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Turning

a novel

WAYNE FEINSTEIN

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First Edition

For Leslee, my loving wife and respected critic,
whose support of my desire to write is deeply appreciated.

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Part I



A RECKONING

ONE

I was striding down Madison toward my office when my phone rang. Surprised to see that it was my ex-wife, Molly—we hadn't spoken in three years—I answered.

"Well, this is unexpected," I ventured. "How are you?"

"Steven came home from Harvard with fourth-stage stomach cancer," she said without preamble.

"What?" I was stunned.

"He's seeing the best oncologist at Sloan Kettering, but his doctor says he has only days to live."

"I don't understand," I sputtered. "How—"

"He's dying, Joe," she said. I felt the blood drain from my face as the news sunk in. Stopping short, pedestrians bumped into me in their rush to get by.

Like a turtle pulling its head into its shell, I stood silently on the sidewalk, not quite present, my head suddenly in a fog. Molly's words sounded distant. She stopped talking, and I could feel her waiting on the other end of the line. My gut churned, and I started perspiring.

I turned into a doorway of a store that wasn't open yet, my ears buzzing like a swarm of bees. My fingers felt numb and cold, and my mouth was as dry as desert sand. I was six feet tall, and trim and strong, but suddenly feeling three feet tall and weak as a kitten.

Steven, one of our twins, had always been a solid student and an athlete. He'd been admitted to Harvard and recruited for the varsity rugby team as a freshman. Handsome, three inches taller than me, athletically built and charming, he had a wonderful sense of humor. His twin sister, Laura, was also tall, with long chestnut hair and warm brown eyes—she was a good athlete as well, and a terrific volleyball player at Harvard. These were two young people who I had never doubted would go far in life.

And as a father, I had failed them both.

Sure, I'd provided financial support and gifts—but from the time they were preteens that had been mainly it, and I'd trusted their upbringing to Molly, who was unfailingly competent. It had been she who was always the active parent, a deeply committed mother even as she was building her career as a corporate lawyer and business adviser to so many movers and shakers. I was always absent and self-absorbed, focused on building my career and wealth—believing an extravagant present could assuage any bad will I'd created over the years with my ex and children.

I had wanted to try to make up for years of absence and neglect with my children. And now, with Steven near death, it was apparently too late.

I took a few deep breaths, trying to bring myself back into the moment, realizing that Molly was still talking. Gruffly she asked, "You still there? I should have realized you'd be headed to the office, but—"

"I'm here," I said flatly. "It's a huge shock to absorb. Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

Bitterly, Molly growled out, "I don't owe you anything. You're lucky I'm telling you now. Steven wanted you to find out when reading his obituary. I'm betraying him out of compassion."

I knew why she said it, but I still hoped that maybe it wasn't too late to fix that. Maybe there was some way I could reconnect, show

Steven I still cared. “You said he’s at Sloan,” I said. “Where is his suite? Which building?”

“Please don’t make me sorry I called you,” Molly pleaded. “Steven begged me not to tell you. I don’t want that to be his last memory of his one constant parent.”

I swallowed and said, “Molly, please tell me where he is.”

“You haven’t been in Steven’s life for years,” she replied. “He genuinely hates you for that and was emphatic. He wants nothing to do with you before he dies.”

Letting out a groan, I started begging. “Look, you’ve now delivered this news, and I appreciate that. How can you not tell me where to find him?”

There was a long pause. Then she quietly said, “He’s in the Center for Cancer Care on Seventy-Fourth at the East River. Joe—my final plea. Don’t try to see him.”

“Molly, I’m sorry, I—”

“Goodbye,” she said curtly, ending the call.

I tried to compose myself, thinking about what I should do. Resolved, I turned back uptown toward Seventy-Fourth Street. Walking very slowly, I decided to take a break at Seventy-Second and Third. I sat on a public bench near the bus stop and spent a few minutes trying to steady my breathing.

Why had I stopped seeing my children? I’d sent cards and checks, never missing a birthday or Hanukah, but of course a father’s love could never be adequately expressed by a mere greeting card. I’d never once taken them on vacation or invited them to stay over. I realized I couldn’t be surprised by Steven’s anger.

I continued my walk to Seventy-Fourth, turning east to the river and slowly coming to the corner across from the Cancer Center. I stared at the building for a moment and proceeded across the street to the building and the reception desk.

