

CHECKERS

Written by

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FADE IN

EXT. LONG ISLAND SUBURB - DAY

Neatly trimmed except for one dilapidated house. An older model car pulls up in front of it.

INT. CAR - DAY

HARRY CRADDOCK, 45 and overweight, chomps on a dripping sandwich as he swats at a fly with a rolled up newspaper. He crushes the insect on a stained seat and flicks it on a floor littered with crumpled lottery tickets.

Harry eyes the strange house, grabs a small camera and snaps a couple of pictures.

EXT. LONG ISLAND SUBURB - DAY

NEIGHBORS watch Harry get out of his car and move toward the rundown house.

Harry clears his throat, BURPS, tucks in his shirt, pulls out a writing pad and knocks on the door.

A large man with no shirt answers. This is SPIDER-MAN. His gut spills over his belt and his skin is covered in tattoos of spiders.

HARRY

Harry Craddock from the
Investigator. We spoke on the
phone.

SPIDER-MAN

Who?

HARRY

Craddock from the National
Investigator. You know. We spoke on
the phone this morning. About doing
the interview?

SPIDER-MAN

Oh yeah - yeah. The Investigator.
My sister lines the cat pan with
that thing. Says it's just the
right size.

HARRY

Uh, yes. So. You're Spiderman.

SPIDER-MAN

Yeah.

HARRY

Mind if I come in?

Spider-man's massive body doesn't budge.

SPIDER-MAN

No pictures of my kids. My kids
don't like pictures.

HARRY

Gotcha. No shots of the kids. How
many do you have?

SPIDER-MAN

Two thousand, nine-hundred and
twenty six at last count.

A large spider scurries up the door frame. Harry is startled,
but recovers.

HARRY

Maybe I better take a picture
before we go inside. How about a
shot of you here at the door?

SPIDER-MAN

Yeah, okay.

Harry snaps a picture of the man's stomach.

SPIDER-MAN (cont'd)
Ya want one of my back too?

Spider-man turns around and a huge image of a tarantula spreads across his hairy back. There is the sound of a ZIPPER as he starts undoing his pants.

HARRY
Hold on big fella. No need for that.

SPIDER-MAN
(over his shoulder)
But ya can't see the whole thing unless I drop my pants.

Spider-man lowers his pants revealing a super hairy butt crack.

HARRY
Low enough. Any further would be a hair too intense for our younger readers.

Harry gets the shot and pockets the camera. Spider-man disappears inside. Harry hesitates.

SPIDER-MAN (O.S.)
Ya comin' or what?

Harry heaves a SIGH and crosses the threshold.

INT. SPIDER-MAN'S HOUSE - DAY

Dark and overrun with real and fake spiders, spider webs, and pictures of spiders. Harry dodges thick webs and dangling spiders as he follows Spider-man.

SPIDER-MAN
Watch your step. I don't want any of my kids gettin' hurt.

Harry tip toes over the CREAKY floorboards. Spider-man flops into a worn chair and slaps a nearby couch for Harry to sit. Spiders scamper out from under the shredded cushion.

HARRY

No thanks. I like to think on my feet.

SPIDER-MAN

(hard)

Sit down!

Harry nervously sits on the edge of the couch.

HARRY

So, you have names for all your spiders, kids?

SPIDER-MAN

Yeah. I like to name them after the Greek Gods.

HARRY

And you say they talk to you?

SPIDER-MAN

I have a few troublemakers, but most of 'em talk.

HARRY

In English?

SPIDER-MAN

Yeah.

HARRY

Your tattoos -- how long have you...

Something spidery moves on Spider-man's shoulder.

HARRY (cont'd)

Did that tattoo just move?

SPIDER-MAN

That ain't no tattoo. That's Zeus.
He likes sittin' there. We watch TV
together. Looks like his sister's
taken a shine to ya.

Harry follows Spider-man's eyes to the multi-legged mammoth on his pants. He jerks to his feet, swats the insect with his notepad, and looks up to see Spider-man's fist seconds before it connects with his face.

