

# HOLLYWOOD HUSTLE

## Chapter 2

Winston closed the heavy front door behind him and made sure he locked it. Eighty years old, the house had a thick, wide entranceway secured by an oak door that must have been trucked in from up north, someplace where old-growth lumber was milled. It had hung there since the place was built (by hand), and was set dead center with a two-foot-by-one-foot, diamond-shaped, beveled window. Plenty large to see anyone outside waiting to get in.

“Is he gone?” Amy asked.

“Yes, honey, he’s gone. It’s okay now.” She looked up at him, her little eyes filled with worry. Win kneeled to her height. “That man brought you here?”

She nodded.

“From where?”

Amy remained quiet.

“Amy, honey, you can tell me.”

She clutched the stuffed puppy tighter and looked away from him.

“Amy?”

“From my house!” she said. “He gave me the heejees.”

“Heejees” was their code for “heebie-jeebies.” They’d use it if they happened across a slime trail of a big slug in the woods or a rotting animal carcass. It also meant a feeling that was just about as bad as could be, something Amy had already experienced too many times in her short

life—Clare and Zeke had made life harder than it ever should have been for this little girl. And now this.

Winston set his hands gently on her shoulders and nodded in agreement. “Me too, honey. But he’s gone now.”

Win saw a hint of relief in her eyes. He knew she felt safe with him, more than with anyone. Perhaps because she’d never once seen him drunk or high, the way her parents usually were. Clare had grown up around him when he was at his most alcoholic, something he regretted deeply, and now she seemed determined to follow in his footsteps. Win didn’t want the pattern to be repeated with Amy.

“Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head, then looked at her feet. “He made me lie down in the car. On the floor. It smelled bad.”

Anger rose in Win’s chest, but he was careful not to show it. Thus far, this kid had not gotten a fair shake in life, and he felt responsible for that. After all, it had been his demons that had caused him to lose the plot when it came to raising her mother. But what was done was done as far as Clare went. He would do everything he could to get her back from God knows what she’d gotten herself into this time, but Amy was his focus right now.

He envisioned wrapping his hands around that skinny prick’s neck, watching his stunned, agonized face turn crimson as his eyes swelled beyond the sockets and burst in bloody twin explosions like special effects squibs. Just like in the movies.

Win knocked out that grim fantasy with a shake of his head. “Did he tell you to give me something?”

Amy nodded and dug deep into her jeans pocket. She held up a small lime-green rectangle of plastic that he first took for a miniature cigarette lighter. It was a thumb drive.

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Win snatched the Trimline phone from its wall mount in the narrow kitchen and dialed his daughter's cell number with his thumb. Since he paid her wireless bill (and a few others), it was the only number of hers he could count on to be connected.

As the phone rang, he retrieved two boxes of cereal from a cabinet with his free hand. Amy liked the way he would mix a couple of different kinds together, a trick he'd learned by accident when he didn't have enough of one to fill a bowl. Today would be Grape Nuts over a bed of Raisin Bran. He fetched oat milk from the refrigerator just as the call went to Clare's voicemail.

"It's me," he said as he turned his back to Amy and lowered his voice. "Amy's here. She's all right, but I'd like to know what's going on. Like who that guy is, the skinny one with the mustache. I know we haven't talked for a while, but call me as soon as you get this." As he hung up, he realized he may have sounded more "fatherly" than Clare would appreciate.

Their last meeting had been a regrettable encounter at the upscale restaurant his younger brother managed. Clare had lost her temper at Win's suggestion that she and Amy move in with him, but without her husband. She'd stormed out in the middle of the lunch rush, bumping into tables and customers as she went. Winston could only cringe as he watched her inelegant exit in the wall mirror, with her shouting profanities all the way out the door. He was sure her outburst had more to do with her own guilt over her shortcomings raising Amy—and decided that when Shakespeare wrote, *"The lady doth protest too much, methinks,"* he must've been dealing with an addict. They hadn't spoken since.

He dressed the cereal with blueberries and sliced banana and poured in the milk, then picked up the bowl and a spoon. “Let’s go upstairs.”

Win led Amy up to his office, where he kept a folded futon for her overnight visits. He pointed for her to sit, handed her the cereal and spoon, and took a seat at his desk. He opened the center drawer, retrieved a set of tangled earbuds, and leaned back in his big wooden desk chair—a leather-padded gem from the 1930s that he’d found along with a matching pedestal-style oak desk at a local garage sale and then refinished himself.

