

Before we explain how it all happened, we'd like to take this opportunity, from the get-go, to apologize.

What do you mean "we"?

I thought we agreed that we would take responsibility for . . .

Whoa whoa whoa. I agree that YOU should take responsibility. No way in hell am I apologizing for something I didn't do. Because none of this, no, let me correct that, NONE of this, would ever have happened if you knew the goddam rules of the game of socc . . .

Okay, let's not get into that again . . .

I'll get into whatever I want to get into, you douchebag.

The point is, dear reader, that mistakes were made, and things got out of hand, and we, I should say *I'm*, very sorry for any mental anguish,

financial loss, destruction of property, or serious physical injury that may have been caused to anyone, including my loving wife and children, my friends, my community, innocent bystanders, the brave and dedicated men and women of the New York Police Department, the staff and patients of Lenox Hill Hospital, the fine officers, crew and passengers aboard the SS *Windsong*, the Port-au-Prince Duffel Bag Company, Charo, and the U.S. armed forces—in particular the Coast Guard. I also apologize to all three branches of the United States government, Arnie and Sue Kogen, and to both the General Assembly and Security Council of the United Nations for any role we may have played—and I assure you it was completely inadvertent—in exacerbating world tensions. And on a more personal note, let me say that, as a passionate lifelong lover and protector of animals, I deeply regret any of our actions that endangered any of the helpless, vulnerable creatures of the Central Park Zoo.

HELPLESS? Those things had teeth like fucking steak knives.

Finally, on the advice of legal counsel, I want to stress that nothing in the account that you are about to read is meant to suggest or imply that there is now, or has ever been, a connection between any international terrorist organization and the Chuck E. Cheese restaurant chain.

Chuck E. Cheese can bite me.



CHAPTER 1

Philip

What a wonderful day! One of those magical Sundays that punctuate the end of a great week with a huge exclamation point!

My name is Philip Horkman, and I own a pet shop called The Wine Shop—a modest store I opened fifteen years ago with money my in-laws, Lillian and Gerald Wine, loaned me on the condition that I name the place after them.

“But won’t that be confusing?” I asked at the time. “Customers will think I sell liquor.”

“Then sell liquor,” they said.

“But I want to sell pets.”

“Then borrow money from people named Pets.”

Hungry to strike out on my own and desperate for funds, I acceded and opened The Wine Shop in a mini-mall a stone’s throw from the George Washington Bridge. Things were slow at first. Painfully slow. But after months of bewildered looks and torrents of invective hurled from those seeking a merlot instead of an iguana, word slowly got out that we indeed sold animals. And the misnomer emblazoned on our sign eventually changed from being a source of scorn to a magnet

attracting pet lovers who applauded our originality and found our wit refreshing.

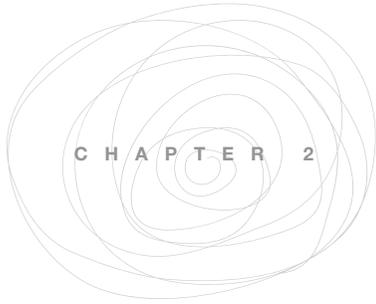
Seven days a week, I worked in that store, and it is no exaggeration when I say that I loved every minute of it. Not only because it was so darned rewarding to see the glee on the faces of children whose folks treated them to a dog, a cat, a bird or colorful fish—but it had also allowed me to provide my family with a comfortable home and middle-class lifestyle in suburban New Jersey. We had two cars. Went skiing every winter. The kids took dancing lessons. Life was good, with promises to get even better, because I'd spent that Saturday morning at the bank signing what seemed like a thousand pages of loan documents so The Wine Shop could expand to a second location the following spring.