A friendly woman at reception greeted me, and I asked for Steven Fredericks's room, handing her my license to verify my identity. She looked closely at her screen, and with a sad look on her face, she said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Fredericks. Steven Fredericks requested a no-visitors order for his room. You're not on his list, sir. I'm very sorry to deny your visit, but we strictly follow our patient's wishes. I'm afraid I cannot admit you."

Barely suppressing my exasperation and turning beet red, I stammered out, "I'd like to see your manager, please." A woman standing just next to the receptionist nodded and picked up her phone. "Joe Fredericks," she said, and I heard the voice on the other end say, "I'll be right down."

The woman extended her hand. "I'm Dorothy Salazar, the reception manager. Please follow me to the conference room—one of our executives will join us in a minute."

Not knowing what else to do, I followed her. Moments later, a well-dressed man in his thirties joined us in the small room. "Victor Cohen, Mr. Fredericks," he said by way of greeting. His mouth turned down, and his eyes bored into mine. "It's a pleasure to meet you, though I'm truly sorry for the reason. I know you've recently given Sloan Kettering a ten-million-dollar donation, and we are all grateful for your generosity, but I do hope you can understand that when it comes to patient care, we must follow the patient's wishes, no matter who is asking."

I listened as calmly as possible, feeling my face redden. "Mr. Cohen, Steven's mother just told me he has days to live. I must see him."

He and Dorothy Salazar looked at each other nervously, and he said, sympathetically, "Yes, I do understand that, Mr. Fredericks. But Steven is twenty-one, and under New York state's patient protection laws and federal HIPAA laws, we just can't ignore your son's instructions. I am truly sorry, but this is not negotiable."

My chest constricted, but at that point, I knew I needed to restrain myself from raising my voice. “Look, I didn’t come to kill the messenger. I understand the law and your policies. I’m just disappointed there’s no way to accommodate a major benefactor. Thank you for your time.” Smiling wanly, while inside my guts were roiling, I left the conference room without shaking either hand and quickly went out the door of the cancer center.

Holding my arms out in front of me, I leaned into the building. My head sagged into my shoulders as I started quietly weeping. How could I have been so obtuse, so neglectful that my dying son hated me until the end? “I deserve this,” I muttered, trying to regain my composure.

Steven, if you could only read my thoughts . . . I do love you. I understand your anger and deserve it. I hope you can die with some peace.

I couldn’t catch my breath as I started crying again.

A nurse was standing nearby, probably on a break. She came over and asked, “Sir, are you okay? Is there anything or anyone I can get for you? Can I help you?”

I stood back up, taking the tissue she offered. I wiped my face and blew my nose, then offered her a weak smile. “Thank you. You’re very kind. No, I’m okay—I’ve just had some very bad news, but I’ll be alright. Thanks again.” I shuddered and began to walk west toward Madison Avenue.

Still moving slowly, but feeling more composed, I called my assistant to tell her I’d be working from home today. She thanked me for letting her know and hung up. How had this all happened? It had been less than an hour since Molly called with the news.

Back at my apartment, I put on some Miles Davis, hoping it would soothe me. I sat in the conversation pit in my great room in an overstuffed leather chair, face in my hands. How could I have ignored the impact leaving the family would have on our children? I was a selfish, shitty father. I had this coming to me. Steven was right to have cut me off.

Drained, I finally lay down for a nap and slept until half past five. Startling awake, disoriented—how had I slept all day?—I made some scrambled eggs, poured myself a scotch, and logged in to catch up on the day's business. By ten o'clock, I was tired again, so I got into bed and stared into space, just listening to music. My last waking thought was, *Sow the wind, reap the whirlwind. All my fault.*

Every day, I'd been waking in the fog of the same nightmare: in a lake of quicksand, I would try to stay calm and not move in order to keep my head above the muck, all the while aware of something buried deep, rising upward from the depths, finding cracks and fissures to escape. The following morning was no different.

Lying in bed, all I could think about—in an endless loop—was how, despite being at the peak of success and wealthier than I'd ever thought possible, I'd gotten to this point in my life.

Howard, I thought. Maybe he could help.

I called my old friend instead of texting him, and he answered immediately. "It's early," he said. "Are you okay?"

