hurried back to Sheepshead to find Mo, his reason for coming there. He found the boat, walked right up the dock, and jumped on.

“Mo, it’s Howie, lemme in.”

He banged on the window, and then the door. There was no answer or movement on the boat. Howie stood there a few minutes, wondering what he should do. He wasn’t even sure why he was here. He didn’t have much to say to Mo, even before the confrontation at the Duck House.

He sat down on the dock and gathered his thoughts. It was on impulse that he drove here. After a while he contemplated leaving; but he knew he’d never come back. So he went across the street to the deli for a coffee and the Post. He kept his head down and his hat low, sensing eyes on him. He’d already made a few grand escapes from the media in recent weeks and wanted to keep it that way.

He walked back to his car and got in to wait for Mo. About an hour later he saw someone walk on to the dock. It was Mo, carrying a large bag. He appeared to be limping. Howard hesitated for a few minutes to get a closer look; he wondered if it wasn’t a good time to do this.

“Mo! Hey!” Howard shouted as he got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Mo said, not appearing to be joking.

“Can I talk to you?”

“Whaddya want? I—this isn’t the best time. I thought we caught up a coupla weeks ago. What’s going on?” Mo said, not so suspicious this time.

“Can we go inside?”

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Mo looked at him awkwardly.

“I gotta get back—I wasn’t staying here long, just come to drop this off and pick up some papers—” Mo said unapologetically.

“It’ll be just a minute.”

“Can’t we have a minute out here?”

“You always did that. Just when the conversation was about to get normal, Mo, you always have a way of keeping it on a level of discomfort that makes everyone you talk to squirm.”

“You come out here to insult me? I got business to take care of Howie; I don’t have a movie waiting for me out in Hollywood.”

“Oh, is that it?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“All these years you never come see me because I work my ass off and go and get famous?”

“Who is this guy. Are you kidding? Come visit you? What planet you been living on all these years? Are you even Howie Kessler underneath all that?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. But I waited for years to hear from one of you guys and you all failed. We were buddies—we were friends—”

“And you up and left us all. You left us to die here in Brooklyn. You just left!” Mo shouted, at least to put a damper on the direction of the argument.

Howie did take a minute; but not to cool off.

“You and Frank just didn’t know how to end it, did you? I mean, we were having a nice time together and you couldn’t leave it alone. It wasn’t his fault, you know.”

“And where the fuck were you during all of this? Hanging out with DeNiro or Stallone? What the fuck do you know

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about Frank, the testimony, or the 2 fucking years I wasted up in Ossining?”

“You know, Mo, you were the smartest one of all of us. It kills me that you’re still hustling, and that you never did a goddamned thing with your life except continue your games and petty crimes. You grew up to be a loser, Mo—”

“Fuck you,” Mo said as he stepped onto his boat and closed the door behind him, appearing unfazed by his oldest friend in the world.

Howard was in a state of confusion and self-reflection that could have sent him right to a heroin dealer; so he took a few breaths and stepped back off the dock and into his car. He turned on the heat, put his head in his hands, and tried to think of what to do next.

* * *

Howard headed to New Jersey where he thought he might find some empathy from Punch. He wasn’t even sure that’s what he was looking for, though. He felt compelled to talk to the rest of the guys and get some thoughts off his chest, now that he realized what had been bothering him for so long.

All those years seeing the shrinks, and no one was able to put a finger on his discomfort with relationships.

In ten minutes on the dock, I figured out that I never really shut the door after I left Brooklyn. The temptation to return all these years was fought by the rational decision to stay and advance my career and seek happiness. But the unhappiness, struggle, and disappointment I felt as a kid re-emerged now. If I could just close the book on that part of my life, maybe I could move on. I just need to tell Punch that he should have stayed in touch. He should have reached out to me. What kind of a friend just lets someone JESSleave, and never even tries to write or call?

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He pulled into Punch's driveway and sat for a moment. How was he going to approach him—the man who opened his home to Howie for over a month and orchestrated the reunion? Who tracked him down after Howie couldn't complete the calls to him? Who helped get him out of trouble countless times as a kid? Howie needed to end all the relationships on his own terms, and that was that.

I walked in through the back door after knocking a little, hoping Adele would come over and let me in. The door was open. I had all the energy I needed to get this conversation over and done with. I walked through the kitchen into the dining room, the dreaded mausoleum of tacky china. I heard the clocks ticking. It let me know that the world was still moving and I wasn't stuck in between floors. Soothing and disconcerting at the same time, the different ticks. No one appeared to be home, which was odd. It was coffee and strudel time, 4pm. And after that they would turn on the local news on television. And then dinner. And then reading.

I sat at the dining room table for a while listening to the ticking clocks and staring at the photos on the wall. Decades of memories locked in faux-wood frames. The phone rang 5 times. I thought the message machine might pick it up. Then the phone rang again, as many times. A few minutes later it happened again. I left the house and sat in the car. I put my head back and waited, dozing off for a while.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK
KNOCK KNOCK.

JESSICA

Wake up. Wake up Howard!

HOWIE

I'm up! I'm up. Yeah. Gimme a sec.

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JESSICA

What are you doing here?

HOWIE

Is your father around?

Long PAUSE.

JESSICA

He's dead. We buried him yesterday. He's gone.

HOWIE

Jeeezus—Jess, Honey, I'm sorry.

JESSICA

What do you want from us? Why are you here?

HOWIE

Listen don't get upset—I mean, I know you're upset. I'm not here for anything. I just wanted to say hello. I'll get going. Anything I can do? You're sitting shiva, right? Where is your mother?

JESSICA

I'm going inside. I can't have this conversation with you. You make me so angry; I want to blame this all on you.

Howard drove away from the house in total disarray. He was lost. Though he went there to end the relationship, he wanted to do it on his own terms. This was not his own terms. He lost one of his oldest friends who knew him better than anyone; even though he didn't know him at all.

Days went by and he didn't speak to anyone. Of all the memories flooding over the past couple of months, Howie

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really concentrated and focused on the ones that were most compelling with Punch. He was really like a brother, as cliché as he thought it sounded. Though Howie had more brothers and cousins than he cared about, Punch was always there for him as a kid. When they got older and Howie started to get into more trouble, Punch was the one to give him the guidance and self-conscious grounding that he needed. Punch was the reason why Howie left Brooklyn—to get out and do something with his life rather than get sucked in to the pattern of failure into which so many of their friends had fallen.

Had he not returned, he never would have known about Punch's death, or his daughter, son, wheelchair, his life.

He found a voice and wrote his story. Over the course of just a few days, Howard wrote a script that he felt encapsulated the gritty, sad, isolated world he grew up in. It was finished.

He rewarded himself with a trip to the track, his only true joy. He sat quietly in his spot at Belmont with his hat pulled down low and his DRF in his hands. He shuffled over to the Paddock for a bite to eat.

This guy walks up to me and holds a ticket in his hand and says I dropped it. Well of course I dropped it, you fucking ass, it's a losing ticket. Oh, he says. I realized at that point he'd never been to a track. Here in the dining room there's not a lot of tickets on the floor, I guess they sweep them up. But in the Grandstand the floor is littered with losing tickets. I explained that to him and he was grateful and apologized for bothering me. I could tell he felt really stupid. I asked him what he's doing here. It was at that point he recognized me. I tried to walk away but he was a big fan. We talked for a while and he joined me for lunch. He's an off-Broadway producer. I told him about my script.

