

# **Smashed**

**A novel**

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# **Week One**

# MONDAY

## 1. UNIFORMED DRIVER

The meaty hands of my uniformed driver are sure on the wheel as he guides me through the outskirts of pricey New Jersey suburbs. I'm new around here, but a man can tell when he's southwest of East Orange. It's a sunny early spring morning and I sit back knowing I'll start my first day at my newest job on time and in appropriate style.

I've had other new jobs since 9/11, when the Twin Towers came down, taking with them most of my staff of 70 – and most people's respect for me. I was one of the few to make it out. Eventually I got another job as a bond broker – my specialty -- and stuck with the trappings of my high-roller Wall Street lifestyle. That meant retaining my longtime driver, Nardo, and his limo even while my business dried up and I became an employee, no longer a boss, earning fewer dollars.

Back in my glory days Nardo took me early each morning to my World Trade Center office. He'd respond to my spontaneous lunch junkets to busy Manhattan restaurants; client dinners in the meat-packing district; the Knicks at the Garden; the Mets at Shea; rock concerts; prize fights; whatever. Maybe a gentlemen's club when it got so late it seemed like a good idea.

Nardo's duties included the eventual ride back to my gracious colonial situated on four secluded acres, with Gunite pool and updated pool house, on Long Island's North Shore. It had a name. Not an address, a name.

Some late nights back then Nardo would idle in my circular driveway as I showered. I'd blast my favorite tunes – like Marshall Tucker -- in my considerably soundproofed shower. Then blast out the door in a fresh suit while my wife slept blissfully on. That's what you call a "round robin."

Or Nardo might make stops dropping off any of my late-night guests – a co-worker, maybe a shnocked client, maybe even an inebriated little cutie sleeping it off – at their various Long Island destinations. Then he'd circle back and get me in time for the pre-dawn ride back to the city and a new day's work. Not sure when Nardo himself slept.

My house was big because I was making the money and my future ex-wife and I thought we'd need the space. We entertained. And we started breeding. We produced a cute little boy. Very cute. Laird, my opponent, made it clear that she did practically all the reproductive work.

Today, to keep 10-year-old Stevie in my life, I've got my work cut out for me. But not just another job making money – I'm now a newly minted substance-abuse counselor at a high-end rehab center. My new work is about saving humanity, one addict at a time.

To be near Stevie I moved near Laird and her peculiar new husband. That meant commitment. And that meant New Jersey.

Pretty bold move for a man my age – just a few years over 40 – but I've got a reason: Laird took everything there was left to take in the divorce, and she's not getting sole custody of that boy. If she does succeed and gets Stevie full time...she'll finally have gotten me.

But I'm a good new-hire. I know a whole lot about substance abuse. Especially how to abuse it. Curing it, not so much. Hey, I'm new at this. Anyway, addiction counseling is a smart move right now. I'm near Stevie, and I'll have the perfect employer next time Laird drags me into family court where she has what's-his-face trying to adopt my son.

We're almost there. I feel a solid foot applied to the brakes. I lean forward as we slow down, the brakes complaining, then I swing from one overhead pole to the next, arriving at the doors just as they sigh open. I nod to the driver and hop out. He doesn't dress like Nardo. He wears the uniform of New Jersey Transit. As his bus pulls away behind me I resolve to learn his name. Since I have no car and no driver's license, I'll be relying on this man for the foreseeable future.

## 2. THIS KID

And now a walk down the “verdant lane,” as the brochure calls it, to The Harman Recovery Center, a high-priced drug-and-alcohol rehab. The leaves aren’t out on the trees yet. It’s April so one day feels like May and the next like, oh, February.

I’ve been here three times. Twice for interviews: one with Dr. Pauline Krauss, the headmistress, and one with her minion, my condescending supervisor Cameron. Pauline is interesting – an MD and former pills addict. Cameron is a problem. I can’t pin it on any one thing, so let’s just check “all of the above.” I get this feeling from him – besides that he doesn’t trust me or wish me well – that he has never been addicted to anything. Maybe like a pediatrician who has no children -- it’s okay, but you wonder. Also he’s beady-eyed. Like Dean Wormer but bald. But, as Laird used to say back when I was successful and we were speaking, “You’re not supposed to like your boss!”