The next day was Sunday and I did what I always did on Sundays. I refereed soccer games for our town's AYSO league. I'm sure a lot of folks found that odd, as both of our children were well into their teens and hadn't played in this league for some time. That said, after being cooped up in a store all week, I still enjoyed refereeing, as nothing helped me unwind better than to be outdoors breathing the crisp autumn air while running up and down a grass field. Plus, I found it invigorating to be amongst such spirited children whose enthusiasm was fanned by their parents and friends who came out to cheer their favorite ten-year-old players on.

But that Sunday's game was set on an even bigger stage, as the winners of the two divisional playoffs were playing each other for the league championship. It was a special day. The crowd was bigger, the local press and their papers' photographers were on hand, and the kids rose to the occasion, playing their hearts out in a 1–0 nail-biter. And with the exception of one overzealous father who shouted his displeasure when I ruled his daughter offside after she kicked what would have been the tying goal, a great time was had by all, and the rest of the parents thanked me afterward for a job well done.

That glory of that Sunday continued that evening when I took my family to our favorite restaurant to celebrate the new store, returned home, watched our favorite movie (*The Sound of Music*) in HD on the flat screen, went upstairs, and fell asleep spooning my wife, Daisy.

I'm not a religious man. Yet I've always considered myself blessed. And though life presents us with challenges that test our resolve along the way, it's a positive attitude that's granted me the strength to handle any situation adeptly, cope with it, and move forward. I've always been the kind of person who, when given the choice, chooses to err on the side of being grateful.



CHAPTER 2

Jeffrey

I'll be honest: I wanted to kill the asshole.

That was the first thing I said to my wife, Donna, after I temporarily stopped yelling at the asshole for calling offside on Taylor when there was NO WAY it was offside.

“I want to kill that asshole” were my exact words.

“Jeffrey,” she said, looking around at the other parents, who were making a point of not looking at me. “Language.”

“Right, sorry,” I said. “I want to kill that *fucking* asshole.” Now some of the parents were actively edging away from me. But I’m sorry. My daughter kicks the tying goal in the league championship, and this asshole calls offside? When it clearly was not? And I’m supposed to *not notice*?

It happens to be my job to notice things. It’s my *profession*. I’m a forensic plumber. And before you laugh, you might be interested to know that forensic plumbing is a growing, high-demand field, with its own national association, which I happen to be on the board of directors of. You might also be interested to know that a top forensic

plumber can command \$300 per hour plus expenses, and that the expert testimony of forensic plumbers has proven to be crucial in several high-profile court cases, including one in which a man was found guilty of murdering his wife by holding her facedown in their master-bedroom toilet. He claimed she committed suicide, but the forensic plumber, testifying for the prosecution, was able to show the jury, by means of a dramatic courtroom reenactment, that with that particular model commode there was no way the victim could have reached the flush lever and still got that level of facial suction.

I'm not saying I've been involved in anything that glamorous. I mostly handle insurance work. But I make a good living, and the reason is that I have a highly organized mind and an eye for detail, which is how I know there was no fucking way Taylor was offside.

After the game, I confronted the ref. Donna was tugging on my sleeve, telling me not to embarrass Taylor. Like THAT was the issue, embarrassing Taylor, when the issue was that this asshole is out there making a complete mockery of the girls ten-and-under league championship. Which is what I told him to his face, and you know what he said? He said—and this should give you an idea of the mindset I was dealing with—“I'm sorry you feel that way, but she definitely looked offside to me.”

Asshole.

So I told him that she probably looked offside to Ray Charles and Little Stevie Wonder, too, but anybody with working eyeballs could see she wasn't.

That was when Taylor started tugging on my other sleeve, saying, “Dad, forget about it.” This is something I need to work on with her. As a player, she has all the physical tools, but she doesn't have the fire, the *fight* you want to see. If she doesn't turn that around, she's going to get killed when she moves up to the twelve-and-under division. Those girls will rip your throat out.

So anyway, we left. The last thing I saw was the asshole ref talking to some parents, and they were smiling. Parents from *our side*, I'm talking about. *Smiling*.