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The producer, Brad Siegel, had been a big fan of Howard's and was interested in his disappearance. He noted that there had been several media reports of "sightings" of Howard Kessler throughout the tri-state area, and there was even a blog now devoted to marking the spot where he was seen.

Brad asked to see Howie's script. Howie was a little hesitant at first, knowing that this guy could be a stalker. But they got along well and he seemed genuinely interested in the story, and not the star appeal of Howie himself. Howie excused himself from the conversation, citing Punch's recent death as a source of his anxiety, but gave his number to Siegel to contact him to discuss the script. He meant it.

They went back and forth over the course of the next week or so on variations of the plotline, then Siegel called a writer he knew *in* Brooklyn to go help Howie out in polishing the script and adapting a stage version. Siegel and Howie went to one of the Russian nightclubs and bonded over vodka, dancing, and a Neil Diamond cover singer who sang only in Ukrainian. They had a lot in common, but not really. They did share a common interest, in seeing success and exposure come from the script.

Siegel sold Howard on the idea of running his script as a play right after the new year. A contract he had signed months ago had fallen through and he had open dates for the theater that he would love to fill. He could pull together the financing, find a director, and get a cast together. He owned his own theater on Greene Street in Soho. Howard was elated that he could do something without Alan, finally.

Howard got up the next morning and before he went on his jog, he left a voicemail for Alan stating that he'd no longer be needing his services as his agent. He would fax a letter later that day to confirm the end of their engagement.

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He felt energized, independent, and confident. This was his work and he alone would see to its success.

Chapter 27

Jessica

It was awful. It couldn't have been a worse, horrible, tragic way to die. We still don't know what killed him, or if he killed himself. My mother won't hear me say that. But I think my dad might have at least contemplated it. The official story is that he fell into a coma brought on by the blood sugar thing and then suffered a stroke. That's all fine. But we found him face down in the toilet bowl. He had to have crawled from his chair, which was not even outside the door. I'm sick to my stomach just thinking about it.

The past few weeks my dad was depressed. I can't say that the whole reunion was a trigger, I just can't say it for sure. But the timing is awfully coincidental.

"I disagree. It gave him something to do. He was calling restaurants, writing emails, keeping active, and really looked forward to staying in touch with the others," my mother said as her voice still quivered when she talks about him.

"Well, Ma, it did bring back rough memories, right? I mean, he said some pretty provocative things that I'm not sure he's thought about in years."

"Provocative? What? Your father? Come on."

"No, Ma, really, you should hear the interviews."

"What, hear what interviews?"

"The ones I did for the article. I taped many of them, so I could go back and listen."

"You did what?"

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“Mom, for the 99th time, I recorded the conversations I had—with consent—to piece together Howard Kessler’s childhood through his friends’ eyes. And that included Dad. He didn’t just point me in the direction, he’s a part of the story, too.”

She looked at me funny. I don’t know if she didn’t understand or if she misunderstood. But she was clearly not comfortable with this.

“How much did you and your father talk about this thing you’re doing?”

“Ok, Ma, first, it’s an article. It’s an essay about Howard Kessler, Dad, Frank Russo, Mo Buchwald, and Art Raimi. We’ve talked about this.”

“Don’t you realize what a painful childhood your father had? How he had to get out of that place before it destroyed him? Why do you think all these years we’ve—I’ve—kept him the hell away from those animals?”

I was a little shocked. I was a lot shocked. I’d never heard my mother—the queen of deference—assert such a strong opinion about something other than a handbag or kugel.

“I didn’t know you—I didn’t know. You should have told me, Ma, before I started—”

“So what, you’d stop? Or you’d skip your father and write the story without him?”

“No, I don’t know—”

Is she saying it’s my fault he’s dead because I asked too many questions about his childhood?

“Do you want me to be defensive? Because I’m kind of spent right now, Ma, and I can’t get my head around what I think you might be inferring,” I said quietly.

“I don’t know what you just said.”

“Don’t play stupid with me. Don’t do it anymore. You got away with doing that with Dad, but I can’t stand it. Just say

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what you mean, please, and have some respect for my intelligence.” I had my head in my hands, gripping my hair, feeling the blood rush to my face, and the tears streak down my cheeks.

“Aren’t you feisty today. What gives you so much confidence?”

“Where are you going with this? Why are you fighting with me?”

We both went silent and sat there at the breakfast table over tepid, over-sweetened Lipton tea and white toast, with the AM news radio humming as our soundtrack.

“I didn’t make Dad depressed,” I said and I got up to leave.

My mother grabbed my hand to sit me down again.

“I’m sure that after all these years he told you about his youth. But maybe he left out some details.”

“I know he was poor, really poor. I knew that before the interviews—”

“Honey, he went hungry. And you know why? His father was a dope addict.”

I couldn’t speak at that moment. I didn’t know whether to laugh because the accusation was so ridiculous that a Polish immigrant escaping the Pogroms in the 1920s would do that. Jews aren’t heroin addicts.

My mother continued, “His father took what little there was, and, well, he was an addict. That’s how he died. Well, he got hit by a trolley car, but really he wasn’t right at that time.”

I still couldn’t speak. Even if I could get words out of my throat, I wouldn’t even know where to begin to ask the questions. So my mother continued.

“Your grandmother was saddled with debt, and she was ostracized by her family and Mordechai’s family. Mordechai was your grandfather’s name. After he died, your father was

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about 7 years old then, there was no contact with family so your grandmother had no support. God only knows how she survived. All those years you wondered why she was so grumpy? That's why. That's the reason why. Because she had a terrible life with a terrible man. And your father—your wonderful, sweet, father—”

Mom couldn't go on after that. Neither could I.

Still in shock, I pieced together some fragmented stories mostly from my dad's interviews and realized there was a sub-text to much of what he was saying. That sub-text—his aversion to drugs and alcohol, his obsession with promises and responsibility—underscored so much of why he worked tirelessly to provide stability to us, at the expense of his own explorations in life. I re-read some of the passages in the article referencing my dad's experience, and I plugged in a few details learned from my mom. It gave him more depth and added even more compelling angles to the story—which started to look more and more like a tale of desperation for all involved, rather than a pin-the-tail-on-Howie piece. That worked fine with me.

I felt a strong desire to call Howie, since the two of them were closest friends and had known one another since they were in grade school. I wanted to talk with him about my dad now, though I realize I was a little gruff with him a few weeks ago. He's no dummy, I know I didn't like him. But I feel like now it's different; Punch isn't here anymore.

“Hi, um, this is Jessica Plotkin—I just wanted—”

“Oh, Jess, hiya, how are you doing? How's your mother?”

He was surprisingly calm and solemn.

“I'm, uh, we're ok. It's hard. It's just really hard now, for my mom. For me. Everybody, my niece and nephew, my brother, it's just been hard—” I trailed off and mumbled a few more details to fill in the space of the phone call. “I was

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hoping you could fill in some details about my dad, his life, as a kid, you know, um, I just don't know where to start, really—”

“Oh, sure, wow, that's a long way back. What do you want to know?”

“I don't know, that's just it. He never really talked much about his upbringing. I know he was poor—”

“Poor? You don't know what poor is. No offense, honey, but your father didn't eat sometimes. Not that we had much, I lived in a tenement with 40 relatives, but there was always bread. I would bring him bread. We were kids, 6 years old maybe. Most of the games we played was running around trying to steal food.”

