

*"...an exciting thriller with plenty of surprises...packed with twists, disasters and suspense."*

*-Emma Hunneyball, In Potentia*

KARMA HAS A NEW FACE.

# AGENTS OF CHANGE

GUY HARRISON

**Agents of Change**

**Second Edition**

By Guy Harrison

Kindle Edition

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*To my dearest Lindsay, for putting up with all of the late nights and wasted days I spent in front of my laptop.*

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## Prologue

Awake at an obscene Saturday hour for a teenager, the girl looks into the distance as the rising sun behind her gives her otherwise golden hair a bright orange hue. Biking along Pennypack Trail, one of Philadelphia's most scenic paths, the girl stares down the challenging stretch that awaits her while also ignoring that which she's already traversed.

The trail takes the girl over its eponymous creek before turning west. Ahead, another cyclist sprints in her direction. If the girl is running a marathon, her counterpart is running a hundred-meter sprint.

As the cyclist draws nearer, the girl can see that her counterpart wears a vintage light blue Phillies cap and is female, expressionless, and in an apparent hurry. The girl breathes a subconscious sigh of relief. She's been told countless stories of young women being sexually assaulted, even murdered at odd hours along the trail.

The girl moves to her left—closer to the creek below—to clear the way for the cyclist. Her counterpart only mirrors her movement. *One of those awkward moments*, the girl thinks as she moves back to her right.

Closer still, the cyclist again mirrors the girl's maneuver and shows no signs of slowing down.

*This isn't funny.*

The gap between them closing, the girl clenches her bike's breaks and swerves to her left.

*Swoooooop!*

*Crash!*

The girl and her bike spin off the trail and tumble over the guardrail, sending the girl hurtling towards the creek. In a helpless panic, the girl attempts to brace herself for the rocky earth that lines the creek's embankment.

Before she can shed her bike, before she can reach out a hand for protection, her left cheek meets a rock. Her face cracks as her legs and bike are sent flailing into the air.

As the girl continues to drop toward the water, unable to regain control of her body, she catches a glimpse of the cyclist standing on the trail, staring down at her bounding body. Soon, the girl's joints seem to rap every possible protrusion along the

embankment and her bike splashes into the creek.

Tumbling backwards, the girl sees the cyclist and the sky in one final blur before succumbing to blackness.

*Crack!*

## **Part I: The Agency of Influence**

## Chapter One

I slide my dark finger down the page, never minding the newspaper ink that's certain to rub off on my finger. I've come this far, I must find the information I'm looking for.

I scratch my closely-coiffed head and separate my tie from my neck; it's a bit stuffy in here. I would have gathered the information I was looking for last night but I crashed early. I can't stay up as late as I used to—are you supposed to get all grandfatherly in your late twenties?

Ah. Found it.

The local hockey team, the Flyers, won last night, 3-2. Awesome.

I look away from the newspaper and remember the envelope that occupies the desk space next to it. Having already stamped and addressed it to Celia Williams, I sign the bottom of a five-hundred-dollar check and place it in the envelope. I lick the seal and press it shut.

When I turn my attention back to the newspaper, I'm interrupted by a knock at my door. Paula, my assistant, stands before me with her arms relaxed at her sides.

"Mr. Grace is on line one," she says, sweetly as always.

"Thank you, Paula."

"Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

I grin and raise my eyebrows.

She smacks her forehead with her right hand. "Oh, right. Sorry."

"It's cool. Don't worry about it." Really, it was. As she leaves my office and closes the door behind her, I recall the day I hired Paula, not more than three weeks ago. Because I'm in the minority of bosses who don't like coffee, I'm sure that'll take some getting used to. I'm also in the minority of bosses at Maxwell that are, well, minorities. I imagine that, in combination with my age, will also be an adjustment for Paula, just as it was for me. It's still odd telling people that are older than me what to do.

Knowing what's coming next, I exhale as I close my newspaper and pick up the

phone. “How are you, Mr. Grace?” I press the receiver closer to my ear and look at the set numbers and formulas scribbled on the whiteboard in front of me.

“Not happy.”

I play coy. “Sir?”

