

*"Jack Wakes Up rocks!
It's a fast, smooth ride
on a highway not
found on any map."*

—MICHAEL CONNELLY

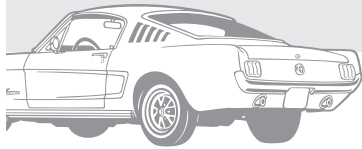
JACK WAKES UP

SETH HARWOOD

a novel

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THREE RIVERS PRESS
NEW YORK

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1



Jack Palms walks into a diner just south of Japantown, the one where he's supposed to meet Ralph. As he passes the Wait to Be Seated sign, he wonders if these things didn't come standard issue with *Please* at the start not too long ago, back when the world was more friendly and kind.

But Jack knows what Ralph and the rest of the people who come to a place like this would tell him: Fuck that.

The diner's built out of an old cable car, with a lunch counter along one side and booths on the other. Ralph sits alone at the last table, eating, hunched over his plate, long brown hair hanging curly around his face, his blue-and-white Hawaiian shirt clashing with the ugly checked wallpaper. He hasn't gotten any younger or prettier over the years: His pockmarked cheeks move like a rabbit's, his eyebrows form a thick mustache over his eyes. He wears wide sunglasses, the kind blind people wear, pushed up onto the top of his head.

Ralph smiles when he sees Jack. "Jacky boy," he says, showing Jack the other side of his booth with a big hand, not getting up. "You look good. Like you added a little weight." He winks. "In a good way."



“Thanks.” Jack pats his rib cage. He calculates it’s been three years since he last saw Ralph. Three years and then the phone call this morning, asking Jack to come in on a deal.

“You see that game against the Mets?” Ralph starts, saying no one should be allowed to pitch around Bonds, the steroids home-run machine, that the Giants lost because the Mets did just that. Ralph shakes his head. “I guarantee you: They pitch to Bonds, he puts that shit in the Bay.”

“Just coffee,” Jack tells the waitress, who’s come out from behind the counter. She stops with the brown-rimmed pot tilted over the table. When Jack says, “Decaf,” it’s clear she’s not happy about having to go back for the other pot.

“And toast,” Ralph adds. “He’ll have a wheat toast, darling.” The waitress, pushing forty and only a few years from when the days on her feet and gravity will own her, smiles and tips her head. “Thank you.” He winks. When she’s gone: “You got to have toast or something. So they know we’re not camping.” He tilts his head, forking more waffle into his mouth.

“Just don’t eat it.” He shrugs. “I’m buying.”

“Right,” Jack says. Next to Ralph’s untouched water, two butts half fill his ashtray: one coming in and one with his coffee, waiting for Jack and his food, Jack guesses. He’s a quarter into his waffle and has a side of eggs and bacon that he hasn’t touched. Ralph did a good job syrugging the waffle: buttered it first, went liberal, and stayed away from the fruit flavors—no blueberry or apple bullshit.

“Listen, Jack.” Ralph barely looks up, cuts the next quarter waffle into strips. “I’m real sorry about how that shit went down with Victoria. How you handling yourself?” He looks up, pauses from eating.

Jack runs his finger over the rim of his coffee mug. “Getting by, Ralph. Thanks for your concern.”

“Because I feel for you about Victoria telling people you hit



her.” He shakes his head. “That wasn’t good.” He looks at Jack, like he’s trying to get it all figured out right then and there. “You didn’t, right?”

“No, Ralph.”

“And that wasn’t cool that they pulled the money for your sequel, dumped the project.” He forks a big piece of waffle into his mouth. “I’m sorry about that too.”

“So what’s the basics here, Ralph? The big picture?”

Ralph nods. “It’s a buy,” he says, mouth full, using his fork to point. “Easy and simple: a buy and a sell. One big trade, no small shit or breaking up of product. We each stand to make a couple thou for a few days’ work.”

“You said on the phone we’d be set for good.”

Ralph shrugs. “Shit, Jack. I needed to get you down here to hear this, right?”

Jack looks around the diner, thinks about how it’d feel to just get up and walk out. But then he considers the two thousand reasons to stay and the guy from the bank calling this morning about his missed mortgage payments.

“Keep talking.”

A sip of coffee and Ralph cuts off some eggs with his fork and adds them to what he’s already chewing. “You want this bacon?” he asks. “I’m trying to watch my cholesterol.”

The waitress comes back with the decaf pot and fills Jack’s cup until he stops her about an inch from the top. He’s glad Ralph doesn’t ask about the decaf, doesn’t want to explain that he had his coffee at home and knows a second cup will leave him too jittery to deal with Ralph’s shit. She drops off a small plate of dry wheat bread, lightly toasted, at the top of Jack’s placemat. Little pats of butter line the side of the plate, the kind you have to peel the paper off of. Ralph drops two bacon strips on top of the bread. “Make yourself a sandwich,” he says.



