THE BARKING CEASES



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For Zella,
who reminds me that a name is only as good
as the truth we build behind it.

“Identity is not an immutable brand or an algorithmic search result; it is a moral debt. Deflecting ancestral trauma through reflexive irony only hollows out the self, making it hospitable to monsters.”

PART ONE

THE INHERITED MUGSHOT

Chapter 1: Fifth Avenue Collect Call

The drizzle along Fifth Avenue had reached that specific late-October temperature that turned merino wool into wet dog hair. David Berkowitz balanced two cardboard cups of lukewarm oat cortado against his ribs, his thumb navigating past spam alerts on a cracked iPhone screen, when an Ohio area code pierced the steady hum of midtown traffic.

He didn’t swipe ignore. At 2:14 on a Tuesday, an unknown number was either a venture partner asking why Serial Marketers hadn’t delivered their deck or an offshore debt aggregator looking for the prior holder of his SIM card.

“David Berkowitz?” The voice was breathless, midwestern, powered by filtered water and aggressive phone-tree commission targets. “Lane here with Apex Publishing Acquisitions. We’ve been tracking the rights reversion on your 1980s inspirational testimony, and our European desk wants to fast-track an anniversary commemorative run.”

David stopped under the green canvas awning of a florist near Twenty-First. “Lane. You have the wrong David Berkowitz. I was born in 1985 in Livingston, New Jersey. I run a brand consultancy.”

“Right, of course, the legal deniability clause,” Lane continued without a pause, rustling paper against a speakerphone. “Our legal department reviewed the Sullivan Act parameters. If we position this under European rights syndication through our Frankfurt branch, we can clear the advance escrow before the victims’ board flags the title.”

David stared at his wet shoes. For thirty-eight years, the name had been a tax he paid on existence—a roll-call punchline in seventh grade, an algorithmic mismatch on airline boarding passes, an uncomfortable silence whenever an Uber driver glanced in the rearview mirror. Usually, he apologized. Usually, he cracked the rehearsed, defusing joke before anyone else could make it.

Instead, he felt an icy, delinquent impulse take the wheel. He pressed the receiver tighter to his jaw, stepped closer to the masonry, and lowered his voice to a dry, theatrical whisper.

“Lane,” he muttered. “Do you have any idea how much a pack of Newport 100s costs in Cell Block D right now?”

A dead hush dropped over the Canton line. Then a sharp, frightened intake of breath.

“Oh,” Lane whispered, her corporate cadence instantly replaced by awe. “Oh God. Is this an unmonitored line? Did I reach you during recreation?”

David looked out at the yellow cabs splashing through the gutters of Manhattan. “Send the onboard paperwork to my research desk,” he said, rattling off a burner ProtonMail address. “And don't ever call during chow again.”

He tapped end call. He took a sip of the tepid cortado. It was the first time in his entire life the name had given him the upper hand.

* * *

Chapter 2: The Three Davids

There were three Davids in the air above Brooklyn, and two of them were completely innocent.

The first was David Berkowitz Senior, who had worked fifty years with steam irons and heavy cutting shears in the garret shops off Seventh Avenue. He smelled of chalk, damp wool, and stale seltzer. When he died in the autumn of 1984, the family held shiva in an apartment smelling of brisket and mothballs, mourning a man whose name stood for reliable seams, honest credit, and quiet dignity.

Ten months later, in August 1985, Ruth Berkowitz gave birth in Livingston, New Jersey. She named the boy David in plain, unquestioned continuity—an ordinary Jewish act of memorializing a righteous grandfather. But eight years earlier, a postal worker from Yonkers with the exact same name had emptied a .44-caliber Charter Arms Bulldog into parked cars across the boroughs, carving the syllables permanently into American tabloid mythology.

By the time David turned twelve, the name was not neighborhood terror; it was syndicated cable lore. It was A&E Investigative Reports, late-night jokes on basic cable, and teachers freezing momentarily as their finger hit his line on the roll call. David learned early that if he made the joke first, the joke couldn't hurt him. He turned the name into an ironist’s shield—a funny, self-deprecating routine that disarmed strangers and later became the foundation of his boutique agency, Serial Marketers.

Sitting in his Park Slope kitchen past midnight, watching the city lights through the fire escape, David opened the incoming email from Canton, Ohio. The subject line glowed in bold Helvetica:

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FROM: acquisitions@apex-international-press.com
TO: d.berkowitz.research@proton.me
DATE: October 24, 2023, 23:41 EST
SUBJECT: AUTHOR ONBOARDING PACKET // INMATE D. BERKOWITZ (#78A1976)

Enclosed please find the electronic rights schedule and escrow routing
paperwork for the European reissue of your spiritual prison memoirs. Please
transmit custodial verification at your earliest convenience.
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David leaned back in his chair. A sane man would have deleted the address. A professional would have forwarded it to the New York State Department of Corrections. But David had spent thirty-eight years carrying someone else’s shame for free. The screen hummed softly in the dark, waiting for an answer.

“IDENTITY IS A MORAL DEBT.”

When brand consultant David Berkowitz is mistaken by an overseas vanity press for New York’s most notorious imprisoned killer, he transforms a bureaucratic error into a lucrative online farce. He invents an absurd “jailhouse redemption” scripture and a corrupt prison warden to mock the predatory publishers.

But the joke collapses when an obsessive reader takes the fictional lore as gospel—literalizing David’s satire in real-world blood. To disrantle the digital monster he authored, David must face the plain weight of his own before the hoax destroys everything he loves.



DAVID BERKOWITZ is the founder of Serial Marketers and a longtime marketing strategist based in New York City. *The Barking Ceases* is his debut novel.

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