Still, this could become a good job. I spent a decent day at Harman last week getting what Cameron calls “orientated.” He showed me around and kept asking me questions about my background and my counselor training. Sizing me up. I sized up his paunch.

I saw most of the facility excepting the Women’s Wing where my services are not required. I ate lunch in the cafeteria – during men’s lunchtime -- and had to sit there with Cameron and the chicken salad in front of me. Men walked by and stared at me. Some of them were staff, I think.

I also attended a Group Meeting conducted by Neal, a counselor. He was pretty cool. The patients – or “clients” – seem okay though the stuff some of them brought up seemed really personal and heavy. Later Neal, a big, gruff Afro-American, told me his Group actually held back while I was there. We’ll see what my own Group will be like soon enough.

I spent the weekend making my studio rental apartment into a home. There was not much to do. It came with some crappy furniture, like a seedy bed. I ordered a new mattress for it and after the delivery truck rolled away I realized it was too big. Whatever. Then I explored the mini-mall between the bus stop and my building: dime store; Chinese

take-out; Laundromat; liquor store; outdoor pay phones that seem to have bullet holes, and an ATM. Then my debit card pooped out.

Now, as I walk up the lane to Harman's entrance, this kid – my 10-year-old – keeps coming to mind as the one to blame for my move to New Jersey of all places. In a way he helped me choose my new career. As a substance-abuse counselor I can be viewed today as the polar opposite of what I was for decades: an abuser of alcohol and cocaine and other stuff -- and an enabler too. Back then it was often my creative use of such treats that made me a hit with certain clients who appreciated a night out and a little bad boy fun. And that helped me make lots of money.

My current dire straits have me in financial polar opposition too.

Now I need to show a family court judge that I gave up all that bad stuff for good. That I reinvented myself and am now a fit father – I even stopped cursing and swearing. Then Laird and her new husband, Doctor Ben, can stick it. Voila – I'll get my son on alternating weekends. Simple, huh?

Besides harping on my alcoholism and related issues, another tactic of Laird's lawyers – the flying monkeys – is claiming I never bothered to get to know my own son when I had the chance. Yeah, it's going to get ugly.

So, in quiet moments like this, I reflect. Stevie is kind of beautiful – in a kid way. On the occasions I've spent time with him during my 17 months of sobriety I still can't get over his face. Even though he has Laird's eyebrows.

Stevie is either monosyllabic or talks a blue streak. I don't see him enough to feel free to say "Wouldja shut up and eat your burger?" so I just listen and watch him when he gets cranked up on a topic – his new school; a TV show; a new toy he wants. He also talks about his kid friends back on Long Island and I've promised, once I get vehicular again, to drive him back to civilization to play with them.

I was drunk for most of Stevie's life. And hung over on the weekends and holidays when Stevie and I were both home. Laird, sensing this disconnect even before she schemed to replace me with a guy who spends his days poking tumors or whatever, actually scheduled formal play dates for me and my son. If I reneged, there'd be big trouble. If I brought Stevie along to a game or a friend's *man room* to watch football, big trouble. If Stevie brought a friend with us to the mall and I lost the friend, big trouble.

Then there was my Day of Infamy – unfortunate events a few years ago involving exotic dancers and Stevie that I refrain from discussing.

Sometimes Laird would arrange an audience for us with the King of Burgers in nearby Glen Cove – there were no stores in our own village. We’d follow that with a stop at the pet store for some replacement fish and a bubbling plastic deep-sea diver or skeleton in a treasure chest.

“Hey, that one’s cool!” I’d say.

“Dad, you bought me one last time!” Stevie would point out. “Remember?”

“Yeah, sure I do...it’s still cool, though.”

If I went and looked at his tank sometime I might remember.

But the corporate burger joint always went over well. Stevie loved the cuisine – he’d dunk his fries in a shake made of sweet white sludge. If Stevie wasn’t in a talkative mood, he’d tinker with whatever plastic wind-up toy they gave away that week commemorating some cartoon show. Or I’d try to assemble the thing while Stevie dunked his fries. One zany gadget had a windup wheel which, after a few revs, would skid away out of control. Stevie made it launch off our table, spin out across the floor and crash under a nearby table occupied by a non-English-speaking family.