I stopped him right there, because I wanted him to know I learned about my dad's father. At least it would help Howie talk about what he really knew, rather than hold back.

“I know about his father. I know about it—”

I heard him sigh, and then take a deep breath. I can't get over how much is communicated non-verbally, and without even seeing someone. Hearing them breathe can explain more than words ever can.

“When did you find out? Recently?”

“Like an hour ago.”

“You're still in shock, why don't we talk about this another time? Nothing is going to make sense to you now.”

“When the fuck is a heroin addict grandfather ever going to make sense?”

“Well, hon, it is what it is. Listen, why don't you and I grab a bite to eat? You ever been to Brooklyn?”

Have I ever, I wanted to say. But I remembered at that point not to let on to the fact that I've been digging around for months. At the same time I didn't want to play stupid, because I really wanted his help is piecing together my

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father's life, and in understanding more about who I am as a result of how he lived as a child.

"A couple times—Williamsburg and Park Slope, mostly. Dad took us out to Coney Island once when we were young, and we had dinner at Carolina's on Mermaid Avenue. Is that place still there?"

"Ah, I don't know—I've only been back here a couple of months, one of which I spent in West Orange at your folks' place. I'm still getting a feel for it now. I'm staying in Brighton Beach. There's a nice Ukrainian café downstairs. Give me a call whenever you want to come by. I'm here for a while and I don't really go anywhere far."

He was really decent. I couldn't get over it. Here's this big Hollywood star who conveyed his heartfelt feelings to me and genuinely expressed a desire to help me.

Why the hell am I burying him with this article?

I spent the next couple of days wondering if the article was the right thing to do; knowing that it was, but feeling guilty. What if Howie really wasn't as bad a guy as everyone made him out to be? And it's not like he's portrayed as a *bad* guy, just insensitive and selfish. Who isn't?

I decided just before finalizing the thing and sending to Hello that I should give the agent guy a call, the one from the plane. I'm sure he's forgotten about me already, but what the hell.

"Alan Shiner, please, this is Jessica Plotkin," I said to a very young sounding male secretary, or assistant, whatever they call them.

"And what is this regarding?" he asked, playing the role of gatekeeper.

"My article, he asked me to call him. Met on a flight about a month or so ago."

"That's it?"

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I couldn't believe he asked that.

"Yes, that's it—what the hell else do you want from me? I'm holding the guy's card. If you don't want to put me through, I don't really give a shit either way."

"Just hold please and I'll see what I can do," and now all of a sudden because I was a bitch this kid is acting like my best friend. Amazing how L.A. works.

"Ms. Plotkin! I'm so glad you called! What a nice surprise!" Alan jumped on the phone immediately. I didn't expect his welcome.

"Thanks, yeah, how are you?" I asked tepidly.

"Great, thanks, it's always beautiful in Hollywood," he said, laughing.

"I have a final of the article. I haven't sent it to Hello yet, though I did sign a contract. If you're interested in seeing it, it's about Howard Kessler, but as a kid in Brooklyn."

Chapter 28

Alan

I wasn't sure when to expect the phone call, if ever. It was such a powerful piece, with interviews that could bury Howard. I wondered if Jessica had the gumption to finish it and put it through the real test.

"It's done," she said. No good morning, just "Done."

"Great, that sounds good. Let me have it. Email ok? You can send a PDF? You in a hurry?"

"I kind of am. I mean, I just want to get this thing out there and it's already a week later than when I told I'd get it to Hello. I mean, with my dad and all—"

"Of course, sure, no, I understand. Listen, get it over to me and I'll see what's what. I'll call you back with some definitive news. Keep your phone close."

In minutes, the email came and my assistant printed out the article. I closed my door and sat down to read what she had written about one of my old, dear friends and clients. Though her reporting is sharp, I was floored by the comments of the guys—all of whom I met at the Duck House that night. If I didn't hear the last 15 minutes of the confrontations, I wouldn't have believed this was the same gang of guys from the restaurant. But the sense of paranoia, distrust, and opacity that was evidenced in that last few minutes was pervasive through the piece I was reading.

It also reinforced all of the negative feelings I had about Howie not just in recent months, but over the years as well. Howie's charms often outweigh his selfishness, his distanced

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and unsympathetic sense of friendship, and an ugly aspect of his competitive nature. Jessica Plotkin was an expert manipulator of words, reporting, and interviews, because she pieced together this disparate group of individuals with little or no contact over the past 50 years and replayed their high times and low times throughout the piece, with the undercurrent of Howie's destructive characteristics flowing throughout.

It was brilliant. She is an ace.

I could get this thing made into a movie in no time. I am absolutely confident. I would bet my kids' college careers on it; and I will bet my own career, or what's left of it. Without Howie on board, I don't have much to lose.

"Get her on the phone NOW!" I yelled, hoping to catch her before she sent it anywhere else.

I wanted to make the phone calls and take the meetings as quickly as possible. I hadn't been this excited about a project in years. Literally, in years. I just had to get her to agree. I wasn't 100% sure. If I just moved fast enough, she wouldn't have enough time to waver.

"I have to say, your piece is excellent, I think we can really do business together. I mean it. I can send you out a contract momentarily and I can get started selling this thing. What do you think?" I said, holding my breath.

"I'm not sure what you mean. I mean, I'm glad you liked it. So, should I send it to Hello? I don't know what—"

She really had no idea.

I don't take advantage of people. I generally let them think they take advantage of me. With my connections and experience in this town, I could make this girl a fortune in a few phone calls. She just has to trust me. I think she does. But there's one thing that could keep us from moving any

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further, and that is my relationship—or former relationship—with Howie.

“I know you were just out here, but you should plan another trip. By the time you come out again, I’ll have some meetings set up, some deals ready and set. Otherwise you can just green-light any of the projects I propose. Movie, TV, syndication, series, you name it.”

“Um, I’d like to start with getting the thing published?”

I laughed, and after a moment she did, too.

“Honey, I can put this thing anywhere you want. Better yet, anywhere like Vanity Fair, as a front cover feature. This is going to make waves, Miss Jessica, you are going to make waves.”

“Is there anything else I need to know?” she asked.

Is this when I should tell her about Howie?

Chapter 29

Frank

“I got great news, Da—that guy, Lou, Mike’s friend from the city in the stage guy’s union, he called me back and I’m starting tomorrow,” Dario said to me.

“You up for it? Those guys really work—”

“No they don’t, Frank, they’re notorious for being overpaid and they never lift a finger. Dario, who is this guy?” Dee said.

“He, uh, Mike, you know, Mike from 65th Street with the bar, he’s a friend of his I guess—”

“You gotta get your shit straight, Dario, you can’t go in there mumbling like an idiot. How are you feeling, alright? Are you up for this? Don’t listen to your mother, they’re going to make you work. I know them guys. They work hard.”

I was really happy for him and hoped to high hell he could pull it off. I’d honestly never seen him so excited about something—maybe because he really pulled his own strings to get this. It could be the turnaround he—and all of us around here—needs. I sure as shit hope so.

“Yeah, dad, I think I’m ready. I been talking to the guy and he said there are some things I gotta learn, but I think I can do it.”

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“First you gotta stop thinking that wrestling is real, Dario, since you’ll be working on the stage and all!” Petey said as he walked by, slapping Dario in the back of the head.

* * *

A couple of days later I learned that Dario had actually been showing up to the job and working. I was a little surprised, since he doesn’t usually go back to a job after he starts it. I sat down and took a little time with him; this could be a good thing for him.