You wonder what has happened to this nation.

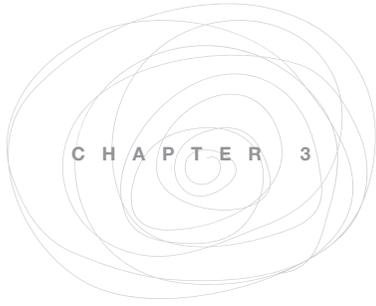
As you can imagine, I was in a pretty bad mood when we got home, so I ate some lasagna in the media room and watched *Silence of the Lambs*, and I felt a little better. I was still thinking about writing an email to the league, using my official stationery, Jeffrey A. Peckerman, C.F.P., so these people would know who they were dealing with. The only thing I was second-guessing myself about was that I mentioned both Ray Charles *and* Stevie Wonder. It wasn't racist. I was just going for blind guys, and in the heat of the moment no white blind guys came to mind. There don't seem to be that many famous ones. In a way, you could argue that what I said was actually kind of a tribute to African-Americans, but you just know the asshole ref would be the kind to twist things around. So I finally decided, reluctantly, that I wasn't going to pursue the matter any further.

And I probably wouldn't have, except for Oprah. She has this thing where she announces that everybody should read a certain book, and her zombie army of women followers go out and buy millions of copies of it. One of them is my wife, who belongs to a group of Oprah women who all buy the book and then meet in somebody's house to drink wine and discuss it, although mostly they drink wine because they haven't read the actual book.

So anyway, the next day I was driving home, coming from an inspection of an eighteen-unit apartment building whose landlord had hired me to find out which of his tenants was flushing metal balls down the toilet that were totally screwing up the plumbing. So far I had determined that the balls were from a game called *Pétanque*, which was invented by the French, so my next step in the investigation was to find out if any of the tenants were either French or known to exhibit French behavior such as scarves.

But the point is, I was driving home by an unusual route that took me near the George Washington Bridge, and Donna called my cell to tell me the Oprah zombie group was meeting at our house that night and could I stop and pick up some wine. I was just telling her that I was in an unfamiliar area and didn't know where a liquor store was, when I happened to glance to my right and see a strip mall with a sign listing the stores, including one called The Wine Shop.

So I put on my blinker and turned in.



CHAPTER 3

Philip

I heard him before I saw him.

It was the day after that game, and I was in the back room of The Wine Shop counting canaries. A shipment had just arrived, and it was important that there were exactly twenty-four of the little tweeters, because that's how many I was donating to the kids in the obesity clinic over at Children's Hospital. It was the annual drive, and local merchants were asked to contribute to the department of their choice. And since one of our children has a propensity for being overweight, I am particularly sensitive to the plight of those boys and girls in the midst of that heartbreaking battle. So I planned on sending them a check as well as those canaries to hopefully cheer them up.

Counting birds of any kind is a challenge, but canaries are more active and tend to flit about the crates they're shipped in more so than others. So it requires total focus as you transfer them into individual boxes, at the same time making sure that none of them have watery eyes, puffed bellies, or any other telltale signs of disease.

One bird concerned me. A multi-colored Spanish Timbrado that appeared to be too thin and nowhere as lively as the others. I picked

the little fellow up and held him to my ear. The Spanish Timbrado belongs to a species commonly referred to as “song canaries” for their unique chattering sounds and metallic tones. But when this bird opened his little mouth, I heard nothing—either because it was unable to sing or because his chirps were drowned out by the outburst coming from the front of the store.

“Are you fucking kidding me!”

I had left Hyo, a sixteen-year-old Korean American who worked for me after school and on weekends, to mind the register and assist customers. And while Hyo, who was saving up to buy a car when he got his driver’s license the following year, was an affable lad capable of handling even the most difficult pet buyers, what came next turned my head.

“Please don’t yell, sir. It scares the animals,” said Hyo.