Jack adds a sugar to his coffee and stirs it with one of the diner's dirty spoons, adding a half-and-half. "So what's the who? The when?"

Ralph goes on eating. "The when is still up in the air, but I say it happens within the week. Thursday or Friday. The who you don't need now. I'd tell you, but it wouldn't mean anything. You're too long out of this game."

Jack nods, sits back in his chair, and looks at the little white mug of decaf, thinking about whether he should walk out. "Tell me why you need me."

"Listen. You made that sequel, you'd be in a whole different world right now, financially and otherwise." Ralph holds up his hand, stopping Jack before he can tell him to shut up. "I know," he says. "Enough. But I'll just say I heard you're touching down on your luck, that maybe you could use a little money. That's why I called."

Jack takes a bitter sip of coffee, puts the mug back down. "I'm listening."

"I need a side, a guy who can come along, maybe drive a nice car, and get us into some respectable places if these guys want a nice time in the city. You still got the Fastback, right?" Jack nods. "And that mug of yours can still get us past a few red ropes. More than mine anyway, probably more than any of the suckers' I know."

Jack lifts up a triangle of toast and looks at it, puts it back. With butter, maybe it'd be all right, but plain it looks like warm cardboard. "You see my name in the papers lately?" he asks. "No one gives a shit who I am anymore."

"Exactly, my man. They see you, people don't care, but maybe a small part of them remembers your face, knows you from the movie. I know it, you know it. That's why you wear the hat." He points to Jack's baseball cap, the Red Sox World Series



Edition that he's taken to wearing when he comes into the city. "They recognize you and sometimes it's good: 'Oh, Jack Palms, you the man from *Shake 'Em Down*.' Then sometimes it's not good; someone says, 'You the guy got addicted to smack and hit his wife. The one never made a second movie.' Either way, bad or good, they like knowing you, recognizing someone they think is a celebrity. And we get the treatment we want."

Jack doesn't want to believe it comes down to this, to hear this is what people think of him, that he's down to the point where these are his options. He's been up in Sausalito for a long time now, two years of hiding away from the city, cleaning himself up, but he can't hide out forever, especially with his money from the movie running out.

Jack takes a deep breath. The flat surface of his coffee has no reflection. Bacon lies across his toast, grease soaking into the bread. He wonders how Ralph can still be eating like this and partying like he used to, how nothing's changed, nothing's come along and kicked his ass like the newspapers did when they came to take Jack's picture in handcuffs.

"I apologize, Jacky." Ralph puts his hands flat on the table, no longer eating. "But you know how it is. I know the papers got it wrong, but let's be honest about the street: You not the man anymore, Jack, but you still got *something*."

Jack sips his coffee: cold already and bitter. He takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly. "Okay," he says. "I'm in."

Ralph nods, fluffs his eggs, and forks in a mouthful. "Good," he says. "It's Eastern Europeans coming in from out of town, Czechs traveling big-time, looking for a large chunk of blow. We meet them, take them out, show them The Guy, and see that the deal goes off. It's easy."

"Right. And they'll pay big for that."

"Relax." Ralph stops eating for a beat, points his fork at Jack.



“Why so skeptical? It’s just a trade. Big trade. Don’t doubt, bro.” He forks up a big chunk of eggs, rubs it in the syrup. “I just need a backup. And for high rollers, I have to look good. That’s why I call you. When I say we do this, I mean we do the fucker. No stops.” He brings the fork to his mouth.

Jack nods. It’s been a long time since he’s worked *anything*. Maybe he’s just getting nerves; maybe he just needs to be involved with something outside of his own house. He thinks about where he’d be right now if Ralph hadn’t called: probably at the gym lifting or out on a morning run, things he needed at first to keep himself sane while he cleaned up. Now he’s clean; he needs something new.

“When do we start?”

Ralph laughs while chewing and catches some egg going down the wrong way. He coughs into the top of his fist. When he finishes catching his breath, he says, “That part you can just leave up to me, baby.”



2



Two days later, after Jack's run his three miles and just started a coffee, Ralph calls again. He says to meet him downtown that night at eight, at the Hotel Regis on Stockton. Jack doesn't know the hotel but knows the neighborhood around it: the city's boutique shopping. The finest places: only designer names and upscale hotels.