“So what’s the job? What are you doing?”

“Eh, right now I’m just hauling a lot of boxes, heavy shit, moving shit around. It’s a theater downtown and I guess they’re getting ready for rehearsals, so we’re making room for the backstage area, dressing rooms, and building out the back part of the theater. There’s so much to do; I’m learning a lot.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Dario, really glad. I can’t tell you.”

“You know I think it’s a play with Howie, but I’m not sure yet. I heard one of the guys talking about it.”

“Really? You don’t say? Well keep an ear out but don’t make trouble. You hear me? Don’t make trouble. You don’t need any more shit, I don’t need any more shit, and neither does your poor mother.”

A play about Howie? I hope it’s not another goddamned musical.

I guess I could call Howie. I didn’t know if he was heading back to L.A. or staying out here. We didn’t really leave it any way after he left the house a couple months back. It was so awkward with him here. We’re not kids anymore, that’s for sure.

So a few weeks later I got off a job early and I thought I’d drop by and see how Dario was doing. More truthfully, I

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wanted to see if he actually showed up, and if not, for how long he hadn't been there.

To my surprise, there he was, working his tail off, taking orders and humping boxes. At this rate he'll be in the union early next year. I was praying for that. This kid needed so much help. Getting in with the Stagehands union is the best thing that could ever happen to him.

I hung around and caught Lou, my old buddy's friend who was the shop steward and who was connected quite well, to see how things were working out. He thought Dario had a good shot of being able to stick around if he kept it up, which made me happy.

"You know, this production is a play that Howie Kessler wrote—it's supposed to be about his life in Brooklyn. I thought you were in touch with him? I heard he was at your house a couple months back?" Lou said. "It's gonna be in premiers in a couple weeks. You should come by, you come in the back."

"He wrote it? Dario said it was about him. What the fuck? He's still here? I didn't even know. Yeah he dropped by, I thought it was a send-off, you know, he, uh, we talked a little and said goodbye. I thought he was leaving back to Hollywood." I walked away from Lou because I was suddenly angry, and I didn't want it to show more than I could control.

What the fuck is this guy doing? If he's still in New York why the fuck did we have a big, goodbye like on Oprah? I thought I had done enough thinking about the past. Every weekend when we get together to watch his movies I think about the past. I thought about his life—what he has and what I don't. Why he got what he got and why I got stuck with what I got. I don't stop thinking about that. We never started out any different—both poor, kids of immigrants, we had nothing. I worked my ass off laying bricks. This guy does

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a song and dance in the Navy and some Hollywood fag thinks he's the greatest thing since sliced bread and so they give him roles until Scorsese discovers him. Next thing you know he's rich, famous, the face of Brooklyn but in Hollywood. And never a word about us; never dropped me a line or a fucking post card. We were inseparable since grammar school. Some of the best memories of my life I spend with this guy.

And now, I don't know what the fuck he's doing—writing a play in New York—about US?

I drove home steaming about the whole thing.

“You don't know what it is, Frank, stop with the *agita* already. Wait'll you see it and then get mad,” Dee said, calming me down, usually just to get me agitated again over something else. “I'd be more worried about Dario keeping this job than whatever the fuck is in this play or whatever.”

And there she went, getting me crazy about something else. If anything, she's predictable.

We spent the evening at that Chinese restaurant talking about our secrets and the shitty things we've experienced in the years past. I hope to fucking god he doesn't use any of that. The argument between me and Mo—if that goes public, we're both dead.

“I don't trust him,” I said, or maybe I didn't say it. I thought it. It was a big thought.

Chapter 30

Howard's Play

Brad Siegel absolutely fell in love with Howie's script. Brad was a venture capital investor and managed a fund of funds during the dot-com era. He got out before the crash and was sitting on a pile of money. After sailing around the world in his 46' sailboat for a few years, he decided to be more active in throwing his money away. He had always liked the arts and just couldn't spend enough on theater fundraisers, so he took an active role in off-Broadway productions he invested in. He'd started a production company and was fielding hundreds of scripts to produce in his theater on East 15th Street.

Howard's acting career began on film, but he always yearned to be in theater. With the exception of two musicals whose productions were limited but Tony-award-winning, he had never created the opportunity; mainly because he was averse to coming back to New York for any extended period. Brad's writer tweaked Howard's rough script and notes into a workable enough piece to get a production together. Brad also hustled to incorporate other investors, using Howie's name and star power. It wasn't difficult.

Howie took a fairly active role in shaping the production. Brad made thorough introductions to the other producers, director, and casting director. His big peeve was to ensure that the actors were actually from New York and had or could do Brooklyn accents effectively, without sounding like caricatures. There was nothing worse than seeing an episode

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of *Law & Order*, shot in New York, when the actors can't even pull off a simple New York accent.

The whole production came together in weeks; it was miraculous by off-Broadway standards. Word spread quickly through the theater community that a mega-star was interested not in acting in the play, but in writing and shaping it. People piled on.

Not surprisingly, Hollywood was not looped in. Howard was relieved that he didn't have to deal with a publicist. For the past several months he'd bypassed calls by the PR machine that he employed for decades and focused on his own needs. Between that and no more Alan, it was like learning to ride a bike without training wheels for Howard. So within the course of about a month, Siegel put together previews dates, a cast and a production. He wanted to blast this on the media when all the details were crystallized and he got a better impression of the production from his director—a seasoned off-Broadway guy with plenty of ups and downs under his belt.

Howie plugged along in his routine when he wasn't called in to help with rewrites, perspectives, or thoughts on cast. He realized that they were just being polite when they called him in to supervise the auditions or help with a tiebreaker in the casting, but he went anyway and lent his opinion. He had been pleased with the way it was all going.

Siegel asked him to step out for a coffee one day during rehearsals. It was one of the final rehearsals before the previews began the following week. He was only a few years younger than Howie, but couldn't have had a more different life experience. But there was a reason why he had so much money, and it wasn't because he was dumb.

“Howie, do you really want to do this?”

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“Whaddya mean? Do what?” Howie said innocently and defensively at the same time.

“This production. I don’t know you and I’m not going to pretend that because I’ve seen your movies that I know what your motives are. But this is a tough play. It’s heavy. It’s personal. I—it’s hard to put it out there, if you know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what the fuck you mean.” Howie knew exactly what the fuck Siegel meant. He was just interested in seeing how he was going to frame the discussion.

“Come on, Howie. You haven’t given it a thought, that the biographical aspects of this thing don’t exactly shine the most positive light on your friends?”

“First of all, we’re not going to change a fucking thing—you have money down on this and previews begin next week with reviewers already set to attend. So fuck that. And second, they are not my friends. I haven’t had contact with these guys in 50 years. We all had dinner last fall, and a couple conversations thereafter. I don’t need to defend a fucking thing.”

“Ok, alright, fine. Don’t get so upset. You’re so defensive all the time. I’m only asking because I’m your friend now, not just your business partner.”

“You’re goddamned right I’m defensive, because you question me every time you have the opportunity. It’s a good thing you’re a fag because your wife would never stick around for your shit.”

They both laughed, though the weight of the conversation still hung unresolved.

But how could Siegel have any questions about it at this late date?

Later in the evening, Howie couldn’t shake what Siegel said. He was angry, because after having finished the script

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and seen the enthusiasm to produce it, someone would question the strongest points of it—the characters. And that someone was bankrolling the production and doing all the legwork for the publicity blast. But he used the anger to mask his own self-doubt. After seeing the guys and getting to know them again—and now, with Punch’s death—was he betraying them in this play?