INT. HOSPITAL - PATIENT ROOM - DAY

Harry has a black eye, spider bites on his face and neck, and bandages on his head. He winces as a NURSE dabs medication on the sores.

NURSE #1

This should help with the
discomfort.

HARRY

The word is "pain." What is it with
you people? Discomfort is when you
sit on the remote. This is pain.

NURSE #1

Yes. Mr. Craddock.

HARRY

When am I getting out of here?

NURSE #1

The doctor said probably sometime
tomorrow.

Harry notices the New York Times on a nearby chair.

HARRY

Who left that?

NURSE

Left what?

HARRY

That piece of trash.

NURSE

The newspaper?

HARRY

Correction. It's trash.

NURSE #1

Yes. Mr. Craddock. You had a visitor while you were in X-ray. I believe his name was Barrington.

HARRY

Ah. Yes. And who better to leave trash but a rat.

BRIAN BARRINGTON enters -- 30ish with a classy appearance that almost hides a smarmy nature.

BARRINGTON

Hello Craddock. Wish I could say you never looked better.

HARRY

Barrington.

The Nurse exits, leaving the Times on the chair.

BARRINGTON

Rough assignment?

HARRY

And like a good vulture, you've come to pick the bones.

BARRINGTON

My, my. We are touchy today. Must be your wounds - or maybe your wounded pride.

HARRY

Get to the point. Or did you slither in just to gloat?

BARRINGTON

I'm here on a mission of mercy. You need some help and I'm the guy who can give it to you.

HARRY

Correction. You're the guy who served up the crapload of lies that destroyed my career.

BARRINGTON

Let it go Harry. Your face was on too many busses anyway.

HARRY

How about we reverse that in your case. Arrange for a bus on your face.

Barrington crosses to the chair with the Times, picks it up and tosses it on Harry's bed as he sits.

BARRINGTON

Such venom. You've got to let go of that poison. Look to the future. Especially now that Priscilla has agreed to hire you back.

HARRY

I'm all tingly.

BARRINGTON

With certain conditions of course.

HARRY

Of course. How is the old dragon lady? Still protecting your ass while you screw hers?

BARRINGTON

That's no way to talk about your managing editor. Writing for a rag like the Investigator has made you a much coarser human being.

HARRY

A knife in the back tends to produce the same result.

BARRINGTON

Would you like to hear Priscilla's offer?

Harry clenches his jaw. Barrington rises.

BARRINGTON (cont'd)

We would hire you, and pay you well, to dig for the juicy stuff. I know you enjoy that sort of thing. But the depth of your scandal could never allow The Times to run your byline again.

HARRY

Translation. You get the credit and I get the crap.

BARRINGTON

You'd be paid triple what you're making now. Good God man, look at what you're doing with your life!

Harry's face is set with anger.

BARRINGTON (cont'd)

Think about it. You know my number.

HARRY

Yeah. I know your number. Tell the dragon lady she can take her job and --

BARRINGTON

Now Harry - watch your temper. A man your age shouldn't get too worked up. Bad for the ol' ticker.

HARRY

Get out.

Barrington smiles and exits.

HARRY (cont'd)

(yelling after him)

Tell that bitch Harry Craddock will be back on top in this city before she has a chance to crawl back on top of you!

He lunges for the Times and heaves it at the door.

EXT. MANHATTAN - NATIONAL INVESTIGATOR OFFICES - DAY

Harry is without his bandages, but still has a bruised face and spider bites. He stands over a garbage bin scratching off a handful of instant win lottery tickets.

HARRY

Come on, come on.

He crumples them all and tosses them in the trash. On his way into the building he passes a male STREET PERSON.

STREET PERSON

Harry! How ya doin'? Hey, ya look worse than me. What happened?

Harry digs deep into his pocket and gives the guy a couple of bucks.

HARRY

(softly)

Can't tell ya, but it involves hot women, international money laundering, and a secret government plot.

STREET PERSON

Ata boy Harry!

Harry moves toward the entrance of the building.

STREET PERSON (cont'd)

(calling after him)

Hey, love that story about the people who hatched the alien baby in their greenhouse. When you gonna do a story about me? I'm still hearing those voices!

