

Zero-Sum Game

**Gregory Huffstutter
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One

“What the hell’s that?” Theresa Partridge stumbled through the cockpit door, hearing what sounded like a pair of sneakers thudding down an air shaft.

“Turbulence,” the pilot replied.

That’s what flyboys always say when they don’t know what’s wrong. Just like they always tried looking down her blouse. And sure enough, helping Theresa upright, the co-pilot lingered with his hand on her hip (don’t think she didn’t notice the wedding band!) and traced the seam of her thong.

It wasn’t exactly a curse... she’d parlayed her curves into gigs as a Hooters waitress, Budweiser swimsuit model, and now, the crème de la crème, a stewardess (ahem, flight attendant) on the team plane for the Las Vegas Outlaws.

Everything about the private jet, including herself, was top-shelf. Art Poulig, the owner of Major League Baseball’s newest expansion team, spared no expense on the amenities: fully-reclining seats, personal entertainment units, private chef, and deluxe bathrooms with more than enough room for Theresa to give the shortstop 30,000-foot blow jobs.

Speaking of which, Mr. BJ went two-for-three tonight. His rule: Hummers only after multi-hit games.

My way of staying motivated, he claimed. Flawed logic, obviously, as Mr. BJ’s batting average limped in at .220 after signing a gargantuan, six-year contract.

He hadn’t shared any of his signing bonus with Theresa, aside from a tennis bracelet and bottle of Channel #4. But that was OK. Their bathroom encounters tapered off during his extended slump, and now she had a new suitor stepping to the plate.

Returning to the main cabin, Theresa was immediately flagged down by “Lips” Lipson in Row 2. “Did we hit a goat?”

“Air pocket,” she said to the Outlaws’ red-faced radio announcer.

“And they say I’m full of hot air.” Lips played the maracas with his empty scotch glass. “How about a refill, sweetheart? Long flight to Boston, and BOZ is in rare form.”

As Theresa made her way towards the galley’s wet bar, the barometer spiked. The high-pressure front wasn’t emanating from outside, but Row 5, where BOZ laid into Señor Suave.

“No, I *want* you to explain it to me! *How* could you call a slider to Ichiro?” The Outlaw’s manager, who normally lived up to the acronym for “Buddhist On Zoloft,” punctuated his question by jabbing a callused thumb at a video monitor.

“His hands getting inside the cutter,” replied Señor Suave, the back-up catcher. “I need something to break there.”

“That’s not how we scouted him!”

“So he roll that slider over and ground out, you say how smart I am. We throw on his hands all day! Best hitters make adjustments – the fuck I should do? Jus’ walk the *puta*?”

Despite the tirade, Señor Suave winked at Theresa as she passed. Stepping in after the team’s All-Star receiver ruptured an Achilles, he’d provided one of the few bright spots in a lackluster season, nailing 50% of would-be base-stealers and contributing 18 jacks.

She winked back; he’d promised to buy her a two-bedroom condo in the off-season.

“I thought you Domo’s knew how to call a game,” said BOZ, still breathing fire. “Or did mama forget to teach you to listen.”

“Don’t go there, *Jefe!*”

From personal experience, Theresa knew the two topics guaranteed to stoke Señor Suave’s Latin temper were his Dominican homeland and his mother. She wondered why BOZ would pick a fight with the one player exceeding expectations, let alone vent his frustrations outside the clubhouse – in full view of reporters, support staff, and other players.

Probably had something to do with getting swept by the Mariners.

Again.

Not wanting to rubber-neck, Theresa continued aft, passing the head trainer (buried in a Tom Clancy novel), starting left fielder (asleep under headphones), and low-seniority bullpen guys (huddled around a Will Farrell movie).

Rows 18-22 were reserved for players with five years of big-league tenure, minimum. Mr. BJ ran a standing hearts game, with thousands changing hands per flight – and tonight’s suckers included one surprising addition.

Donnie Walker, an up-and-coming 7th inning specialist, was new enough to the team that Theresa had yet to settle on a pet nickname. He was Mormon, never drank or smoked, and didn’t have the tenure to sit in the back of the plane, as first and second-year players were supposed to be seen, not heard. Mr. BJ must be getting soft – or running out of people willing to lose a C-note a point.

“We going to talk about this?” Walker was saying as she approached, his peach-fuzz chin trembling.

“Nothing to talk about, rook. It’s none of your concern.” Mr. BJ tossed a nine of clubs, scooped up the trick, and noticed her standing in the aisle. “See the box score?”

She arched her shoulders, accentuating her cleavage. “Triple and a single – two RBIs.”

No need to elaborate. His question was their cue to meet in the bathroom once the pilot dimmed the overhead lights.

Theresa felt the plane slow and descend, which was odd, since they’d reached cruising altitude only minutes earlier. She wanted to go back and check with the pilots, but now Señor Suave was blocking the aisle, storming towards the bathroom.

“*Put a madre!* How I supposed to play for that cocksucker, him yap-yap-yapping ‘bout every pitch?!” Seeing her, he stopped his ranting.

Theresa got a small charge from the physical proximity of both suitors. Señor Suave, the hot-blooded one, who threw out compliments as readily as curses and baserunners, calling her his “*tamale blanca*.” She wasn’t Catholic, so that’d be a deal-breaker with his *mamá*. On the other hand, Mr. BJ had the bad-boy sneer that made her heart race – and might have the stats to wind up in Cooperstown if he could tally 50 more doubles. But he was rumored to be on the trading block, and unlike Señor Suave, married.