Jack takes out a cigarette, his one of the day: the one he smokes with his cup of coffee in the morning, the one that reminds him where he's been. He kicked the junk three years ago, one thousand sixty-six days exactly, and hasn't had a drink in two years. No other cigarettes, just this one every morning.

He looks out over the Bay while he smokes, through the huge kitchen windows that were the biggest selling point of the house, the thing Victoria fell in love with first. Now he's used to the view, to seeing the tiny sailboats move about on the water while he eats. As he takes a long drag, he feels the familiar nausea and closes his eyes, eases into the comfort of his chair. The rest of the cigarette goes slowly, bringing the day to a crawl that Jack can appreciate now, knowing the afternoon will feature things he doesn't know and might not be prepared for.



When he's done, he snuffs out the cigarette, gets up, and washes his hands, scrubs them vigorously with soap to remove any of the smell from his fingertips, knowing it won't ever work. He takes down the cereal and a ceramic bowl off the shelves that Victoria had installed when she remodeled the kitchen.

He skims the front page of the newspaper while he eats, looks out over the Bay, thinking about what Ralph's going to get him into with this and whether it's worth it. Compared to sitting around all day, there's hardly a choice. Compared to losing the house and looking for an apartment he can't afford either, he's ready to hit the shower and get dressed to go.

The phone rings and Jack waits it out, finally hears his answering machine beep. The plain voice of an agent from his bank comes on, the second call in as many days, asking Jack to call back, make an appointment to come in and discuss his loan. Jack knows what the bank knows—that he's late on the second payment in a row now and doesn't have the money. He's just transferred the balance from one credit card to another, buying himself some time, but the bank won't wait much longer.

Out in the Bay, a steamer makes its way around Alcatraz, heading for the port of Oakland.



Jack dresses in jeans and a dark button-down, not tucked in. For too long he's been up here wearing sweats and tracksuits, going to the gym, and it feels good to be clean, dressed. Back in L.A., he dressed up for parties, went out to clubs all the time, had work to take care of. With Victoria, he'd dress even nicer: tuck in, wear a suit jacket every once in a while. But that was back then. Even before the divorce, after her first time in rehab, they'd stopped going out, mostly just stayed at home to nurse their addictions.

He stops at the mirror in the living room before going out to



the garage. This is where he usually puts on his Sox hat, but now he leaves it on the rack. He looks at himself in the mirror, runs his hand over the short brown hair that he cuts himself every couple of weeks with electric clippers, smooths the skin over his face that he shaves clean now every couple of days. In L.A., he used to have his hair styled and he'd wear a goatee or something else whenever he wanted, shaved himself with an electric, and had a good time playing with the styles, but not now. Now he shaves with a razor, hot water, lather, and a badger brush. His face feels tight, the skin sensitive, but he takes his chin in his hand and looks at the side of his face, the bump on his nose from when he broke it playing football in high school. He's still in there, he tells himself, the guy he's known his whole life, alive and breathing, has the same looks that got him the movie, and has even added a little muscle since he made *Shake 'Em Down*, the movie where he drove the fast car, won all the fights, got all the girls.

The dark circles under his eyes are almost gone, the payoff of two years of getting a good night's sleep, running every morning, and spending time in the sun. He stands up and looks over his body, patting his ribs like he did when he saw Ralph. He doesn't look bad, he tells himself, and does his best to try and believe it.



From Sausalito to the bridge, Jack opens up the engine on his light red, almost orange, '66 Mustang Fastback "K-Code" GT. Here on the 101, early on a weekday evening, he can hear the engine roar, feel the torque and the power of the rpm's as he eats up the hills. He's replaced almost everything inside the car himself, repainted the body too. It was this color—"poppy red"—when he bought it. He'd originally wanted blue, but something in him



couldn't make the change. Something in him knew that this car was meant to be this color forever, new paint or old. So when he put on the new coat and waxed it to a gleam, he'd kept it the same: poppy red, all the way.

He got the car after the movie, when he had money; this was the big thing he'd wanted, the thing he had to have: a '66 Mustang Fastback that could only survive in the clean California climate—no winter slush or salt to eat through the frame. Now, even without anything in the bank and the mortgage falling apart, he'd give up the house before this car. Nothing matches the power feel of the Mustang "Hi-Po" engine, the looks he gets on the street, or the feeling of knowing exactly what he's driving, a car so rare that even when they were being produced in 1965, '66, and '67, you only had a one in a hundred shot of getting a "K-Code." And he's worked on it enough to know exactly how it runs and what pieces went into it.

And the style. This car has more style than anything else on the road for Jack's money—any amount—the slick line and the rise in the back untouchable. And he's not trying to compensate for anything, as Victoria once suggested. The Mustang eats hills like they were bumps, a San Francisco must, makes a sound like a jet engine, and does what he wants. The car is Jack's love, the only friend from L.A. times that's still around.

