

CONTENTS

Introduction	My Story Ends Here	1
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PART I

1.	Wiseguys Don't Wait	4
2.	"Eye" See You	17
3.	A French Reunion	29
4.	100% Certifiable Bullshit	44
5.	Getting to Know You	62
6.	Sample Request	72
7.	Growing Elephant Balls	81
8.	Now I'm the Man!	92
9.	Up-Up and Away	103
10.	We'll Take it From Here	111

PART II

11.	Who's the Boss?	118
12.	Family Acceptance	123
13.	What About Jimmy?	132
14.	Now I'm the Dead Man!	139
15.	Right Time Wrong Place	148
16.	Let's Show and Tell	154
17.	"Meat" and Greet	164
18.	Choose Your Drink Wisely	172

PART III

19.	Unexpected Guest	182
20.	Just Visiting	190
21.	Now Hear This!	199
22.	Heavenly Intervention	206
23.	Trial Assessment	215
24.	Jack in the Box	222

25.	Un-Fuckin' - Real	243
26.	The Lambs are Silenced	250
27.	My Story Starts Here	258
28.	Glossary - Connected Guy Lingo	267

INTRODUCTION

My Story Ends Here

I'm walking up 45th Street, just three blocks past Eighth Avenue. Although this area seems shady, it's the home to many aspiring actors, writers, musicians, and artists. The area is called "Hell's Kitchen," former home base of the Irish mob "The Westies," and soon to be my new home. That is if you consider the "Manhattan Half-Way House" a home. For guys who have done their time and are ready to enter the workplace, it would be a luxury hotel. I see it as the next phase in my life. The old cliché, "If you can't do the time, don't do the crime," or as wiseguys say "Do what you gott'a do, just don't get fuckin' pinched." Neither words of wisdom seem to resonate as I got closer to my new residence.

It's a hot summer afternoon, temperature must be in the mid-nineties. Although the air stinks with the smell of some garbage left on the sidewalk – I love it! I love it because it's the smell of "free air." It's the kind air that you can breathe any time you choose to – not when someone tells you when you're allowed to walk out and smell it! I wish I could take smaller steps. I don't need to get there any sooner than I have to.

My throat is beginning to get dry. It could be the weather. It could be the last three hours of well wishes and

encouragement with my family and friends. Or the reality that this day has arrived and I'm about to meet my new owners. For whatever the reason, I need to compose myself. In retrospect maybe I should have taken the many offers to be dropped off. The truth of the matter, I'm talked out and embarrassed. I didn't want to share the hurtful experience of saying goodbye in front of the Half-Way House.

I'm looking down the block trying to see something that resembles a prison. I thought I was on the wrong block. Well, to my paranoid surprise I realized the prison was nothing more than an ordinary six story converted brownstone. It blended in with the rest of the neighborhood. In addition it was furnished with opened windows, in case I wanted to smell all that "free air."

No "stoops," as we called steps in Brooklyn. No signs or plaques for identification purposes. No one hanging outside, and definitely no doorman. It was just a straight walk to the bell. My heart is racing as I took a deep breath. I'm realizing it's not a bad place to wind up considering I could have been wacked a hundred times over. The truth is it's a small the price to pay for all those fucked-up times that took my breath away. Door opens, "James Valentino?" I nod. "They're waiting for you" . . . My story ends here!