As he unraveled the buds’ cord, he swiveled the chair to look out the window. He had put the office upstairs on the northwest corner, an ample room with windows on two sides. Built-in bookshelves he’d installed himself covered one entire wall, lined with hundreds of titles. This room was a place he could be alone with his thoughts, read scripts, plot his next move, and embrace his remorse. It had been in this very chair that he’d realized if C-grade genre flicks were what life had in store for him, then he’d rather do them sober.

He plugged the earbuds into the black computer tower, which shared the space with a monitor and keyboard on the expansive leather writing surface. He’d gotten the pro model Mac a few years earlier so he could keep up with the latest film editing software that seemed to drop into the market every ten minutes. Win didn’t direct often, but when he did, he loved the process of stitching his first cut into a cohesive whole, right here in this room. It was a thousand times better than getting stuck in an editing bay with some guy who’d felt the business had passed him over and wasn’t shy about expressing the idea that *he* should’ve directed this piece of shit, having just seen proof that Winston Greene, that over-the-hill excuse of a washed-up movie star, couldn’t direct traffic through a crosswalk. This business could make some people bitter.

He typed in his password (Amy's birthday with an exclamation point, October13!) and twisted the earbuds into place. As he did, he glanced at his granddaughter, who was munching her cereal slowly, clearly distracted. He rotated the monitor so she couldn't see the screen, but kept an eye on her in case she stood up and tried to see something she shouldn't.

Win inserted the thumb drive into a USB slot on the tower. A small folder icon appeared on the screen. It could be porn—Clare might have finally found a “career” but then gotten cold feet, and now they could be trying to blackmail him. Then again, how many famous fathers did he know of whose daughters had posted their homemade sex tapes online? He could name two without even thinking about it. Then Win considered the horrific possibility of his daughter being tortured on camera. Or maybe it would just be audio, someone giving him instructions with one of those voice-altering filters. Or it could be a virus, something to hack his information and empty his life savings. *All right, just rip the bandage off.*

With another quick glance at Amy, Win double-clicked the folder. A window opened, inside of which was an .mpeg file. It *was* a video. He took a breath and opened it.

The video rectangle filled the screen. He hit “Play” and the rectangle went black. It rolled on in inky silence for a few beats before music kicked in, a saxophone playing a rising arpeggio, joined by a small band playing an upbeat, bouncy tune. He recognized it from somewhere, from way back in his youth. *What is that?* Then a memory came into focus: childhood, possibly early teens. The family room of his parents' modest house, a Saturday evening, the magic hour when the rosy light of dusk streamed in through the westerly window, his father in his easy chair laughing at the TV, a cold beer in his hand. *That's it!* The opening theme of *The Benny Hill Show*, an import from England starring a pudgy, impish, round-faced comedian who wrote and

performed weekly sketches of sexist double entendres and innuendo. His father had looked forward to it every weekend.

Then a pale blue title card with blood red letters blasted onto the screen:

*HI WINSTON HOPE YOU'RE HAVING A NICE DAY!*

Black again for a few beats, then another card:

*SOMEONE WANTS TO SAY HI.*

Black.

*THAT IS, IF YOU CAN MAKE ROOM IN YOUR BUSY*

*SCHEDULE!*

Black.

Then a still image, sharp, the colors rich. It was Clare, her blue eyes clearly terrified over the stranger's hand covering her mouth. She was looking straight into the camera, and Win felt a father's kneejerk protectiveness for his child—a torment that becomes magnified in moments like these, when he's unable to do a damn thing about it. He glanced over at Amy. She was still on the futon, now playing with a small tablet, one he got for her to keep here at the house, the empty cereal bowl abandoned next to her.

Black.

*SHE SAYS HI!*

Black.

*WHAT'S THAT? CAN'T HEAR?*

Black.

The music abruptly stopped. Then a video started, taken by a static camera, perhaps mounted on a tripod. It looked like a basement. No, a cellar. The wall facing the camera was dirt,

and the only light was harsh, artificial, coming from somewhere above camera, perhaps from a bulb in the ceiling. There was no fade-up to a picture or a swell of music to intro this section. Just the sound of scuffling feet and whispering voices that sounded male. He couldn't make out what they were saying except for when an insistent muffled voice said, "Go!"

Win straightened up when Clarissa stepped apprehensively into the frame. At twenty-six, she often seemed weary beyond her years, but whatever had transpired during these last few months had added a new layer of fatigue. She wore a dark green hooded sweatshirt, the zipper all the way open, over a white V-neck T-shirt and blue jeans. The right sleeve of the hoodie was pushed up to her elbow, the left hung at her wrist. She stopped about six or seven feet in front of the camera, and when she turned, he could make out a set of small bruises on her right forearm. Her hair, long loose curls like her mother's, hung to her shoulders, the way she normally wore it, but a thick strand dangled in front, blocking one eye. She looked back behind the camera, to where she'd entered from.