“And I wouldn’t be yelling if these fucking animals weren’t here and you sold what your sign says you’re selling, or is ‘wine shop’ the way you say ‘pet shop’ in China or Japan or whatever rice-gobbling country you swam here from!”

While I couldn’t place it at first, that voice was familiar. I knew I’d heard it. Recently. And when I stepped into the doorway that separated the back room from the front of the store to see what the commotion was about, I recognized the belligerent customer as the belligerent parent who dressed me down the day before at the soccer field. Once again, his rage was palpable. Red face, heaving chest, eyes bulging like a sick Yorkshire Canary. So I opted to remain calm and try to defuse things without incident.

“There’s a liquor store about a mile from here. Would you like me to call to see if they’re still open?”

He turned in my direction and immediately remembered me.

“You? This is your place?”

“It is,” I nodded.

“Makes perfect sense.”

“What does?”

“That the same idiot who can’t see that a player is not offside also can’t see why this is a ridiculous store. You can’t see *anything*, can you?”

“I guess not,” I answered, shaking my head. “Pretty much like Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder.”

Hyo, who’d been silent up to this point, chose this moment to speak up.

“That’s a pretty racist remark,” he said, looking at me with a combination of surprise and disappointment.

“I know it is. I was just quoting what he said to me yesterday.”

“I knew you’d never say such a thing,” said Hyo, visibly relieved.

“It’s not racist, goddammit! I only mentioned them because there are no famous blind white people!” shouted you-know-who.

“Oh, really?” I countered. “How about Helen Keller? And Galileo? And Joseph Pulitzer who created the Pulitzer Prize? Or Brian McKeever, the Olympic cross-country skier? Or Louis Braille, the man who invented Braille? Would you like me to continue?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Your blind white people couldn’t shine my blind black people’s shoes. My God, look at the joy Ray Charles’s and Stevie Wonder’s music have brought to millions of people. These are great men who just so happened to be blind. Not like your guys who made a fucking business out of it. The only reason Braille invented Braille was so he could read because other people got tired of telling him what he was missing. And what the hell did Helen Keller do except *be* blind? And she’s on a stamp? Why would they put a person who couldn’t even find the post office on a stamp?”

“She was also deaf and mute,” I told him.

“Which means that even if she did find the post office, she couldn’t tell the clerk she wanted to buy her own stamps or hear how much they cost. What bullshit!”

I was going to respond. Was going to explain that overcoming her handicaps was a laudable achievement itself and an inspiration to so

many others similarly afflicted. But before I had a chance, the silence was broken by a faint chirp from the sickly Spanish Timbrado I'd been holding since I came in from the back room. So I looked down and started to gently stroke its head.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

"A canary," I answered.

"We're donating two dozen of them to Children's Hospital," Hyo added. "As incentives for the boys and girls in the obesity program."

"That's very nice," he said.

It caught me off guard. Those were the first humane words he'd uttered in the two days he'd been a new, unwanted entry into my life.

"That's very, very nice," he continued.

Perhaps this is the real person, I wondered. Maybe this is who the guy really is and the maniac I'd been dealing with was merely him acting out other frustrations in his life. Understandable. Repulsive, but understandable. I'm wired to instinctively give people the benefit of the doubt. To focus on their inherent good. My wife Daisy has always claimed that was what attracted her to me. My desire to stress the positive. So I decided that I'd focus on the man who stood before me now and start anew.

"Yes," I said, with a smile. "They'll get them as rewards for reaching certain goal weights."

"That's wonderful," he said, nodding. "But if they don't reach their goal weights, how much you want to bet that those fat turds eat those fucking canaries?"

As I reached for the broken pole from a birdcage stand I kept behind the counter to fend off dangerous intruders, flashes of my own child's weight struggle—the tears, the object of name-calling, and the Saturday nights spent in a bedroom, uninvited to parties—I prayed I'd get in one good swing before he was out the door.