“Fuck no,” Howie said out loud, as he stood on the terrace of his condo overlooking the beach. It felt like the same cold wind that sucked out his breath on the first day he stood outside the building on the boardwalk on the beach.

He closed the doors, pulled the curtains closed, and went to bed.

Chapter 31

Alan

Reading Jessica's essay on Howie is like reading election coverage in the local paper. You know what the writer's true allegiances are, but they appear to work hard to appear unbiased. That very act of trying not to come across one way or the other intimates bias. I could tell that Jessica wrote this thing before her father died. She seemed so invested in it when we first met, and her intensity struck me. In the past couple of calls with her in working out the contract and plans for publicity, she seemed eager to get it off her desk and get Howie out of her life. She had already talked about another NPR assignment pending that she wanted to get working on.

"Honey, you need to make yourself available for interviews, if this thing goes where I think it will. Between the bidding war that *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire* are having, and the *Hollywood Reporter* giving me midnight serenades for advance excerpts, you're going to be a busy lady in the coming weeks."

"Oh—really? I'm not sure that really suits me, I mean—do I have to travel out to L.A.? I was hoping to stick around by my mom for a bit—"

"You go wherever you want to go. When things heat up we'll see what's what. That's what I'm here for, to tell you what you should be doing. Let's focus now on the option for the script—"

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So we batted around some details, and she was very easy to work with. It still didn't make it any easier for me to hide my relationship—or should I say, former relationship—with Howie. I had a lunch negotiation with a studio exec interested in optioning the piece for a film, just as I hoped would happen.

“Lemme get this straight—she doesn't even know you represent Howie?”

“RepresentED. ED. I no longer represent Howard Kessler. There's nothing wrong with what I'm doing—I have a clean head about it. No one has expressed any problems with it.”

“I'm not expressing anything. I'm just asking. You're defensive for someone with a clean head.”

“She's not an insider. That's all. I don't want to scare her off. She doesn't know how things work.”

“Is she going to be a problem?”

“No, not at all. She's an angel. She's an excellent journalist and plans on continuing doing that.”

We both laughed at that suggestion, knowing that the success that would come out of the article would no doubt propel Jessica into another direction entirely.

Did she hate Howard? Did she blame him for her father's death? Or did she feel guilty for putting together a piece that shines an ugly light on Howard?

I couldn't afford to lose her if she found out I represented him and interpret me to be a Janus-faced prick. I'm going to release the tapes and let the media eat Howard up just as the article is published.

* * *

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“Things are just moving so fast, I can’t believe it,” Jessica said, sounding wide-eyed at the proposition of being paid a half million dollars for the option to make a film from her article.

“Enjoy it. Good work is good work, and it goes places,” I said, an anodyne. If she could see me sweating now, she would know something’s wrong, so all the better we’re on the phone. I am a nervous wreck about leaking the tapes. I have a shady publicist known for handling stuff like this. Like it’s a mob hit: no connection to me, no phone records, we used a third-party messenger and code words to conduct the whole operation. They’re instructed to begin dissemination as soon as there is a publish date in *Vanity Fair*; and 24 hours before that article is available, an interview in *Hollywood Reporter* with Jessica is set up with some excerpts to the article. I wanted to get sweet Jessica out there before she figures out it was me who leaked the interview tapes with Howie.

And meanwhile, not a fucking word from Howie. There hasn’t been a word about the guy in weeks. I have my assistant monitoring [Gawker.com](#) and the [WhereIsHowie.com](#) sites to see where he pops up, and I can’t make heads or tails of the sightings. I just hope for his own sake he’s not back in trouble again with the drugs or horses.

Look, I’m not taking this lightly. This isn’t retribution, either. This is managing my clients’ career and work. I would leak the tapes if I had them for anyone, provided it would serve as a boost to the PR behind their work. So this isn’t about Howie. Does it look bad that he used to be my client and we were inseparable at one point? Yes, absolutely. You just have to believe it’s not about Howie. It’s about my two kids in college and the few years I have before I retire from this shit for good.

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“Mr. Shiner, it’s Ms. Plotkin,” my assistant called. I was dreading the call. I knew it would come. I had to pick it up.

“Hi Jess, what’s up?”

“Don’t Hi Jess me, Alan, where the hell did you get the tapes? Do you have any idea what it took for me to get these guys to talk at all, no less on tape?”

“Wait a minute! Wait a minute—what are you talking about?”

I had no idea the leaks were out yet—I figured I would be the first one they’d call once the tapes surfaced. This PR guy is great. I guess he started in New York.

Of course I made a copy of the tapes.

“My friend at the Post just emailed me that they are listening to Howie tapes. Isn’t my article supposed to come out tomorrow? Fucking TOMORROW? You think this doesn’t look intentional?”

I guess I underestimated how smart she really is.

“I don’t know what to say. I could keep denying this but I won’t.”

“Oh Christ, Alan. Jesus, they are going to come after me. Do you realize they are going to come after me?”

There was true fear in her voice. It wasn’t just anger or resentment. I have made a grave mistake.

“They are going to come after me,” and she hung up.

I got on the first plane to New York.

Chapter 32

Art

“Mr. Raimi, sir, uh, there’s someone here to see you who is, um, very insistent—he’s not a baseball person, sir, he’s uh—”

“Well get rid of him, this is ridiculous. We’re right in the middle of negotiations, Sam, you know the drill,” I said as I waved off my assistant who slithered into the conference room. At least he had the sense to wait until we broke for coffee.

Two minutes later I hear knocking on the window of the conference room. I knew this was for me. I leaned back in my chair and peered through the blinds and saw that it was Frank.

“At least he blends in well and isn’t conspicuous,” I said as I got up to excuse myself from the negotiations and step outside with Frank.

Frank and I were like passing ships in the night. Though we never really had any problems together, we were never close friends for any number of reasons. Just different, I suppose. I never really had any curiosity or compelling desire to find out what he was doing after we all went our own ways. Yuri’s family owns some industrial properties in Bay Ridge and we would occasionally see Frank’s company trucks on a site there, Russo & Sons Builders. I had assumed that he was doing just fine, after the indictments and with his face plastered all over the New York tabloids back in the early 1980s. I never quite understood how he wasn’t knocked off.

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“Sir—I’m sorry, I just couldn’t help it, he pushed me!” Sam said as he was trying to meekly defend himself against expected charges that I would hold him accountable.

“Son, I’d be worried if you were able to stop Frank,” I said while I held my hand out to Frank while I put my other on his shoulder to guide him away from the conference room.

“Art I know this isn’t the right place for a talk, so let me just preface this with my apology,” he said flatly.

I guess I expected a more self-gratuitous statement.

“What’s up? Don’t tell me another death—”

“No, not that. Not at all,” he said, brushing through his imaginary hair atop his Mr. Clean gleaming head, doubtless thinking of Punch’s recent passing. “I know you’re busy, and this doesn’t look good, I know you’re in the middle of the Players Association stuff and with everything going on this is the last thing I wanted to drop on you.”

“What? Wait a minute, let’s go in here,” I led him around the corner and down the hall to my office. We stepped in and I closed the door. I buzzed Sam to get lunch orders in the conference room to stall the meeting.