“That moron you have down there, Keeling—”

“Oh, Keeling?” I say, with a blasé wave of my hand. “I can explain. He—”

“Don’t explain, Newsome. Just fix.”

“He had a bad quarter. He’ll bounce back.”

“You’ve got a lot more faith than I do.”

“I guess. What do you want me to do?”

“You’re the director, man. Direct.”

“Wait, are you asking me to fire him?”

Silence from the other end.

“That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?” I say.

“You might want consider it. Look at the guy’s numbers for chrissakes. You can’t ignore that kind of decline. ”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Fine. I’ll call him in.”

“Good. And don’t be nice with him, either. I know how you like to play psychologist.”

“Yes, sir.”

I hang up the phone and dial Paula on speakerphone.

“Hi, Calvin.”

“Paula, can you let Trevor Keeling know that I need to speak with him, please?”

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks.”

I hang up and turn to look through the window. I never used to think that corner offices were everything people made them out to be. That changed when I moved into this office. I get unobstructed, breathtaking views of Philadelphia’s skyline, its glass skyscrapers glistening in the spring sun.

On the other hand, I used to think that being the director of business analytics had its vast array of advantages. Other than my office, though, I can’t say I’ve enjoyed this experience; it’s not what I thought it’d be. Heck, not even my salary increase was worth celebrating—it simply meant that I was in a new tax bracket. Yippee.

Despite a bevy of efforts to circumvent it, I’m now that guy that everyone tries to avoid. I’m the guy who, when you’re called to my office, you get a knot in your

stomach. It's a feeling I'm sure Mr. Keeling feels now, though I can't say it's unwarranted from his point of view.

I pull a granola bar out of my desk drawer, unwrap it, and take a bite. I look down at my desk and look at the headline on the front page of the newspaper. *City Pall*.  
Clever.

When I hear a knock at my door, I wave my visitor in. Trevor Keeling was a holdover from my predecessor, so he's not my guy. I can't say I feel a ton of loyalty to him.

"You wanted to see me?" he says in a hushed tone.

I take a deep breath. "Take a seat."

He sits down in a wooden chair in front of my desk and straightens his tie. His hands are trembling.

"I've had a chance to look over your numbers from the last quarter."

He averts his gaze. "I know. No good, right?"

"No good? Try inexplicable. Unfathomable."

Keeling doesn't say a word. He only rocks anxiously while continuing to avoid my gaze.

"I mean, what the fuck happened?" I say, holding his report between my thumb and index finger. "You've never—"

He places a hand in front of his face to hide his trembling lips.

"I've been given the green light to terminate you," I say.

"No..." he says, his eyes moistening.

"The fact is, my ass is on the line, too. And I refuse to lose my job because of you."

"Please, don't do this to me."

I rub the back of my neck and look down at my desk as I avoid Keeling's pathetic gestures. My eyes flick over to my partially-eaten granola bar before settling on the random numbers and formulas scribbled on the dry erase board behind him again. I furrow my brow with contempt as I catch myself reciting each formula in my head. I hate this crap.

Keeling's whimpering draws me back to the task at hand. "What am I supposed to tell my wife?" he says.

I force myself to look at the man again and take in his pained, involuntary movements. I then look him in the eye as I lean forward and place my elbows on my desk.

“I want you to tell her that she has nothing to worry about,” I say in a soft tone.

Keeling sits slouched in his chair with a confused look on his face.

“I know how much you love your family,” I say. “I’ve been by your desk, I’ve seen your screensaver. You’ve thought about what you’d tell them if you were ever fired, yes?”

He nods his head.

“And I’m sure you’ve imagined the looks on their faces.”

“Yeah...”

“Remember what that looks like going forward, Trevor. I expect to see you kick ass this quarter.”

Keeling stifles a grin. “Wait. What?”

“You’re going to meet with me every Friday—arrange it with Paula. We’ll get you back on track.”

He looks to the floor as he tries to hide his swaying emotions. I watch him silently for the next few moments. The man doesn’t move.

“Trevor?” I wait for his eyes to return to me. “You can go back to your desk now,” I say, slowly.