Stevie enjoyed negotiating with me. As the parent responsible my choices were two: crawl under that table apologetically and retrieve the toy, or apply to store management for a replacement. This aspect of Stevie’s personality further proves that he shares some of Laird’s DNA.

What did I really want back then? Another beer.

What do I want now? Another chance. This past year I attended 350 hours of classes for CASAC certification by day – that’s credentialed alcohol and substance abuse counselor – and spent many nights alone with the New York Knicks. And I kept replaying things I needed do with this smart little boy before it’s too late. Before girls. Before he gets his driver’s license and access to the sports car with MD plates. Before Laird and her groom brainwash the little guy.

I imagined all sorts of corny activities – both doable and unrealistic: building a soap box race car and racing it; fishing in some stream; flying a kite on a beach; selling

lemonade from a roadside stand; sneaking him into a PG-13 movie – innocent for me, exotic and risky for Stevie.

One thing we do well together is toss the pigskin – Stevie has a natural spiral. Playing catch once last fall Stevie asked me a question.

“Dad, what does MD stand for on a license plate?” He chucks the football.

“MD?” I catch it. “Stands for ‘Mad Doctor.’”

“No, Dad! ...*Really?*”

I pass it back. “That way the police can spot them easier.”

My most unrealistic dream is us together on a kayak adventure. We actually did that once on a vacation that seems so long ago. I still have flashbacks to that sunny beach.

### 3. MEET THE BARNARDS

Harman’s driveway curves around to the main building’s front entrance, where I’m headed. It’s chilly but I’m walking off last night’s canned chili. Near the entrance you see their slogan – “Know Peace” – etched peacefully in a big stone slab.

There’s a limo parked by the door. The driver is standing beside it in his black suit, smoking. He keeps his cigarette out of my line of sight as I nod to him and Harman’s front doors swish open automatically for me.

Inside are the atrium and the well appointed lobby. Comfy chairs, leafy plants, soothing paintings and an architect’s rendering of an ambitious planned build-out -- The New Harman Center – on an easel. You’ll hear some sort of misty New Age Muzak. It will make you want to relax or take hostages, depending.

You’ll also find Libby in the lobby. I met Harman’s pert receptionist last week. She could be 20 years younger than me. Libby receives FedExes and admits new patients. From her big desk Libby also mans Harman’s communications nerve center. There’s a

clandestine alert system that lets staff know about a possible emergency situation while keeping visitors unaware. It's all very Cheney.

Libby is dealing with this well-to-do-looking family. They're bending over paperwork at the admitting desk adjoining hers.

She knows this is my first day. We don't say hello, but Libby's eyes meet mine. Wisps of blond hair dangle from her temples, framing her face. Receptionists unnerve me but I like Libby. She nods toward a corridor. Above the corridor's entry there's a small blinking amber light. I'm only familiar with the Men's Unit, where I will work, and Libby's gaze is toward the Women's Unit. What does she want from me?

I hesitate and look back at Libby and her customers. That's when I recognize Judge Barnard. The old boy's a well known Manhattan trial judge – you see sketches of him in the Post grumpily presiding over big show trials. Barnard mutters something testy to his wife.

“Oh come now, Mildred. Sign the damned thing! Please!”

Mrs. B, looking prim and pudgy in her gray suit, is having difficulty with the pen.

I flash on one of Judge Barnard's big trials -- rich heirs quietly bilking their demented mother out of zillions -- and how courtroom artists drew him like he is now: scowling down at the accused.

Their grown-up daughter is by Mother's side and she's irritated at Father.

“Dad! ...Mother, Mother, can I help you? Are you all right?”

That's when Mrs. B slumps forward and barfs.

Right on the admittance papers she's supposed to sign.

“Mildred! For God's sake!” hisses the judge helpfully.

“Dad! She's a sick woman! Isn't it obvious??”

“Susan,” he rumbles, “you *watch* yourself.”

Libby tries to minimize the mess as I stride over to help.