“How do I say this—uh, Howie is putting on a play, a play about all of us, and him, and it’s—”

“What’s the immediate concern? We can talk about everything later—is there something pressing I need to know?” At that moment I realized what Frank was going to say.

“The guy who plays you, I mean, your character in the play, he’s uh—”

“Oh fuck.”

* * *

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I returned to the negotiations and finished my very long day, though not without two separate comments inquiring about my disposition and if I was feeling alright. No, thanks, I'm not feeling alright. I'm about to confront a New York sports media bulldozer whose intention it is to crush me. I'm so unused to discussing the subject of my sexuality in public that I'm not sure even how to approach this with the publicity division; or if I should even employ my own agent for good measure. Though it may be unprecedented to have a gay commissioner of a major sport and someone in the world would welcome it, I'm not sure I'd like to be the first one stepping into the role. I've spent my entire life working toward this job. Every ounce of my effort as a kid in school, playing sports, and side-jobs was devoted to achieving the goal that I am about to reach when the announcement is planned in two weeks.

"Deny it. Just deny it," Yuri said, trying to be supportive.

"You know it's not that easy."

"How are they going to know? We just won't go out together in the city as much. It's not like we do anything now."

"How can I not deny it? What if they get to Marion and the kids? And they will. Fucking press. These guys have nothing better to do."

"I have an idea—though you won't like it. Why not get one of the gay groups to support you and do a media barrage? It's a little fluffy, but I think GLAAD has people in high places in Hollywood and New York advertising people involved. Now they'll have a commissioner of a major sport."

"I can't stand those people. I can't stand the idea of making your life so goddmaned public. Who the fuck cares? Why should anyone care? I just can't stand them."

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“Art, they could save your job, and maybe your life. Think about it. If you’re not going to deny it—and listen, we don’t know anything about this play, right—just be prepared to have a couple of weapons of your own.”

This is just devastating. I called Frank early the next morning to find out if he had the script, or the previews schedule. I tried the cell number I had for Howie but it didn’t work. I had his agent’s card buried somewhere in my wallet, I think, so that’ll be my next call.

“This is Art Raimi, a friend of Howard Kessler’s, we met a few months ago in New York,” I replied to the assistant’s interrogatory. I waited a minute on hold.

“Mr. Raimi, please continue to hold, Mr. Shiner will be right with you. I’m connecting you to his mobile phone—he’s got a few minutes before he gets on his flight.” I was shocked that he was going to take my call. I didn’t even know what to say once he got on the call.

“Art—I don’t represent Howie anymore, if you’re asking how to get in touch with him,” he said, preferring to preempt any line of questioning that may involve him.

“Have you heard about his play? Are you involved with that at all? And yes, I’d like to get in touch with him—” mostly to wring his fucking neck, but I wasn’t going to jump the gun.

“Play? He’s in a play? Not on Broadway, I would know about that—”

“No he apparently wrote a play. It’s downtown, previews start next week. I’m trying to get my hands on the script.”

“How’d you hear about it?”

“It’s been under wraps for the past couple of months but they pulled the production together fast. Frank’s son is a stagehand.”

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“Oh for the love of Christ—I have to assume from the tone of your voice that there are some controversial—”

“Controversial is not the word.”

“I understand. Listen, I just don’t know what to say. There’s nothing I can do. Howie severed our relationship a couple of months ago, before the holidays. I don’t know what the fuck he’s doing—”

“Well now you do. If you have any way of getting in touch with him—I don’t know why he’s doing this. I don’t know why he would try to destroy me like this—”

“Art, listen, I hear you. This shit happens every day in Hollywood, and I know your line of work is equally cut-throat. Just distance yourself from this thing, and wait to see what happens with it. You know, just because he’s Howie Kessler doesn’t mean this play is going to go anywhere. The past two years Howie hasn’t exactly had the Midas touch so I honestly don’t expect much of a splash. Did you say you had the script?”

“Not yet, Frank’s kid is trying to get his hands on it. His kid is a dipshit though so we’ll see what happens with that.”

“Listen—I guess I’m glad I have you on the phone. I’m going to tell you something that, well, though it’s not going to make Howie’s play go away, may take away from the attention on the play and focus on Howie and some of his missteps.”

“Missteps?”

“The article that Jessica Plotkin did, all those interviews with you guys?”

“Yes, she was very good. Poor Jessica, I can’t get over Punch. Is that article going to be published do you know?”

“Not only is it going to be published, Hollywood is tripping over its young to get the rights to make the film and

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Jessica is going to reap the benefits beyond all expectations. But the tapes, they're out."

"What do you mean they're *out*?"

"Someone leaked them. It wasn't Jessica. Her bag was stolen at Newark Airport, I understand she was mugged and it was a bit of a violent episode—"

"She ok?"

"She's fine, the article had remained under wraps on her laptop, but the tapes were in another bag and somehow whatever thug got their hands on them gave them to the tabloids. I just got the call this morning."

I was silent. I tried to think what I had said on those tapes. There were things that could be used for the article—which I read a proof of before she finalized it—and there were things that were ugly. Really ugly details about Howie, which were not meant for print or any other consumption. I knew the tapes were a bad idea.

"Wow, that's not good. I think. Right? I mean, I don't know what anyone else said, but I for one didn't exactly paint the best picture in some instances of any of us, especially Howie. So Howie knew about the article all along?"

"No, that's just it. He didn't know. This whole thing—both the play and the article and the tapes—is coincidental. Bizarre, huh. Listen, my flight's boarding so I have to hang up. I'll be in New York tomorrow so we should talk more."

Alan seemed decidedly unconcerned. I suppose there's nothing for him to be concerned with; he's just an ancillary character in this whole thing.

Chapter 33

The Perfect Storm

Howard wakes to a phone call from Brad Siegel. He expected Brad to be a little frantic today since it was the first preview of *Getting the Old Gang Back Together*.

“Don’t open up the Post, whatever you do. In fact, stay in your apartment. Don’t even let the super see you.”

“They found me? Big deal—”

“No, Howie, there’s more to it than that. I don’t know what the fuck we’re going to do—”

“Whoa, whoa, what the fuck are you all hysterical about? What’s in that rag now?” he said, now actually slightly concerned.

“There are some tapes, I guess interviews with some of your old buddies, recently? And some article is out—and that’s the other thing, there’s going to be an article about you in one of the big magazines—”

“What the fuck?”

“I say we put this thing into high gear. Skip previews. I’ll get the PR machine to put some serious asses in those seats tonight. Let’s make all the shit turn to roses. Ball’s in our court.”

“Yeah, yeah—do whatever you think is right, it’s all good. Just lemme know what, uh—” Howard trailed off and hung up.

For the first time in years, he was flummoxed. He resisted googling to find out what was going on in the blogosphere

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and went downstairs to the newsstand, as he does each morning. Today was different.

“Hey boss, somebody don’t like you!” the newsstand guy, Rajiv, yelled at Howard.

“What’s the new stuff you got back there for tomorrow?” he asked.

“I can’t show you that, boss.”

“Fuck you. What do you have back there?”

“I got them all, boss, somebody else gossiping about you?”

“Listen, lemme see what you got back there.”

Rajiv made a sour face at Howard and led him to the back of the store where the new issues were piled up.

“Gimme a boxcutter,” he said to Rajiv, to open the binding of a stack of Esquires.

He proceeded to look through GQ, Playboy, Variety, Rolling Stone and a few others before he came across Vanity Fair. And there he was, a collage image of his face from a few of his big films, with the words, “The Star has Fallen,” across the bottom.