“Oh, right,” he says, breaking out of his trance. He gets up and walks to the door, stopping just before he leaves. “Thank you,” he says, now wearing a broad smile. I wave him off as he closes the door behind him.

I shake my head and look at the digital clock on the wall: 12:28. I better get going if I want to make my appointment.

As I hop out of my chair, my cell phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Calvin, where are you?” It’s my adoring Ronni.

“Uh, at work?”

“Did you forget?”

“Forget what?” When I remember that I was supposed to meet Ronni for lunch today, I press my fist against my forehead and swear under my breath.

“Ugh! I knew you’d forget.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’ll make it up to you. How about tonight? Your place?”

“Fine,” she says like a spoiled teen. “You better bring Italian.”

“Spinach ravioli?”

“Yes, please.”

After we hang up, I grab my suit jacket and the envelope, and leave my office.

Paula greets me at her desk just outside my office.

“I’m taking my lunch now,” I say. “I’ll be back at 1:30.”

“Sounds good,” she says. “Hey, when’s the next community service outing?”

“Next Saturday. Want me to add you to the list?”

“Where will it be?”

“The SPCA.”

Her eyes light up.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I place the envelope on her desk. She’s been good at taking care of my mail.

“I didn’t think you were into animals.”

“Every dog has his day,” I say with a shrug.

“Good one,” Paula says, just as her phone rings.

When she recites the standard Maxwell greeting, I walk away toward the elevator and wait to take it down to the underground parking garage.

Veronica Lee—Ronni for short—is Chinese-American, first generation, in fact. I’ve known her since we were little kids. Her parents immigrated to the States in the ’70s. They were among the few Asians who flocked to the eastern seaboard as opposed to the west coast. And as is customary in her culture, Ronni’s parents were very strict with her, especially in regard to her studies. When Ronni would beat herself up over the occasional B, she would tell me, with great disappointment, that she could see her father reminding her, “You no B-sian, you A-sian.”

Despite the fact that her academics took precedence, Ronni still found a way to love me in a way no one else ever has. When I’ve had my heart broken—or when I’ve done the occasional heartbreaking—Ronni’s always offered herself as a sounding board. She also never laughed at me when I sought her out for college calculus help, even though I went to Penn, and Ivy League school, and she inexplicably went to Philly U. Now, that’s true love.

In the garage, I climb into my car—a late-model Kia—and open the sunroof but not the windows. It’s a gorgeous spring day outside but if I have any shot of making my appointment on time, my only chance is on the expressway. I turn the ignition, emerge from the garage, and head west.

As I drive through the high rises that comprise the city’s skyline, passing the intermittent gobs of pedestrians and the exhaust-coated homeless lying along the sidewalk, my thoughts wander to what has me driving quite far from work on my lunch break.

In my spare time, I am a matchmaker and, today, I'm meeting a new client. Don't laugh. It seemed like a cool thing to do at the time.

I'm a matchmaker and fairly wet behind the ears with it, too. I'm so new to the industry, I haven't yet posted a bio or photo on my website. See, in a field inundated with folks who are older and much more experienced than I, my services need to speak for themselves. I need to allow word of mouth to do the advertising for me.

Initially, in order to get my name out there, I had to offer a few free sessions to wrangle my first handful of clients. It was a strategy I learned in business school. It also illustrates my current predicament: as I try to make a difference, I still have to take a businessman's approach to things. And that's not what I want.

I want my work to mean something without having to think about numbers and customers and cash flow. Despite my management degree from Penn's Wharton School, I've never had a job that I would consider significant. My current job is cushy, don't get me wrong. But I never found much meaning in my work, even with the employee stock options and the silly-nilly corporate office games like hallway bowling. Call me *too cool for school* but that isn't me.

While I'll be okay if I end up being a matchmaker for the rest of my life, I really view it as a stopgap, something I can do immediately to fill a void as I explore other, more meaningful opportunities. Eventually, I need to do something everlasting, something the world can profit from, and not necessarily in a financial way. I want to do something that, when people see it, they know Calvin Newsome's hands have been all over it. I want it to be different. I want it to stand out.