Harry waves at the man and enters the building.

INT. NATIONAL INVESTIGATOR OFFICES - DAY

Harry crosses to his desk and is accosted by his editor, VINCENT WARSHEVSKI, a 50-something man with a bull-dog face and acrid demeanor.

WARSHEVSKI

Craddock. Heard what happened. Tough break. Did ya get the story?

HARRY

Thanks for your concern.

WARSHEVSKI

So whatdya want from me? It's a tough business.

HARRY

Correction. It's a sleazy business.

WARSHEVSKI

Are we gonna go through that again?
So Spider-man got the best of ya.
Shit happens. I thought ya could
handle it.

HARRY

(gets in Warshevski's
face)

For future reference, I do not like
to associate with anything that
crawls out from under a rock --
that includes spiders, slugs, and
maggots like you!

WARSHEVSKI

Ya wanna leave? Ya wanna leave? Go
ahead -- leave!

Harry turns to exit and then Warshevski fires the silver
bullet.

WARSHEVSKI (cont'd)

But ya better remember -- this is
the only game in town for ya
Craddock. Who's gonna hire ya after
what you did?

Harry stops, but does not turn around. He continues his exit.

WARSHEVSKI (cont'd)

(yelling after him)

I'll let ya do some real stuff on
my dime! This could be the big one
you've been waitin' for.

This time, Harry stops and turns. Warshevski reels him in.

WARSHEVSKI (cont'd)

You're gonna love it. It's a
retirement home upstate called
Willowbrook.

Warshevski crosses to Harry.

WARSHEVSKI (cont'd)

Ya know -- old folks, corruption,
death.

Harry studies his boss' gleeful face.

HARRY

That's it? A retirement home?
Didn't we do that a month ago?

WARSHEVSKI

Nah. You're thinking of that old
biker dude who saw bigfoot.

HARRY

I'm wasting my life with this shit.
Do you know how close I came to
winning the Pulitzer?

Warshevski rolls his eyes.

WARSHEVSKI

Yeah, I know. King Craddock. But
you screwed up and now I'm all ya
got.

Harry grabs Warshevski by the collar.

HARRY

Correction. I didn't screw up. I
was thrown under the bus by a God
damn snake.

WARSHEVSKI

Let go of me or you can add assault
to your rap sheet.

Harry releases Warshevski.

HARRY

All I want is a story worthy of my talents. That's all I ask. Is that so hard?

WARSHEVSKI

Okay. Let's do the one about the guy who owes three months back rent on his fancy Manhattan digs.

Harry's eyes narrow.

WARSHEVSKI (cont'd)

Your landlord was in here again.

Harry's shoulders sag. After a couple of beats...

HARRY

So what's the retirement home thing?

WARSHEVSKI

It's simple. Willowbrook has a cat that can play checkers. Some old guy sent a letter. He asked for you special.

HARRY

Why me?

WARSHEVSKI

Dunno. But he says the cat plays the game like a pro.

HARRY

Chess?

WARSHEVSKI

No, checkers. The cat's name is Checkers and he plays checkers. Get it?

HARRY

(yawns)

Are you sure it's not chess? At least there'd be some strategy involved.

WARSHEVSKI

Hey. My sister plays checkers. She's no airhead.

HARRY

Isn't she the one who slugged her boyfriend in a courthouse? That was a brilliant move.

WARSHEVSKI

Maybe I should call your landlord smart ass.

HARRY

You can call my landlord anything you want.

WARSHEVSKI

Look at me laughin'. Ya want this job or not?

HARRY

I know. I know. The only game in town.

WARSHEVSKI

While you're gettin' the story on the cat, you do some snoopin' around. Uncover some dirt.

HARRY

So I'm doing two stories -- the Checkers thing and the piece on the retirement home.

WARSHEVSKI

Yeah.

HARRY

And you're paying me for both?

WARSHEVSKI

Yeah.

HARRY

What's the catch?

WARSHEVSKI

No catch. Just get me the story -
uh - stories.

EXT. MANHATTAN STREET - NEWSSTAND - NIGHT

Harry approaches. SKEETER mans the booth -- a 17-year-old black kid full of energy and dreams.

