

# HARD FEELINGS

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## ONE

Waiting to cross Fifth Avenue and Forty-eighth Street, I spotted Michael Rudnick, a guy who grew up across the street from me in Brooklyn. He was standing at the front of the crowd on the opposite corner in a black business suit and dark sunglasses, looking in my direction, but apparently not noticing me. He had changed so much since the last time I'd seen him—about twenty-two years ago, when I was twelve and he was seventeen—I guess it was incredible that I recognized him at all. He used to be overweight with horrible acne and frizzy brown hair. Now he was tall, tan, and muscular and his thick dark hair was slicked back with gel.

The don't walk sign changed to walk and the crowds from the two corners converged. When Michael and I were a few feet apart, I was still looking right at him, waiting to see if he would notice me. He was walking straight ahead, his eyes focused on something in the distance. Then, just as we were about to pass, my shoulder accidentally knocked against his and we stopped in the middle of the crowd. I saw my reflection in his sunglasses—two pale faces staring back at me. I was about to say hello when he grunted in an angry, annoyed way and continued across the street.

"Asshole," I muttered.

At the corner, I turned around to see if he was looking back, but he was gone. He must have already disappeared in the crowd heading toward the West Side.

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After I said hi to Raymond, the evening doorman, I retrieved my mail—all bills—and rode the elevator to the fifth floor. When I entered my apartment, Otis started to bark.

"Shut up!" I yelled, but the hyper cocker spaniel continued to yap away, clawing against my legs.

I took Otis for his usual walk along East Sixty-fourth Street, then I returned to the apartment, where I sat slumped on the couch in my underwear, staring at the TV, obsessing about my day at work.

This afternoon I'd had a meeting with Tom Carlson. Carlson was a CFO and decision maker for a hundred-user computer network at an insurance company in midtown. He was running an old-version Novell network and was looking to upgrade to Windows NT and purchase new PCs and servers. It was the third meeting I'd had with him and I should have left his office with nothing less than a signed contract, but when the moment came to close the sale I hesitated and the son of a bitch slipped through my fingers again. Now I would have to call him tomorrow—always a low-percentage way to close business—and try to get him to fax me a signed contract. Carlson was by far my best prospect and if he got away I had no idea what I'd do.

At around eight-thirty, I was still on the couch, ruminating in front of the TV, when Paula entered the apartment in pumps and one of her designer suits. She bent over the couch and kissed me hello, then asked how my day was. Before I could say "horrible," she said, "I have some great news—I'll tell you in a sec," and she went toward the bedroom with Otis trailing her, wagging his tail and barking.

I knew what the "great news" was. Paula's sister in San Francisco was due to give birth next week and she must have delivered early.

A few minutes later, Paula returned to the living room, wearing shorts and a long T-shirt. Like me, she had been neglecting the gym for the past few years. She used to be thin with toned muscles, but since she had stopped working out she had put on about thirty pounds. She was constantly talking about how she was fat and needed to lose weight, but I thought she looked better heavier—more feminine, anyway. Recently, she had cut her long, straight blond hair to a short bob. Whenever she asked, I told her that the cut flattered her face, making her cheekbones more prominent, but the truth was I missed her long hair.

"So," she said, "you want to hear my news?"

"Kathy had a boy."

"Guess again."

"A girl."

"She's not due for another week."

"I give up."

"Come on, Rich, this is important."

I shut off the TV with the remote.

"I got a promotion," she said, smiling.

"Really?"

"Isn't it unbelievable? I thought for sure Brian would get it—I mean the way Brian and Chris are so buddy-buddy. But Chris called me into his office this afternoon and gave me the great news—you're looking at the new VP of equity research."

"Wow," I said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

"I can't tell you what a relief this is," Paula said. "For the past few weeks, my job's been so crazy—I mean working on three reports at once and then having this promotion hanging over me. I just wanted it to be resolved one way or another, but to have it turn out this way is just incredible. You know this means I'll get a salary increase, too."

"Great."

"My base'll be seventy a year now."

Ten more than my base, I thought.

"That really is terrific news," I said.

"I think it'll really take some pressure off us now. Maybe we could put a little away in savings, pay off the credit cards..."