Mrs. B starts to collapse, slowly, and I'm there to ease her to the carpeted floor. Susan and I kneel beside the patient. She cradles Mrs. B's head in her lap and I try to make her comfortable. Her head then swivels toward me and unleashes a follow-up burst of vomit. Some of it, bitter smelling and warm, sinks into my Dockers. The effort pops her pearl choker. The pearls are real and they hit the floor running in various directions.

“Oh, Mom!” sobs Susan.

“Can’t you DO anything for her??” Barnard blurts at Libby.

“The head nurse is on the way!” says Libby.

Making Mrs. B comfortable is not a two-man job. I start crawling around gathering her scattered pearls. I note they are gem-grade South Sea cultured black pearls. Some have vomit on them.

From my knees I see a door burst open. A wheelchair, propelled by Harman’s Head Nurse, Megg Rodriguez, rolls to us. Megg looks very capable. Focused. On it.

Megg Rodriguez also looks a lot like a young Sophia Loren or maybe Raquel Welch in a nurse’s uniform. Maybe more like Loren. Not bad.

She wheels up next to Mrs. B, kneels beside her, and checks her air passage for obstructions. I figure I should approach the Judge with the brackish pearls and offer them to him. But he turns away to get a better look at his wife.

Megg says to me, “Help me get her up into the chair!”

I instinctively shove the pearls into my cotton-blend institutional jacket pocket and stoop to help lift. Susan, still crying, moves out of the way.

“One, two, three... up!” says Megg. “That’s it!”

This passed-out lady is quite a load but together we get her up into the wheelchair. I see Megg has the chair’s brakes on. The Judge peers down intently at Mrs. B, checking for signs of life.

“You’re going to be okay, Mrs. Barnard,” Megg says. “Can you hear me?”

Megg looks at my badge, then at me.

“Butcher...what are you doing here?” she whispers.

“Helping?”

Megg nods toward the corridor with the blinking amber light. She speaks quietly but firmly.

“That light means you are needed... down there. Stat. I’ve got this.”

Stat. Okay. I head for that door.

As it swings open for me, I glance back for a second and see Dr. Pauline Krauss bustle into the reception area. She’s all professional concern in her tailored pinstripes.

She's got pearls, too. Haven't spoken to her since my last interview. Her henchman, Cameron, called me to say I got the job.

Here goes.

#### 4. WOMEN'S DETOX

I've never been in Harman's or anyone's Women's Detox wing. But something's definitely up – a disturbance that Harman administration does not wish to call attention to. They obviously need manly bulk to deal with it, so now I'm heading down this white hall double time.

The thought of Women's Detox reminds me of my mother watching "The Snake Pit" on TV when I was a kid -- a black-and-white movie with haggard women in smocks, writhing. Movies my parents watched on TV are often more memorable to me than the ones I saw later – drunk – with my friends.

There's a locked door. I swipe my new card key through its slot but it flashes red. Shit. I was anxious I wouldn't know what to do but now I can't even get there. And what sort of emergency can a woman get into in detox? Suicide attempt? Hostage situation? Clogged toilet?

Neal suddenly lurches into view on the other side of the door and stiff-arms it open. I whip my head back so the door doesn't crack me in the nose.

"Where the hell you been, Butcher?" Neal inquires.

He turns and heads down the hall toward the trouble. Neal is very big. I scurry behind him.

We turn into a corridor of private rooms. Squatting at one door is Mr. Buffolino, Harman's janitorial specialist. Mr. Buffolino has a gadget in his hands and his tool bag by his feet. He pops out the doorknob. Strange, tormented squeals come through the

doorknob hole. Mr. Buffolino peers into the hole. Further down the hall there's a gurney waiting. With straps. Neither man speaks to me but the job at hand is obvious: get this door open. Neal gives off a sense of urgency as he mutters something to Mr. Buffolino.

Neal must be a good man, I figure, when he's not irritated. I noticed during his Group Meeting last week that, though some patients look like trouble, they mostly seem in awe of him. Neal's neck is as thick as my thigh and his thighs are like... well, I don't talk about a man's thighs, but he's wearing tight fitness shorts for some reason. Cameron told me Neal was a second-string linebacker on a couple of NFL teams for a few seasons. I don't remember him but he got injured, then disappeared from pro football.