He sat on a box and stared at the cover for a moment. He could feel the heat rise from his hands up his torso and to his face and ears. His heart raced. He wiped his mouth.

Rajiv brought him a coffee and closed the door behind him as he left Howard alone to read the story of how he fell from his crest.

* * *

Siegel had a copy of the magazine article and the Post on his desk.

The biggest problem that Brad had was in telling so many of the current ticket-holders for tonight’s performance of

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Getting the Old Gang Back Together they had a raincheck. He had no problem getting reviewers, socialites, and the various members of the New York VIP contingent in the house, what with the Post's coverage of the tapes and the Vanity Fair article. It was a risk that no producer would ever take—going live without previews, it's like putting on your makeup with no mirror. Siegel had nothing to lose but money, of which he had plenty. He'd lose face among other investors, but knowing what's at play here, he decided the risk was worth it.

He spent every minute of the day on the phone managing who would be in tonight's audience. He had two interns doing the same thing. He pulled out every stop possible. He made the show a media event, which wasn't a problem to get media to show up to anything related to Howard, now with the new information.

Chapter 34

Jessica

“I don’t understand. What exactly does it say?”

“What does what say, Mom? The article in the Post, or the article in the Post about the article that’s going to run tomorrow?”

“Just pack your stuff, quickly, we really need to go soon. I’m sorry for this,” Jessica said, peering out the window.

“You know you look paranoid. I thought everything was ok with your article. That man in California you said was taking care of it all.”

“Ma, you don’t understand. There’s a lot of moving parts to this whole thing.”

It was totally cliché that I jumped 20 feet in the air when my cellphone rang. Thankfully it was just Alan.

“I landed, I’m at the hotel, you should come into the city where we can talk. There are a few more things you should know about,” he said, not sounding as calm as I would have liked.

“Listen, I’m getting out of town, with my mother, because I don’t feel safe. I don’t trust these guys—and they don’t trust me.”

“I understand—that’s probably not a bad idea, but you can’t run away forever. And plus, there’s the thing about the play, it’ll be a diversion—”

“Play?”

“Yeah, that’s the other thing I’m telling you. Howie wrote and is producing a play. It starts tonight—”

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“No previews? We didn’t know about this before?”

“No, it’s apparently a rush-job.”

“It looks like we planned this all together—”

“No it’s fine. Listen, what’s in the play is more disturbing to Mo, Frank and Art than what’s on the tapes. I am convinced you don’t need to be worried about them, but I understand if you want to go under the radar for a while. But you need to keep me in the loop where you are so I can get in touch—hold on, there’s a call, don’t move—”

I sat there on my mother’s bed in utter disarray. I literally didn’t know which way to go. And fucking Alan has me on hold. It’s not even lunchtime and I want to kill myself. I thought about this unbelievable turn of events: Had he been planning a publicity boost for Howie’s career? Was this all a part of his plan?

“Jess, you have just sold the rights to your article for a new Universal film. The whole deal looks to be in the millions, with points. My assistant is faxing me the paperwork. You can put your worries aside.”

“I’m delighted, but I’d like to have my kneecaps follow me to fame, so if you would please help me focus on what the fuck to do so these gorillas don’t come after me because of the fucking tapes you stole and leaked, that’d be great, really.”

I could feel my voice quiver as my pitch increased, with that tone of near-hysteria that can only come from sheer panic. My mother stopped fussing with her bag to come sit on the bed and hold my hand. She had no idea what was going on. She’s been in a fog since the night she came home and found Dad upstairs a few weeks ago. I could feel my throat tightening and the air was getting harder to breathe. My mother picked up the phone since I hadn’t quite hung up and I could hear Alan shouting into the other end.

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“Yes—this is Adele Plotkin—I don’t know what’s going on. But if you got my Jessica into trouble you need to get her out, and that’s all I’m saying about this, Shiner, you hear me? Are you there?”

Go Mom.

“Fix it, just fix it. That’s all you need to do, just fix it. We’ll be out of town, you have her number, call us when everything’s settled. Bye now.”

Adele had such a way about her, I keep forgetting how smooth she is. All these years, that’s how she put up with Dad and his compulsiveness, and Josh and I, and the world. Adele could make someone quake in their shoes when she had to—but only when she had to, when all other options ran out the door, Adele hit in the clutch.

“That man mentioned something about a play in Soho—I think it’s the same name as your article, title, dear. Maybe you should think about going, or no. Think about what your father would do.”

What would my father do? He would get on the phone and get everyone together and talk it out. I’m afraid things have gone too far down the line. Sour. But in light of the tapes being leaked, I thought I should reach out to Frank, Mo and Art. By retreating they might think I leaked them on purpose and it would give them all the more reason to come after me.

I had 28 voicemail messages and needed to start going through them soon. Things are moving so quickly that I’m not sure I have the confidence to make the right decisions.

One message was from Art:

“Hi, Art Raimi here, yeah, I heard about the tapes. I just want to let you know that I know you didn’t leak them. I hope you’re ok. Whatever happens with everything going on, you’ll know that I think you did OK, kiddo, so congrats on the article. The other thing is this

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play in Soho that Howie's producing. It's tomorrow night, I'm going to be there. Give me a call when you can."

The message was from yesterday—though I wanted to be relieved, I wasn't, since he wasn't really the one I was so nervous about with the contents of the tapes. Before I called him back, in thinking about whether I was going to tell him that my own agent stole the tapes in an act of retribution that backfired, I lay back on my mother's bed and watched a ladybug crawl up the curtains. It seemed to get lost in the fabric, but a minute or two later it re-emerged on the wall, walking casually between the ceiling and the wall. I blinked, and it disappeared altogether.

"Hello, this is Jessica Plotkin calling you back. I'm so glad to know you know I didn't release the tapes, the whole thing has been awful. I will try to get to the play tonight, I don't have a ticket but I think I can finagle one as a member of the press. I hope to see you there. I have a question though, that I hope you can help me with, and it's about Frank and Mo, and whether I should be afraid of, um, concerned if—" BEEEEEP. Ok, well said, then.

The rest of the messages were unimportant right now. I had hoped Howie would have called, but I knew of course he wouldn't. I felt a little lost right now.

What if I show up tonight and they're all there? Fired up and angry—embarrassed, lives changed? Frank talks about his affairs and girlfriends, how fucked up his kids are, how fat his wife is, how he paid bribes for no-bid contracts with the city and how he took bribes from suppliers. Mo talks about his drug dealing, his enemies, his ex-wife who he's still fucking and her billionaire husband, his years in prison. Art just talks about how messed up Howie is and always was—what he did to girls, stuff he stole just to steal it, all the drugs he did. Endless. And Dad, well, dad really kept his cool. It's like he

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knew to hold back—whether it was to protect me or just to keep composure. Maybe he just didn't feel strongly one way or the other and didn't care about Howie that much to spend too much time thinking about it.

Chapter 35

Getting the Old Gang Back Together

“It’s exactly what happened—look, the restaurant, us, everything. He didn’t even bother changing our names?” Frank barked at Art.

“SSSShhhhhh!” sh’d the lady behind him.

He turned and glared at her with his signature look that would quiet anyone. Frank couldn’t sit still in the seat. He’s too large and kept shifting his legs.

“I don’t believe this. Word for word, our conversations. He’s making us look like buffoons, Frank, buffoons,” Art said, not bothering to whisper, in shock.