"We'll have to go out this weekend and celebrate."

"You want to go out to dinner right now? Come on, I'll change into some clothes—I could be ready in ten minutes."

"I really don't feel like it tonight."

"Come on, when was the last time we went out to dinner? Let's go to that new Vietnamese place on Third. It's beautiful out. We could sit at a table outside, order a bottle of wine—"

"I said I'm not in the mood."

I was looking away but I could sense Paula staring at me.

Finally, she said, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You don't seem very happy to see me tonight."

"I'm just tired."

"You don't seem very happy about my promotion, either."

"What?" I said, as if that were totally ridiculous. "What are you talking about? I'm thrilled you were promoted, but I don't feel like going out to dinner. Is there something wrong with that?"

I turned on the TV again and started flipping stations. Paula sat next to me on the couch, Indian-style, staring blankly at the screen. I could tell she was still angry at me, but I didn't feel like fighting anymore.

Finally, I said, "So how is Kathy, anyway?"

"We have to talk, Richard."

"Not now."

"You've been acting strange lately—the past few weeks anyway. You've been very distant, keeping everything to yourself. I think it's starting to affect the marriage."

I hated when Paula referred to us as "the marriage," and how she was always trying to analyze me. She had been seeing a shrink once a week for the past five years and she was always telling me that I wasn't expressing myself or that I was being "passive-aggressive" or "projecting" or "displacing my emotions" or whatever psychobabble she could come up with.

"I'm really not in the mood for this right now," I said on my way into the kitchen.

Following me she said, "See? This is exactly what I'm talking about."

I took a menu for Chinese food out from one of the counter drawers. Last year we'd had the kitchen redone—installing the snack bar, putting down new tile, refacing the cabinets. Home improvements and Paula's work wardrobe were the major reasons we had over twenty thousand dollars in credit-card debt.

"You can't just walk away," Paula said. "When something's bothering you you have to talk about it."

"How about shrimp with lobster sauce?"

"You're upset I got promoted," she said. "It threatens your male ego—makes the hunter feel like he's not providing."

"Stop trying to analyze me, all right?" I said. "I'm ordering. You want something or not?"

"Why don't you just admit that you resent my promotion?"

"I'm getting you moo shu chicken."

I ordered the food in the living room. Paula entered and stood facing me with her hands on her hips.

"Admit it," she said.

"Admit what?"

"That you want me to make less money than you."

"That's ridiculous," I said. "The more money you make the better. Make two hundred a year, make three hundred! The way things are going for me, we may need all the money we can get."

Otis started barking again. I yelled "Shut up!" then I sat down on the couch. Paula sat next to me, waited a few seconds, then said, "How did your big sales meeting go today?"

"How the hell do you think it went?"

She rested her hand on my lap.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Maybe you should think about quitting."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I was uncomfortable with her hand on me so I stood up. "You think I can just go in there tomorrow and quit? That'll look great on my résumé—seven months at the job without making a sale. That'll sound really great when I start interviewing."

"It's not your fault—"

"Then whose fault is it?"

"There're lots of explanations you can give," Paula said. "The company was restructuring, you had personal differences with your supervisors..."

"They can smell that bullshit a mile away."

"But you don't have to put all this pressure on yourself," Paula said, "that's only going to make things worse. Now that I've gotten my raise—"

"So you're getting, what, another fifteen K a year? After taxes, what's that, eight or nine grand? Whoop-de-fucking-doo. Have you seen our credit-card bills lately? Face it, we're living paycheck to fucking paycheck. What happens the next time we want to renovate? Or what about moving out of the city someday? Maybe you'd like to just sell this place, take the hundred-grand loss."

"Oh, stop with this bullshit," Paula said, standing up. "Just because you had a bad day doesn't mean you have to take it out on me. I got some great news today and you obviously don't give a shit."

Paula marched into the bedroom and slammed the door. Otis was barking again. I threw a couch cushion—it hit Otis's ass and ricocheted onto the floor. He barked once, defiantly, then scurried meekly into the kitchen.

I sat on the couch with my head in my hands until the Chinese food arrived. Then I knocked on the bedroom door and apologized for losing my temper. About a minute later, Paula joined me at the dining room table.