I've always been good at that, standing out. I use big words you'll only find in the dictionary. I like hockey. I like rock music as well as rap. As a black man, those things make it hard to blend into the crowd.

Turning my right blinker on, I merge to my right as I approach my exit.

East Falls is a very woody, slice-of-Suburbia part of town, although it's certainly not without its warts. Despite its greenery, sloping thoroughways, and desirable location, it still possesses Philly's most common property, the row home. This neighborhood is also home to Ronni's alma mater, Philly U, or "P.U." as I used to say whenever I wanted to piss her off.

When I pull up to my client's house for the first time, I'm struck by how large it is. It's a colonial—red bricks, white window details and all. The house stands as a fortress along the two-lane road in front of it.

Before opening my door, I take off my tie and leave it in the passenger seat,

undoing my shirt's top button for a more casual look. I climb out of the car and grab a notepad before closing the door.

Two large trees surround both sides of the home's expansive, forward-sloping front lawn. A small stairwell of about three steps leads me from the sidewalk onto a concrete path through the lawn up to the front door. Startled, I look up when I hear the loud kazoo-like squawking of a bird from one of the large trees.

As I approach the door, I remember this new client being female. I ring the doorbell, expecting Blanche Devereaux to answer.

The door swings open and standing before me is one of the most beautiful women I've ever laid eyes on. She's a Latin goddess and is far younger than my usual clientele.

"Hi," she says.

I take a moment to study her shoulder length brown hair—adorned with highlights—and light, caramel-colored skin. Her form-fitting T-shirt and jeans accentuate her curvaceous figure. To top it off, she's wearing my favorite scent: vanilla.

"Uh, hi," I manage to say through clenched vocal cords. Consider me speechless.

"Come in," she says, all business as she opens the door even further. I step inside and blown away by the home's interior. Polished hardwood floors, vaulted ceilings, classic yet tasteful window valances and beautiful, nearly-mint condition leather furniture beckon the home's guests.

The woman reaches out her hand. "Elena Jimenez," she says, her face emotionless as her large brown eyes fixate on mine.

"Calvin Newsome. Nice to meet you." Despite her allure, I can't hold her gaze. I choose instead to take her in just a little bit at a time.

"Take a seat," she says, pointing to a leather chair in the living room. Still no smile.

Elena walks briskly to the kitchen as I take a seat in the chair. One of the perks of this job is getting to see my clients' homes. This one is the nicest, by far.

"Can I get you some water?" Elena says from afar.

"That'd be great."

I pull a pen out of my pocket and, as I put it to my notepad, there are only two words I can think to write at the moment. *Hot mamacita.*

The only downside to this is that I don't really have an age-appropriate male to set her up with. That's not entirely bad, though. At the very least, I could post her photo on my website and use her as bait for both my male and female clients—my practice is

flexible like that.

She comes back with a glass of water in hand, still very much poker-faced. She may be beautiful but if this is the extent of her personality, I can see why she's single. I take a swig of water and place the glass on an end table. Elena sits on a couch across from me.

"So, what can I do for you?" I say.

"Tell me about the process," she says. "How does it work?"

"Well..." I suddenly feel the urge to close my eyes and begin to fall forward, despite a steadfast desire not to. I hit the hardwood floor with a thud, landing in the fetal position. Before my eyelids call it an afternoon, the last thing I see is the bizarre image of the beautiful Elena standing over me ... with a rope in her hand.

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Philadelphia's City Hall was once, for a considerable length of time, the tallest building in the city. It now stands as one of the tallest masonry buildings in the world and is smack-dab in the middle of Philly, at least Philly as it was designed by its founder.

Behind its rock-solid limestone, granite, and marble façade, sits the city's mayor, Terry Haslett. A former local business owner and city council chairman, Haslett sits in a large, black plush leather chair, one of those in which you'd imagine someone of great importance sitting.

Sitting on the other side of Haslett's freshly polished cherry wood desk is his successor as council chairman, Wes Henry. In many ways, Haslett and Henry are polar opposites.