In the city, heading downtown, Jack gets looks, especially in and around Union Square, where the traffic slows and the shoppers all look to see who you are. Jack keeps his sunglasses on, tries not to make eye contact with anyone. Whether they'd really recognize him or he just needs to get over his fears, he's not sure. But a part of him doesn't want to find out.

Jack pulls up outside the hotel and parks next to a new white Mercedes G-Class, a big boxy number like a cross between a German tank and an SUV. He'd guess this for the Eastern Euro-



peans' car, but they're probably driving a rental, one of the sports cars, the convertible Porsche, or an S-Class sedan. He sees a silver Mustang parked here too, a convertible, one of the recent releases he's heard so much about. Supposedly they're more powerful than his with the same size engine. Forty years later and they must have reengineered it to do *something* better, because it'll never look as good as the Fastback. They've only made a lighter body, it's likely, and that's no great feat with forty fucking years of technology on your side.

Getting out of his car, Jack catches a quick second glance from the parking attendant—the look Ralph described; people know Jack, recognize him still. As San Francisco goes, mostly sports stars and locals, not that many actors, Jack's face is one of the few that people remember.

He gives the attendant a five and hits the revolving door without looking back, still holding the keys to his car. If it has to be moved, they can page him.

Inside the lobby, Jack looks around, trying to decide what he should do. The lobby is two stories high, with fancy chandeliers and leather couches all over. A big guy wearing a designer suit stands up from one of the couches on the left side of the lobby. Jack looks around for the bar, and the guy makes his way over, asks if Jack is “Mr. Palimas?”

“No.” Jack shakes his head, taking a good look at the guy: big nose, face like an anvil. He tries to dodge, more from habit than not, but the guy moves faster than Jack expects, cuts him off.

“You are Jack. I am told to wait.” He holds up a small version of Jack's old headshot, probably clipped from a newspaper article covering his dark days. “Ralphie told me to meet you.”

“Oh, *Ralphie*,” Jack says. “In that case.” He shrugs, holds his hand out for the guy to lead the way.

“I am Michal. Please to come.” He starts toward the elevators.



“Where did you get that?” Jack points to the picture.

“Ralphie has changed our meeting from bar to our suite. It is big.” He turns and shows Jack an awkward toothy smile, as if he got an extra helping of teeth in the attributes line at birth and his mouth did its best to fit them all in. They run together at angles, jammed and overlapping. “Our suite is big so we can have party.”

A bellman holds the elevator doors open and they enter. As the doors slide closed, Jack sees his reflection and that of the smiling suit. He’s taller than Jack and wider; this guy can carry himself. Plus he’s been lifting more than just the rocks they’ve got where he’s from, and his suit is well cut, expensive.

Jack rubs his face. He leans toward the door and looks at his cheeks: pale and clean from this morning’s shave. A couple dots of dried blood have come out along his jaw since he left the house. His eyes still look tired. Though he’s put on five or ten pounds of muscle in the past two years, his eyes still look deep-set in his face—like he’s using—as if he needs a couple nights’ sleep, even though it feels like that’s all he’s done for the past two years. His skin is pale, freckled—has been since the sixth grade, when his mother moved him and his sister up from North Carolina to Boston to get away from his father and the sun. He takes a good look at his brown eyes and runs a hand over his hair, wondering how obvious it is that he has no place better to be.

He turns his neck to the side, leaning his ear to his shoulder, trying to loosen up, get a pop. In his movie, they gave him a big tattoo from his chest up onto his neck, out the top of his shirt. People liked that, were disappointed when they found out it wasn’t real. Even when Jack first met Victoria, she ran her fingers around his neck and pulled his collar down.

As the numbers light up above the doors, Jack rolls up his sleeves. He’s going all the way to the top.



3



The doors open onto a single large room, a two-story suite. White leather furniture fills the middle of the room beneath floor-to-ceiling windows. Jack is used to good views like the one he has up in Sausalito, seeing the Bay, but from here he can see into the hills, clear to Alcatraz, Treasure Island, El Cerrito, Berkeley, and down over Alameda and beyond. The other downtown skyscrapers surround them; it's like seeing the skyline from the inside. Jack recognizes the Transamerica Pyramid but doesn't know the others by name.

As he and Michal step out of the elevator, three men in suits stand to meet them, one of them wearing an awful green eyeglasses with wide lapels. Ralph is here, wearing another loud Hawaiian shirt.