SKEETER

Hey, Mr. C, you don't look so good.
What's the story?

HARRY

I'd rather not go into it.

SKEETER

Have anything to do with the Spider-
man gig?

HARRY

Can we change the subject? I need a
favor.

SKEETER

Name it.

HARRY

I need a ride to my car. I can't
take the train looking like this.

SKEETER
Sure. Where is it?

HARRY
Out on Long Island.

Harry eyes the newspapers.

HARRY (cont'd)
What's the competition got to say?

Skeeter hands him a batch of tabloids.

SKEETER
The usual stuff -- alien beings
living under an abandoned drive-in
movie place, Elvis running a gas
station outside Scranton, and some
senator caught with a teen queen.

Harry takes the papers.

HARRY
Put 'em on my tab would ya?

SKEETER
That's okay, they're on me.

HARRY
Whatdya mean "they're on me"?

SKEETER
What are friends for?

HARRY
Spill it Skeeter.

SKEETER
Mr. Lambert's been checking the
books.

Harry digs in his pocket and hands Skeeter a scratched off
instant win lottery ticket.

HARRY

Here. It'll clean up some of my
tab.

Skeeter takes it.

SKEETER

Hey. You finally got a winner.
(then thinking)
Sorry Mr. C.

A bus passes by with Barrington's smiling face plastered on the side advertising the New York Times. Skeeter tries to recover Harry's attention.

SKEETER (cont'd)

Hey Mr. C., I got to tell ya something kinda cool -- I've applied to NYU. Wasn't going to, but I kinda got thinking about what you said. So I'm giving it a try.

HARRY

That's terrific.

SKEETER

With all you know about the newspaper biz, I bet you could be a professor.

Harry snaps to attention, turns sideways, shoulders back, head in the air, sucks in his paunch.

HARRY

Got that professor look don't I?

SKEETER

Almost there. Gotta tuck in your shirt.

Harry does so and holds his head higher and sneers.

HARRY

How's this? You have to look like
you're smelling something bad.

SKEETER

Perfect.

EXT. LONG ISLAND SUBURB - NIGHT

Harry's car is still parked outside Spider-man's house.
Skeeter's rusty van pulls up -- but not too close. The
headlights switch off.

INT. SKEETER'S VAN - NIGHT

Harry and Skeeter.

HARRY

Stay back here. If you see a huge
man come out of that house, run him
over.

SKEETER

What?

HARRY

Several times.

Harry exits the van.

EXT. LONG ISLAND SUBURB - NIGHT

Harry makes a dash for his car. He sees a large dent in the
roof and winces. Spider-man kicks open the front door of his
house. He has a baseball bat in his hand.

SPIDER-MAN

Hey you!

Harry scrambles to unlock his car door and dives in the seat.
He fumbles with the keys. Spider-man twirls the baseball bat
over his head as he approaches Harry's car.

INT. SKEETER'S VAN - NIGHT

Skeeter frantically blasts his HORN to distract Spider-man.

EXT. LONG ISLAND SUBURB - NIGHT

Spider-man stops his advance. Harry starts the car and disappears down the road.

INT. SKEETER'S VAN - NIGHT

Through the windshield Skeeter sees the huge man moving toward him, bat twirling over his head.

SKEETER

Spider-man, hell. Looks more like
Bat-man to me.

Skeeter hits the gas.

EXT. LONG ISLAND SUBURB - NIGHT

Spider-man slugs the van as it passes, dislodging a rusting chunk of metal that bounces down the road.

INT. WILLOWBROOK RETIREMENT HOME - RECREATION ROOM - DAY

Harry talks with PROF. WILLIAM HOLLENBECK, a distinguished gentleman of 70 with trimmed gray beard and wire-rimmed glasses.

There are a few other ELDERLY RESIDENTS in the room, as well as STAFF. The staff uniform includes a hat with a broad rim that stretches around the head.

CHECKERS rubs the professor's leg.

HOLLENBECK

(to the cat)

Checkers, let's show this nice
gentleman what you can do.