"C'mon!" a disembodied voice hissed impatiently. It sounded like someone was speaking through cloth. Clare looked straight into the lens.

"Dad? It's me," she said, then drew in a breath. "I guess I really screwed up this time."

Her voice was trembling, and Win could see fear every time her eyes darted over to whoever was behind the camera. Her voice started to crack. "They said they were taking Amy to you. You should have her by now. Please take care of her—"

The muffled voice cut in again. "Tell him!"

Clare jerked when the man spoke, and she turned toward the voice, her blue eyes wide. She looked back to the camera.

“They want money. They said if they don’t get it they’ll kill me . . . and Zeke . . . and then they’ll come for you and . . . and Amy!” She seemed to force that last bit out, as if the threat of her baby girl being murdered hadn’t seemed real until she heard herself say it.

She shook her head to pull herself together and took a breath. “They’ll tell you what to do soon.”

*BOOM!* Win jumped at the sound of the gunshot coming through the earbuds and knocked over his wooden pen holder, scattering writing utensils and paper clips across his desktop. The sudden movement startled Amy, and she looked up at him.

“It’s okay,” he said, forcing a smile. He’d seen the bullet plow into the dry earthen wall behind Clare, missing her head by inches and spraying chunks of dirt behind her. Clare, visibly shaking, clenched her fists tightly under her chin. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was frozen in a pursed grimace, as if she expected someone to hit her. The screen went black again for a few more seconds, and the video ended. Win had to control his breathing, which verged on hyperventilating. He removed the earbuds and unplugged the thumb drive, slipping it into the center drawer of the desk, under a notepad. Amy was again fully engrossed by something on her tablet.

Win cleared his throat. “Whatcha got over there?” he asked, making an effort to keep his voice even. Amy had long ago learned to read the moods of the adults in her life.

“*Angry Birds*,” she replied, her face angled into the screen. He was grateful she had something to keep her occupied while he calmed himself down. His heart pounded inside his ribcage, and the veins in his neck pulsed.



“C’mon, you can play your game downstairs.”

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Win moved Amy into the den he’d converted into a movie-viewing-room. It was the only place he displayed visual reminders of his career, having hung a handful of memorabilia from his films among many more vintage posters from his all-time favorites: *Breathless*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Le Cercle Rouge*, *Yojimbo*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Bullitt*. One wall was dominated by the oversized flatscreen he’d splurged on. He picked up the remote, but she took it from him, punched and swiped the center button a few times until she landed on a streaming app, punched and swiped again, and the room filled with the sounds of animated mayhem.

Winston went to the living room window and stared out at the filthy car in his driveway. Should he call the police, even though he’d been warned not to? In the movies, it rarely worked out well. But would it be the right thing to do? Maybe not—it wasn’t like he was on the A-list anymore, but he was famous enough that someone at the police station could leak it to the press. And that would just make things *more* dangerous for Clare.

He needed help.

As a young man, Winston had modeled himself after his screen hero, Steve McQueen. His first (and forever) manager had even pitched him as “the new McQueen.” Like his idol, Win had piercing blue eyes that popped off the screen, had developed an economy of graceful movements, and could hold a gun like he knew what he was doing. But Winston also had the quality you can’t teach but every actor blessed with a Hollywood career has you could see him *think* on camera. He’d been playing variations on the same role ever since: strong, silent types with a hint of menace, always threatening to snap but never quite giving in to the impulse. One

director described Winston as “a land mine that’s been stepped on, just waiting for you to step off.”

Nearly twenty years earlier, one of those roles was in a movie set in New Orleans, about a modern hardboiled detective who gets framed for murder and must prove his innocence. Win’s detective winds up killing all the conspirators except for the beautiful woman who betrays the villains she was once in league with, because of the hero’s bravery, natural charisma, and rugged good looks. He’d played it as a rumped, Big Easy Philip Marlowe, but taller than Bogart.

A decorated local cop named Theodore (Teddy) Beauregard had been assigned by the NOPD as official consultant to the production. He and Win became tight right away and had been friends ever since. Whenever Win needed insight into how the police thought or how to handle various firearms for a role, Teddy was the first person he’d turn to.

Win pulled his cell out and dialed Teddy’s number.