Haslett is tall and sinewy, elected despite Philadelphia's history of voting mostly against white mayoral candidates since the late 1990s. He accomplished this while overcoming the attention drawn by his abnormally long schnoz. Recently, a local political cartoonist depicted Haslett's nose to be like that of Pinocchio. Haslett, however, liked it better when that same cartoonist used to depict him as Gonzo from the Muppets.

Despite this unfortunate feature, Haslett is charismatic and speaks slowly, giving the impression of a perpetual calm to go along with a quiet confidence. When he dies, it will not be from complications stemming from heart disease and high blood pressure.

On the other hand, Henry is rotund with understated facial features. The bottom of his gut threatens to break free of its captivity as it spreads the pleats of his slacks. Meanwhile, his nose is as small as the button on his shirt.

Henry is known as a yeller and screamer. He was able to ascend to the top of the city council food chain despite his abrasive personality. The consensus, however, is that this is as far as he will get. Even if Haslett becomes the governor of Pennsylvania, Henry's spot will most likely remain in his now-flattened seat as city council chair. Unlike Haslett, Henry's short fuse will probably cause a fatal myocardial infarction.

"When are you going to get rid of Commissioner Sears?" Henry says his predecessor.

"I can't," Haslett says. "He knows."

"Does he know everything?"

"No. But he knows enough."

Henry exhales loudly as he looks out into the dwindling sunlight illuminating the city. From this vantage point, he can see a steady flow of white headlights coming toward the building as well as a river of red taillights floating away from the building.

"So he knows about our transportation situation?" the large man says, adjusting in his chair to compensate for its arm digging into his leg.

"Yes. The rolling stock, the track at Suburban Station. He knows about all of that stuff."

"Who told him?"

Haslett shrugs. "I wish I knew."

Henry exhales loudly again. In general, Henry breathes loudly but he's more agitated than usual at the moment.

"Relax, Wes. We're not in danger."

"I wish I had your confidence."

"You would if you knew what I know."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Our protection," Haslett says with a deliberate cadence, "knows no boundaries."

"I hope so. I have kids to feed. I'm not going down like this."

"Wes, when will you learn to stop referring to your stomach as your children?"

"Not funny."

"Hey, you're just as guilty as I am. Stop pretending to be innocent."

Henry looks down at the floor, his stomach obstructing his view.

"Now, please," Haslett says, leaning over his desk, "stop ... freaking ... out." He

then motions for Henry to leave his office.

## Chapter Two

I wake up, only to find myself surrounded by nothing more than three white walls. And a fluorescent light. Oh, that light, buzzing in its perch above me, flickering, pulsating as though it's somehow aggravated by my presence.

When I feel the urge to scratch an itch on my face, I realize that my hands are tied behind the back of the wooden chair I'm sitting in.

"Hello?" I say into the emptiness. The only response I get is the echo of my own voice and the irritating flicker of the light, a flagrant violation of the Third Geneva Convention in its own right.

I hear a door open behind me. Footsteps. Multiple people. I close my eyes and brace for the hit I know is coming. Which will it be? A punch to the head? A whip to the back? A whack in the nuts with a thick rope tied in an even thicker knot? Ever see *Casino Royale* with Daniel Craig? I think every man grabbed his balls while watching that.

As the footsteps move past me, I open my eyes and see three people line up in front of me. The trio is intimidating, though I don't think they're here to inflict physical harm. No, these look like the type of people who'd prosecute me for the extensive yet perfectly legal stash of porn on my home computer instead. Don't judge. A single guy has needs.

Next to Elena—who now wears a black pants suit—stand two men, both dapper, sporting suits and ties. There is a stark generational gap between the two men. The first man, standing in the middle, has a Clark Kent persona about him. He's tall, maybe 6'2" or 6'3", has a full head of dark, closely-cropped hair and is kind of gangly and awkward-looking. Clark looks to be around my age, if not a touch older, and wears eyeglasses to boot.