We ate, barely talking. She left over most of her dish and announced she had a headache.

"Maybe there's MSG in the food," I said. "I forgot to order it without."

"No, it's just my usual migraine. I have to go lie down."

Paula went back to the bedroom. I cleaned up from dinner then I took Otis for his walk, down the block and back. When I returned to the apartment Paula was asleep in bed.

"Sorry about before," I whispered, leaning over her.

"It's okay," she said, half-asleep.

"Feeling better?"

"Little bit," she said.

"I'm really sorry. I shouldn't've taken my work out on you. I'm very happy you got your promotion. I really think it's great news and I want to take you out tomorrow night to celebrate."

"Okay," she said.

"How's around seven?"

"That's fine."

"Goodnight, honey." I kissed her lips.

"Goodnight," she mumbled, turning onto her side.

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After I washed up I got into bed next to Paula and read a few chapters of *How to Be a Bulldog*, the latest book on sales strategy that I'd placed on my night table. Suddenly exhausted, I rested the book on my chest and closed my eyes. I remembered passing Michael Rudnick on Fifth Avenue earlier, then I saw myself as a ten- or eleven-year-old in front of my old house on Stratford Road in Brooklyn. I was alone, bouncing a basketball on the sidewalk, when a teenaged Michael Rudnick appeared. He was overweight, with his usual faceful of acne. He had very thick eyebrows that grew together above his nose and some older kids on the block had nicknamed him "The Caterpillar." Michael asked me if I wanted to play Ping-Pong with him in his basement. He was one of the "big kids" on my block, in high school, and whenever he invited me to play Ping-Pong it made me feel special. "Sure," I said excitedly. "Let's go!" Michael's parents weren't home, and his house was dark and empty. We went down to the cold, musty basement and I watched as Michael adjusted the net on the Ping-Pong table. Then he explained the rules of the game—if I won I'd get five dollars, if he won he'd get to give me a wedgie. I didn't really understand the trade-off, but I went along with it anyway. Of course, the odds were stacked in his favor because he was a much better Ping-Pong player than I was. He was destroying me—winning almost every point. He needed one point to win and when my shot missed the end of the table he put down his paddle and yelled, "You're gonna feel it!" Laughing hysterically, thinking it was part of the "game," I ran away until he caught me from behind and immediately reached around my waist and started yanking up the elastic band of my underwear. The wedgie was painful, but I was still laughing. I didn't like what he was doing to me, but I was afraid if I complained he'd stop inviting me to his basement to play Ping-Pong. He was much taller and stronger than me, and he was pulling so hard he was lifting me off the ground. "Stop, stop!" I yelled, but still laughing, still thinking we were playing a game. Then he moved me toward the sofa. I was still squirming, trying to get away, my face pressed against the sticky black vinyl. I didn't know why he was doing this—why he thought it was so much fun. I was facedown on the couch and he was on top of me, grunting and sweating.

I opened my eyes suddenly, my pulse throbbing as if I had just run a full sprint. Paula was fast asleep next to me, snoring softly. I got out of bed. Otis tried to follow me, but I closed the bedroom door ahead of him and went into the kitchen.

Standing in front of the open refrigerator, I gulped down orange juice straight from the container. I needed fresh air. I went through the living room, out to the terrace.

It was a warm, muggy night and there wasn't much air to breathe. As I leaned against the railing, looking down at the busy Third Avenue traffic, I heard Michael Rudnick's high-pitched voice shouting, "You're gonna feel it! You're gonna feel it!" as clearly as if he were on the terrace next to me. I could still feel the weight of his body on top of mine, feeling trapped and claustrophobic underneath him, and I remembered the nauseating smell of—probably his father's—cheap cologne.

I went back into the apartment and locked the terrace door. In the bathroom, I splashed my face with cold water. I remembered reading an article in the *Times* about how some people blocked out traumatic memories from their childhoods and then suddenly remembered them years later. But it was hard to believe that something like this might have happened to me.

When I lay down in bed, Paula stirred.

"Where were you?"

"The terrace."

"Why?"

"To get some fresh air."

"You okay, sweetie?"

"Yeah."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

"Sorry about before."

"Me, too."

But, the truth was, I'd forgotten what we had been fighting about.