Hollenbeck sits on one side of the game board and Checkers jumps to the opposite chair. Harry takes a seat and watches the cat use his nose to push the game piece. Harry snaps a picture.

HARRY

When did you first notice the cat could do this?

HOLLENBECK

It was Christmas eve. Sylvester kept pawing at one of the gifts under the tree.

HARRY

Sylvester?

HOLLENBECK

That was his name before we discovered his talent. If I may continue.

HARRY

After Stallone or the cartoon cat?

HOLLENBECK

Excuse me?

HARRY

Ya know. The name Sylvester.

HOLLENBECK

That doesn't have any bearing on what I am trying to tell you.

Harry watches the staff tend to some of the other residents. A sexy NURSE catches his eye.

HARRY

Just being thorough.

Hollenbeck follows Harry's gaze. A low GROWL emanates from deep within Harry as he leers at the Nurse. Checkers HISSSES.

HOLLENBECK

Mr. Craddock. You're upsetting
Checkers. He'll be off his game.

Harry looks at Hollenbeck.

HARRY

Sorry. Did you say something?

HOLLENBECK

I was answering your question about
Checkers.

HARRY

Yeah, yeah. Got it.

Harry leans into the old man.

HARRY (cont'd)

Tell me. How is it here? How are
you treated?

HOLLENBECK

This is a lovely place. A fine
place.

HARRY

(softly)

I imagine people take a lot of
medicines here. The staff is
probably overworked. Ever seen any
dangerous mixups?

HOLLENBECK

That type of thing never happens
here. We have an excellent staff.
Very knowledgeable about
gerontological needs and extremely
competent.

HARRY

Still, they're only human. Ya know
what I mean?

Hollenbeck glances at Harry as if he has something to say and then returns his attention to the cat. Harry is bolstered by the reaction.

HARRY (cont'd)

(softly)

Ever seen anyone, ya know, get
pushed around?

HOLLENBECK

(indignantly)

Mr. Craddock, this is a top rated
retirement facility.

HARRY

Sorry.

(beat)

Call me Harry.

(looking at the ceiling)

Kind of an old building. Has it
been inspected lately?

HOLLENBECK

Regular inspections are carried
out. Shouldn't you be asking me
questions about Checkers?

HARRY

Yeah. Sure.

The cat bats a game piece with his paw.

HARRY (cont'd)

It's just that I had an uncle who
spent some time in one of these
places. Always complained about it.

HOLLENBECK

Some people like to complain.

Harry watches Hollenbeck and the cat. An ELDERLY WOMAN across the room and then SNEEZES.

HARRY

His biggest complaint was the air quality. Colds and allergies. The flu.

(beat)

I mean, I'm surprised they even allow you to have a cat what with cat dander, hair, fleas, that sort of thing.

HOLLENBECK

Checkers is bathed and combed regularly.

HARRY

Mold. That was the other thing. Dangerous you know.

HOLLENBECK

I am very aware of the dangers of mold spores. Now watch this move.

Checkers bats at another game piece. Harry SIGHS. He rises.

HARRY

Okay. I got everything I need.

HOLLENBECK

Leaving so soon? But I thought we'd have some tea. One of the staff brought in some excellent home baked cookies.

HARRY

Maybe another time.

EXT. WILLOWBROOK - DAY

Security cameras, well manicured grounds. A scaffolding surrounds the building as if it is being refurbished.

Hollenbeck escorts Harry several feet from the main building. Checkers joins them and rubs Harry's pant leg. Harry pets the cat.

HARRY

Thanks professor. I'll call you
when the story runs.

Harry walks away. Hollenbeck follows him.

HOLLENBECK

Harry, before you leave...
(under his breath)
...there is something I want to
tell you.

HARRY

Yeah?

HOLLENBECK

(softly)
You've got to help us. We're being
held against our will.

Harry's eyes brighten and he readies his note pad.

HARRY

I'm listening.

HOLLENBECK

It's the staff -- they're aliens.

HARRY

(confused)
Like illegal aliens?

HOLLENBECK

Like extraterrestrials. We're being studied like rats in a laboratory and we're in great danger. The mother ship will be arriving soon to take us away.