Nearly every line in the play evoked a response from either Frank or Art.

Alan stood at the back of the theater with hand cupped on his forehead, agape at the dialogue which was lifted right from the Duck House dinner they had together; but with added emphasis making them all look like caricatures, except Howie.

“Frank followed me around like a puppy-dog ever since we were kids. I couldn’t get rid of the guy. And now that we’re in our ‘60s, you’d think he got his own life by now? Apparently not—he watches my movies every weekend with his friends in his basement. This puppy-dog never grew up...”

“I can’t sit through this—Art, this is humiliating—it’s lies—how could he do this to us?” Frank choked up and stood up to leave.

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“And the worst part was his wife—I couldn’t believe he married this girl. She looked like a Mac truck and acted like one, too.”

“Are you fucking kidding me, you fuck!” Frank shouted from the aisle, arms up like he was going to fight with the actors on stage. “That’s me! That’s my life you’re fucking with! We were friends—don’t ever forget that, Howie, you fuck!”

The actors stopped for a moment. The actor playing Howard who was narrating the play and was upstage and closest to Frank shaded his eyes from the stage lights to try to see, but he couldn’t. Art stood up to try to hold Frank back, or somehow control him when the two ushers came charging down the aisle. Frank shook them all off and walked up the aisle to the exit. Art stood in the aisle for a moment, knowing all eyes in the theater were on him. He reached down for his coat and walked slowly up the aisle. He looked back once and then continued to the back of the theater. The actors took a minute to compose, and then continued with the scene.

Art stood at the back holding his coat in his arms, after peering out the theater doors to spot Frank, who had already left and was out of sight. Art noticed someone else standing along the back wall of the theater.

Alan tried to stay out of sight, but noticed just then that Art had spotted him. He looked away quickly hoping to avoid Art’s gaze and the potential of a confrontation. Alan was already so upset from the situation that he couldn’t possibly deal with more complications. Jessica had already decided not to show up, still in fear.

The second act tackled exactly what Art was afraid it would—his relationship with Howie as teens. There was more than a heavy intimation that Art was gay at this point, so he knew what direction the rest of the scene would go. He didn’t want to be there to see it. If he left now, there was a

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chance that no media would see him leaving the theater. Yuri was seated in the mezzanine—they planned to keep separate in public for a while and Yuri knew someone at the New York Times who scored him a ticket.

As Art stepped out of the theater he checked his cellphone and had intended on calling Mo, whose scene in the play had come first and shocked both Art and Frank with the details of Mo's drug dealing, testimonies and indictment, connections with the mob, and current relationships with younger women. It was brutal. Before he had a chance to find Mo's number, someone grabbed him by the elbow and rushed him across the street dodging a speeding cab by inches.

"I know what's going on in there, so don't think you were going to keep this from me," Mo said in the shadows of a shuttered marquee.

"You think I have anything to do with this? Are you nuts?" Art replied as calmly as he could given the circumstances.

"No, I just don't want anyone protecting that bastard fuck, Howie."

"I have no intention. I feel awful for you and Frank, but what Howie's done to me in this play is—"

"He outed you?"

"Yes—wait, how did you know?"

"Art I've known you were a fag since we were kids. I don't give a shit. I'm just sorry you didn't realize it back then. You would have been more fun."

"Or dead."

"Yeah, I suppose that's true too. What do you plan on doing about this guy?"

"Mo, the last goddamned thing I'm concerned about now is what to do about Howie. I need to do some damage

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control or find a big rock to crawl under. I can't let this get out on his terms. I have to manage the information here and I don't even know where to start," Art said, beginning to come unhinged.

"Take it easy, Art, take it easy. One thing at a time."

"And you, what he said about you—isn't that stuff that shouldn't be, uh, talked about? Like, settlements and non prosecution agreements under seal or something?"

"Right, none of it. I have my lawyer in there now."

"You're not going to do anything--?" Art said.

"Don't worry about me."

Chapter 36

THE END

“Get the fuck out of here,” Dee shouted in between her tears and hair streaming across her reddened face, contorted in anger, “I have to read about you in the paper? Are you kidding me? I have to READ about you? You can’t come to me first and warn me this storm is coming? Forty-five years, Frank, 45 years—”

“I don’t know what to say, Dee, it shouldn’t have happened like this—”

“Everyone we know saw it. I’m so humiliated. And what you said about the kids! How could you tell other people? The four of them—you were relentless—”

She broke down and pushed Frank out of the room. She pushed him out for the last time.

* * *

Art just assumed the call was going to come, he just had to wait. There was nothing he felt he could do and resigned to the fact that MLB wouldn’t have a gay commissioner. He went into a static mode for a few days. While Yuri collected the media reports of Art’s character in the play, and in follow-on interviews that Howie did with the press. There were several.

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He took one meeting; the end of the Players Association negotiations on new contracts. There was a distinct sense in the room the entire afternoon of Howie's demise. He didn't have the command he once did—primarily because he didn't have confidence in himself. Here was a secret he had guarded his whole life and constructed an immense false exterior. That exterior fell to pieces in the wake of the coverage on Howie's play. He didn't even follow Yuri's advice to deny it because two publicists and disaster recovery specialists he consulted with felt he could get through the whole episode by ignoring it. He learned in the conference room that day that ignoring it was impossible.

Art submitted his resignation. Yuri suggested he write a book. But until he could manage the depression that set in once he no longer was involved in baseball, he was paralyzed with indignation.

* * *

Mo didn't have any problem deciding what to do about Howie. The only problem was in doing it fast enough: before they came after him. There was no sense pretending that Howie's play was fictional—these guys knew better. And even if it was fiction, the implication that a character resembling Mo was involved in the kind of information-trafficking that could bring down an organization was enough evidence they needed to justify taking him out.

Within a week of the play debuting and the media circus that followed it, Mo awoke to a series of sirens that jolted him from bed. His curiosity got the best of him. He threw on his coat and peeked out of his boat and saw the tremendous blaze the enlightened the night sky. He scrambled off the boat and jolted down the dock only to confirm his worst fear:

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the health club was engulfed in flames. The club was all he had. His insurance policy was leveraged. He was done.

The noise and lights of the fire engines and police dulled his senses until a huge blast shocked all the spectators and first responders. Mo turned back to the bay and he knew it was his boat that was blown to pieces.

Mo was already too late to get back at Howie. He'd be gone soon, too.

* * *

The Vanity Fair article backfired—at least as a ship-sinker for Howie. The release of the tapes served as a publicity stunt for the play rather than support for the article. Though the article was well-received, it too was just fodder for Howie's publicity machine to generate attention around the play, which was soon to become adapted for the screen. Brad Siegel represented Howie going forth and benefited tremendously from the last-minute push he made for attendance at the unpreviewed play. This demonstrated the power of word-of-mouth among the chattering class.

Howard returned to Los Angeles briefly to meet with studio execs and sign the play away to Hollywood. He returned to the circuit as the new Howard Kessler, raised above the fray he caused for himself, this time as a reinvented character for Hollywood to fawn over: Howard Kessler the Director. He would be directing himself in the film about his life.

Getting the Old Gang Back Together was to be the next smash hit and set Howie off on a long career of directorial successes.

He left Brooklyn behind as easily and as quickly as he had 50 years before. This time, though, with so much more at

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stake, the cost to his friends was much higher than it was when they were 18. He felt no regrets.