Neal and Mr. Buffolino start heaving their combined bulk against the door. Mr. Buffolino is a short, unkempt man. His hair looks like Einstein's; he sports a Mario Bros. moustache; and you could light a match on his stubbly chin. His name is embroidered over his pocket: *Mr. Buffolino*. Unlike Neal, Mr. Buffolino seems almost entertained by this disturbance; like it's a break from his normal duties. Harman has six detox rooms, three each for men and women. The men's are pretty nice – private bath, bed with pleasant bedspread, lamps, desk, a dresser, TV, couple of chairs. Wet bar. So the women's must be nice too.

We hear a muffled explosion inside. Tinkling glass. It must be the TV blowing up after a violent strike. But what with?

"Butcher!" Neal says. His voice is really deep. "Get in here and help." I join in trying to push the door open and now we look like GIs raising the flag at Iwo Jima.

"Butcher," Neal says.

"Yes, I'm here." In fact, my head is directly under his pungent armpit.

"You're gonna slip inside when we push the door open! Get in there and move whatever furniture she's got blocking the door! It must be the bed."

We hear an ungodly shriek from inside the room, followed by some very swift talking and cursing. Almost like a conversation.

"Who's the patient?" I ask.

"Celia Franck," Neal grunts.

"Is she alone?"

It sounds like she's having an argument with the Devil.

Neal doesn't answer me. He tries to get better footing on the squeaky linoleum floor to prepare for the big push. Shrieks are not what Harman is about and they could disturb the patients. They could also disturb Judge Barnard and that's surely not what Dr. Pauline Krauss is about.

Anybody would know about patient Celia Franck, a one-time model who lived a bad-girl tabloid existence years ago. Was it 15 years? Longer. She was big back when I was a bachelor. Celia's cosmetic work – lips, eyes, breasts, chin, cheekbones -- was well documented in the check-out-line rags and for a time she was the butt of jokes on late-night TV. Apparently she had that enhanced too. Celia married the much older stinking-rich record executive Ronald Franck back in the early 90s.

I remember one crack, told back then by Relihan, the bartender at the Sky Dive, this bar we liked up in the North Tower: *Celia's planning to smother the old boy in his sleep one night with her implants! No fingerprints!*

Ha.

Anyway, these days the two are miserable; or divorced. Ronald has yet to give up the ghost. Celia, about 40, spends much of her time visiting the finest rehabs.

Right now, each time we push her door ajar a little, there's an inhuman screech from within just as some heavy furniture slams up against her side of the door, pushing it back closed. Celia has the strength of a woman pissed.

There's another oddity about Celia Franck's disturbance. "Hey, didn't she already detox?" I venture, letting them hear the physical strain in my voice.

"Yeah, well she must have re-toxed. We had to throw her back in here last night!" Neal says. "Listen, when I count to three, we're going to push hard together and, Butcher, you're going to slip inside, move the furniture away from the door, and let us in. Ready?"

I don't claim to be ready but Neal commences his count. On "three!" we push hard. The door opens a good 18 inches for one second and I clamber into the gap.

Big mistake.

The door slams back shut. On my groin. There's a slash of searing pain.

"Shit!" I'm trapped in the doorway, one leg and one arm in Celia's room.

You've heard of groin injuries in sports. Well this was a door slammed in anger. Really hard. Since I was stepping up onto the bed behind the door, my groin was fully

exposed to Celia Franck's rage. The muscles in the groin allow you to move your leg. A severe groin injury can turn the entire inner thigh a shocking purple-blue that would make guys in a locker room look away. Girls too.

The men quickly work the door back open a little. I gain some wiggle room and begin to extract my precious leg before Celia can set it on fire or chew it off. Just lifting the half-dead thing out through the doorway sends excruciating waves of muscle pain out through my throat. In an instant, Celia, scheming mad, slams her bed and the door into my poor groin again.

Next thing I know, the men push back gustily, open the door a good way, and Neal topples me headfirst into Celia's room and onto her bed. I'm unable to take any action before Celia shoves the bed and door back closed with maniacal strength.

For one surreal second I look up and see her T-shirt-restrained augmentations hanging over me.