"Actually, buddy, no, I'm not. Too much to go into on the phone. Are you by any chance able to meet me for dinner?"

"Sure. Where and when?"

"Let's say six at my place, and I'll order in. I don't want to be in public tonight. Don't mean to be cryptic, but you'll understand when we talk later."

There was a slight pause, and then Howard replied, "Okay. See you tonight."

Howard and I became close friends almost immediately upon meeting at college, and he was always a truly wise and thoughtful friend, and especially through some rough moments. I felt better just knowing I'd see him this evening and would be able to talk honestly with him.

TWO

When Howard arrived that night, I embraced him as if he brought the warmth of a fireplace. We hugged for a moment, and then I motioned him over to the conversation pit.

“Pour you a drink?”

“Thanks. A scotch?”

I busied myself at the bar for a minute, pouring a special-reserve Glenfiddich aged more than thirty years. I put Howard’s drink on the end table next to his chair and sat down across from him. “*L’chaim*,” we toasted. Howard wasn’t tall but he was built like an ox, always athletic and always exercising. When we were younger, his hair had been dark and fell below his shoulders, but while his eyes remained dark, he’d been bald as a cue ball for decades now.

After a few seconds, he said, “What’s going on?”

I fidgeted, unable to get comfortable. Then I scrunched up my face and took a deep breath. “It’s a lot to drop on you or anyone at one time, but I can’t think of a graceful way of telling you.”

“Okay,” Howard said. “This is sounding serious.”

“Steven is dying,” I began.

“Joe, no. I’m so sorry. What’s happening?”

I explained everything that had happened yesterday, including my embarrassing behavior at the hospital. “Molly reminded me that I’d

been as cold-blooded as a rattlesnake since the divorce and that all I've ever done for the kids was write checks. Apparently, Steven has been angry ever since I left home, and he's staying angry—even now."

Howard winced and squirmed in his chair. "I'm so sorry. I know you'd been mulling over how to reestablish a relationship with Steven and Laura. This news must really hurt."

"I know I haven't won any awards for parenting, but I thought I had time to reconcile. Now Steven will die without my ever having a moment to tell him I love him, that I'm sorry for what I did when he was a child, and to ask forgiveness and an opportunity to make up for those lost years. He hates me, Howard. He just hates me. I get it. But the misery I feel right now . . ." I stopped talking, stumbling over my words. Then I took another deep breath.

Howard gave me a pained look and shook his head. "I'm not sure what to say. I'm so sorry to hear this, and so sorry for you. Did you do anything else after going to the hospital? Or talk to Molly again?"

I shook my head. "When I got home, I ended up crawling into bed at ten a.m. and slept all day. I feel drained and exhausted."

"I get it, Joe," said Howard. "What a shock that must have been. Of course you slept all day."

"And today, I just went through the motions while I spent the day thinking of what a callous sod I'd been all these years." I turned my head away, feeling shame, and sucking down air.

Howard looked at me closely, his expression neutral. "Truth?" he finally said, gently. "You have always been somewhat oblivious to others' feelings."

"Yeah, I know that. I was a horrible father. And as important as Molly was to me, aside from fulfilling my financial responsibilities, I cut her and the kids totally out of my life, as though they were obstacles to run away from."

“Well, you’ve always been like a shark relentlessly racing through the water to your goals, and nothing, not even family, got in your way.”

I nodded my agreement, blew out the air I was holding in, and stood to get the bottle of scotch to refill our glasses. “You know how I’ve told you that, for months, I’ve been increasingly unhappy with where I am in life? And I had that same nightmare again last night.”

“Yeah, you’ve shared that quicksand image. I get it.”

“Whatever it is, it needs to come out, and I need to deal with it.”

Just then the door phone rang. The restaurant delivery had arrived. “I hope it’s okay,” I said to Howard. “I ordered lamb chops and Greek salad from Mykonos.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I put the food out on the kitchen table. “Want a decent red with this?” I asked, out of habit.

“No thanks,” Howard said, looking amused. “I’ll stay with scotch.”

I told Howard, “I feel—broken . . . heartsick that I won’t ever have the chance to make amends with Steven. Where did I go wrong? What can I do to change?” I completely lost it and sobbed uncontrollably for a few minutes, putting my hands on the table and my head into my hands as I cried.