The elder of the two men is a short, stout, meek-looking man in his sixties with white hair on the top of his head. When he came in, I could see that he's balding in the back of his head. If he's lived this long and only has that small of a bald spot on his head, good for him. I also noticed that the old man walks with a slight limp and has a

minor hunch in his back. Based on age and appearance, I don't think it's a stretch to say that the old guy is probably the wisest of the triumvirate, making him the most difficult to pull one over on.

"Untie him," the elder man tells Clark Kent.

The young man comes around behind my chair and starts tugging at the rope.

"You're not going to be a problem, are you?" the old man says with a sort of deep, booming voice and an unmistakable Southern drawl. I shake my head as Clark makes headway with the rope behind me.

"Where am I?" I say, looking up at that damn light again.

The old man clasps his hands and completely ignores my question. "You must be hungry."

I furrow my brow, questioning the turn this situation has taken. "Very."

The old man waves at someone behind me. I turn around and see a mirror, two-way, I presume.

The Man of Steel finishes untying me and returns to his place near Elena and the old man. I want to scratch the itchy rope marks on my wrists but my face ... oh, my face. Razor burn is a bitch. I start scratching under my chin and work my way up to my cheeks, eventually building up more of a rub than a scratch.

Out of the door behind me comes an older woman, built like a linebacker. The graying bun perched on the top of her head is none too intimidating, though. She rolls a table on wheels in my direction.

"You like Cuban food?" says the old man.

"Never had it."

The lady puts the food in front of me. It's a hearty-looking meal of grilled chicken breast on a bed of yellow rice. The aroma and steam it exudes fills my nostrils. Also, a paper cup filled to the brim with soda. I pick up the cup before looking at the old man.

"It's not poisoned, I promise."

I take a small sip. Definitely Pepsi and, for now, definitely sterile. I'm usually an uncola guy but I'm not complaining. This is much better than what I had envisioned when I first heard my captors walk in.

"It's *arroz con pollo*. Agent Jimenez's signature recipe," says the old man, nodding in Elena's direction. "Can we get you anything else?"

"Yeah. You don't happen to have any lotion or aftershave, do you? My face itches real bad."

The trio looks amongst themselves, caught off guard. These guys were prepared

but not *that* prepared. Finally, Elena reaches inside her suit jacket and pulls out a small bottle.

“Here,” she says, brandishing the bottle. “Hope you don’t mind vanilla.”

While I love that scent, I don’t usually wear it myself. I grin and nod my head, creating a basket with my hands. Elena tosses the bottle and throws a perfect strike with the seriousness of a baseball pitcher. I squeeze a fairly small amount of lotion out of the bottle and massage it into my face.

I pick up my fork and start gathering rice with it. “Okay, so when do we get to the part where you tell me who the hell you guys are?”

“My name’s Donald Richardson,” says the old man. “This here is Nick Hamilton and I believe you’ve already met Elena Jimenez.”

“Yeah, she’s a real knock-out.”

“Sorry she drugged you. We had to make sure you wouldn’t run,” he says.

“I think just calling me in would have sufficed,” I say.

“We couldn’t risk you seeing our location,” Richardson says. “Not yet, at least.”

“That’s reassuring,” I say through a big wad of rice in my mouth.

Richardson draws closer to me, arm’s length in fact, making me nervous for the first time since these guys first showed themselves.

“Calvin, what would you do if I told you I could give you a chance to change the world?”

I stop chewing, Pepsi in hand. “I’d say bullshit.”

“What if I told you that you could be an Agent of Influence?”

“Excuse me?” I say, nearly choking on my soda.

“Influence. You know what it means to be influential, don’t you?”

I nod my head.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Calvin, you are at the Philadelphia branch of the Agency of Influence.”

I laugh, inadvertently projecting a grain of rice onto Richardson’s weathered face.

The old man doesn’t flinch.

“Agency of Influence,” I say. “That’s funny. Do I call each of you ‘Agent’ then?”

The trio remains poker faced. These people are serious.

“Your reaction was predictable, Cal—can I call you Cal?”

I throw my hands up, afraid of what will follow. “Why not?”

“We’ve set up a tour of our facility just for you. When we’re through, you’ll see ... this is no joke.” Agent Richardson motions for me to stand. Hamilton and Jimenez