Two guys come forward with hands extended, the one with the bad suit, and another, wearing a simple blue suit. Jack notices a fifth man standing against the wall behind him, almost blending in, wearing a suit that looks a lot like Michal's. Michal steps back and takes a position beside the elevator doors, fading back as if he and the other guy have been posted there. They



stand with their arms crossed, like sentries on either side of the elevator.

“Shake this man down,” the Czech with the green suit says, doing a funny dance in his legs, mostly, without any movement of his torso or arms.

The others laugh.

“Yes, man. You are the one from this movie.” Green Suit bends his knees and shakes his legs, brings them apart and together. “Shake this down.”

To stop this, Jack takes his arm in a two-handed shake and starts pumping, telling the guy he’s glad to meet him.

“I am Al,” Green Suit says. “It is a very pleasure to meet you.” His suit is soft, some kind of ultrasynthetic fabric, shiny and dull at the same time, with a gold shirt underneath and a dark, wine-colored tie.

“Nice suit,” Jack says, because it’s clear he’s looking.

“You like it.” Al turns to the others. “This is good guy. Style, see. Loud, like the American rock and roll.” He laughs, a full-on, head-tilted-back-and-mouth-wide-open laugh that you have to go along with. He moves his hands along his sides, displaying the green fabric.

The other two come around and start shaking Jack’s hands, the one guy in a blue suit and the other wearing a deep gray solid. Both of these guys come on reserved like their clothes. “I am David,” the guy in the blue suit says. He has a glass of scotch in one hand, raises it in salute as he says his name. His hair is cut short, in a buzz that’s grown out, or was cut recently by someone who wanted to make him look like a Chia Pet.

“I am Vlade,” the third guy says, taking Jack in a hug. “I have still the good name from our country that I do not change like them.” He looks at Al and makes a funny face, putting his lower lip up toward his mustache, as if he’s smelled something bad.



“Al,” he says, with an intentionally flat accent, imitating how Americans must sound to him.

“Yes, sir, this is the man here: Jack Palms,” Ralph says, stepping forward. He has a thick cigar in one hand and a scotch in the other. He sways as he moves. Jack realizes this is why Ralph asked him along: because he’s planning on spending most of his time in the bag.

“Jack Palms,” Al says, “let us share with you some blow.” More laughs and then Jack watches Al, Ralph, and the others retreat to the couches. He can see a glass-top coffee table in the middle all ready to go, with the lines cut and set. Ralph sits down on one of the couches and starts rolling up a twenty.

Jack hesitates. Coke got him going in L.A., made him the rage at the right parties, introduced him to some of the right people, maybe even started his short movie career. But it also led him to H and his life falling apart.

Now he’s spent two years in a place where life seems dull: either because he’s taken too much out of it and he’s evening out, or because he’s got fewer dopamine receptors left to stimulate his pleasure cells—either the karmic or the biological explanation, Jack’s not sure which he prefers. He smells the remnants of the morning’s cigarette on his fingers. Even after the scrubbing, it’s still there, like a trail of where he’s been, a reminder of mistakes he’s made.

Ralph leans close to the table and snorts a line. Ralph, who’s never had anything bad happen as long as Jack’s known him, Ralph who just keeps going and going and partying. Fucking Ralph.

Jack clenches his teeth. If he can stand here, watch these guys, and play roving concierge, maybe he’ll be cured.

David cleans up a line with a freshly rolled bill.

“Mr. Jack?” Al says, pointing to the table.



“No thanks.” Jack stays where he is, hooks a thumb at the sentries. “Just think of me like one of these guys: here to work. To help you have the fun.”

The Czechs turn to him. David says, “You do not want to join?”

“You do not enjoy the blow?”

Jack shakes his head. “I’m okay.”

Ralph holds up both hands and says, “Serious downer.” He leans toward the table, covers a nostril, and snorts a line. “Oh, yeah. Motherfucker!” He does another quick one, then lies back on the couch, powder on his upper lip. “Yeah!” he yells.

David’s still looking at Jack, so he shows him three fingers. “Three years now,” Jack says. David nods.

Vlade stands up and comes over to Jack. He claps his hands, rubs Jack’s shoulder when he gets there. “This is all right. Seriously. It means there is more for us.” He starts laughing. “There is the bar,” he says, pointing to a small brown-doored refrigerator under a mirrored wall of glass shelves and cocktail glasses. He gives Jack a slight push. “Help yourself.”

Jack starts to decline, then thinks better of it and goes over. He finds seltzer and ice, a lime, and makes himself a drink. As he turns, he sees David’s and Al’s heads bent to the table, Vlade still watching him.

“Cheers, bro.” Jack holds up his glass, just seltzer and ice, and squeezes in the lime.



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