Howard rose and rushed to hug me by my shoulders as I cried out my feelings of helplessness.

Minutes passed before I was able to sit up again, still shuddering. I took more deep breaths to try to calm myself while Howard continued to rub my shoulders.

“I just don’t know what to do. What should I do? Help me.” I was pleading with Howard. I needed my friend to help put me back together.

Finally, Howard said, “Have you thought about taking some time off? For starters, anyway.”

“What?” I asked. “Now? I don’t know what—”

“You know it’s not the first time I’ve suggested this,” Howard went on. “Paul and Pat run the business like clockwork. You can trust them. Get away from the city for a while.”

“I’m not sure what that will accomplish,” I said, knowing I sounded irritated.

“If there’s ever a time for reflection, this is it.” He looked at me, nodding his head resolutely, his eyes locked onto mine.

Howard and I stared at each other. I shook my head. “I don’t see how I can do this now.”

“Look, I’ll be blunt,” Howard said. “I know you want to reconnect with Laura, but that’s not going to be easy, and you’re going to need to show her that you’ve thought this through and are making a sincere effort. And I haven’t seen you do any reflection, not since college—not even when you decided to divorce Molly. I’ve told you before, you’ve been like a shark moving forward, all action. What about trying to write a bit? Get a journal, get some thoughts down.”

“We’re bidding on this huge city project. I have to be here for this. This isn’t the time to take a holiday of sorrow and pain. How would that work for me?”

Howard persisted. “I think it would be good for you. You’ll find some clues. And yeah, it might be painful. I’ll bet that’s what your recurrent dream is telling you. There are things you regret, people you hurt, and you’re being called to confront this and change your life.”

By then, I realized I was agreeing, silently nodding my head. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe that would help,” I said. “I need to think about my life in an organized way. You’ve always had wise suggestions. You’re right.”

Howard smiled and said, “I think you’re finally thinking with that good brain, Joe.”

“Thanks, buddy,” I said. I meant it with all my heart. For the first time that evening, I smiled warmly. “But I can’t go immediately. There’s the funeral, for one thing.”

“I’ll be there with you,” Howard said, and I looked at him gratefully.

“I’ll take time off as soon as we complete the bidding process on this redevelopment project,” I went on. “I’ll need to be here until we win, and I can sign the papers. Paul can take it from there.”

“How long will that take? Of course you don’t need to leave immediately. But if you do so afterward, it might make you feel a bit—I don’t know, lighter? Just commit to the process. Start getting some stuff down on paper. Think it out.”

I sat upright in my chair. “Yes, you’re right. I don’t want to overstate it, but I do feel a bit better. And what you’re suggesting feels like the right path. You’re the best, Howard.”

By then the chops had cooled to room temperature, but Howard only said, in response to my apologies, “Don’t be silly. Greek lamb is delicious whatever the temperature.” We refilled our drinks, put the chops and salad on plates, and tucked in to dinner.

I asked about Howard’s plans to marry Trish. “Well, I’m trying!”

We both laughed; Howard and Trish had been living together for years.

Howard asked about my rekindled relationship with Margo.

I told him that as she climbed to the CEO role at Brickson, she just felt a need to concentrate completely on her job. We’d even gotten to the point that we rarely talked on the phone.

“Well, that is a huge job she has.”

“So true, but in the last month or so, I think we were both really missing the intimacy we’d shared for so many years, and we decided we needed the other more actively in our lives. I’m not sure yet where this will go, but near-term, it feels great to be back.”

“I’m very happy to hear that,” Howard said. “You two are so good together—and *for* each other. But say, what’s new with the Midtown West project?” As an equity owner of Fredericks, that success had long made Howard wealthy.

I brought Howard up to date and told him that our plans had once more received the highest number of points. “The city will hold public hearings. But the staff and friends on the council think that will be perfunctory and that we’ll get the formal approval in a couple weeks.”

Howard nodded. For a few minutes, I felt better than I’d felt in days.

After I rinsed the dishes and silver and had put everything away in the kitchen, I poured us each one last drink. “To a dear—and vital—friendship. Thank you for being here for me. Truly.”

Howard grinned, clicked glasses, and said, “I’m glad you called me.” Then we hugged once more, and I showed Howard to the elevator for his trip home.