Wondering about the best way to flirt while holding a scotch glass, Theresa decided on the ever-reliable hair flip. Before she could complete the blonde motion, the plane took a sudden nose-dive, the cabin floor dropping to a 45-degree angle.

Un-tethered, Theresa pitched upwards and crumpled against the overhanging luggage bin. She landed across Mr. BJ's card game, her neck flopping to one side like an overcooked string bean.

Her pulverized C3 vertebrae turned out to be a blessing, as the sudden rush of unconsciousness kept Theresa from noticing Flight 877 losing altitude at 200 feet per second.

She missed the sinus ache of rapid depressurization and the disorientation of a full barrel-roll – bodies and luggage pinballing through the main cabin. She remained ignorant of the sucking vortex, the maelstrom of frigid air, as the tail section ripped away from the fuselage.

And, blissfully, she did not feel the impact as Flight 877 plummeted into the Eastern Washington countryside, a thunderous fireball shattering the pre-dawn quiet.

Two

The silver chain. That's what caught my attention – metal glinting in my flashlight beam.

I knelt and moved the surrounding brush with a twig. One end of the silver chain was attached to a charred and ruptured travel valise, the other to a leather-backed luggage tag. Underneath the Major League Baseball logo, I made out a name.

Theresa Partridge.

I wondered who Theresa was, and whether my next discovery would be her blackened, mangled body.

Two hundred yards away, in a clearing beyond the tree line, the largest chunk of fuselage smoldered. Windbreaker-clad investigators swarmed over the metal tube, operating in the glow of emergency vehicles and portable spotlights. One wing was still attached, half buried in the turf. No sign of the tail, cockpit, or opposite wing.

Nearly a full day since the accident, and firefighters still worked on hot spots at the edge of the clearing. Kerosene-scented smoke hung overhead, blocking my view of the Big Dipper and other celestial bodies.

Clearly, if there was a God, He or She wasn't a fan of the Las Vegas Outlaws.

Upon my arrival a half hour earlier, I'd tried approaching the main crash site, but Washington State Troopers closed the road and National Guardsmen manned a wide perimeter with temporary fencing and guard dogs. It didn't appear the Search & Rescue teams had expanded their sweep into this adjacent grove of pines, however, so if I could vector around—

“What'cha got there?”

I turned, my flashlight halting on a woman wearing an oversized reflective jacket.

“Just some luggage.”

She swept auburn hair from her eyes and stepped closer. “Did you flag it?”

“Was about to,” I lied. “But I’m all out.”

“Have some of mine.” She handed me an even mix of yellow and red flags. I guessed one was for debris, the other for body parts. Must’ve waited too long to decide which was which, because she asked, “First crash?”

“Yeah. Happened to be in the area and thought I’d volunteer.”

That was true if you considered ‘in the area’ to be a thousand miles away, with only Mountain Dew, Cheetos, and *Billy Joel’s Greatest Hits* to keep me company during my non-stop 17-hour drive.

Despite my fatigue and the grim circumstances, I couldn’t help noticing Mrs. Search & Rescue’s cute face – upturned nose, freckles, luminous green eyes. So I extended a hand, prepared to work my charm. “Z. Katz.”

“Shelby Kowalski, NTSB.”

I’d frequently heard those initials – for the National Transportation and Safety Board – on the radio the past day, as their spokesperson answered every question with: “No comment.” Maybe Shelby would be more forthcoming if I buttered her up.

“Kowalski, huh? I bet you’ve already heard all the good Polack jokes.”

“No, but my boyfriend has.”

Ouch... shut down in record time. Must be losing my touch.

“Come across anything interesting?” she asked.

“Set of golf clubs about a half mile back. Top-of-the-line Calloway’s. I was gonna try out the Big Bertha driver, but I ran out of range balls.”

“Any pieces of the plane?”

“Nothing yet. So what do you make of this? Al Qaeda?”

Before she could answer, her walkie-talkie crackled. “We got a live one! Sector 4 – one hundred yards northeast of the tail!”

Kowalski sprinted off, so I followed. The next ten minutes blurred into a wordless dash – ducking branches, crossing a dry riverbed, crashing through invisible spider webs.

I had difficulty keeping Kowalski in my flashlight beam. Normally, I could crank out five miles no sweat, but this gal ran like a purse snatcher, and between the long drive and lack of sleep, my legs had ankle weights.

Finally, we broke into a small pocket off the main clearing. All the trees were singed, some uprooted, their trunks angled away from the impact zone. At the center, the jet's tail section rose from the furrowed dirt.

The news reports said the team charter had been something called an MD-81 "Super 80," with twin turbofan engines under the T-shaped tail. One engine must've broken off. The other – still smoking from shrapnel-sized holes in the metal casing – was attached to the ragged edge of the fuselage.

Last year, I'd witnessed the aftermath of a booby-trapped cabin that claimed the lives of four SWAT guys and one FBI agent. That particular site had smelled bad... but this one made me want to cauterize my own nostrils. My head swam with the acrid odor of airplane fuel and scorched flesh.

The main activity was not clustered around the plane's tail, but the northeast tree line. Rescue crews lowered an airline seat from the leafy canopy, and as I circled, I could see the outline of a man still buckled into his seat. The instant he touched down, paramedics formed a huddle, obstructing my view.

"Keep everyone back!" shouted one of the medics. "Get me that stretcher!"

Kowalski waved credentials and squeezed through the checkpoint, a makeshift barrier of sawhorses and reflective tape. When I tried to follow, two Federal Agents in dark suits blocked my way, one a 6'6" beanpole, the other a tank with humorless bug eyes.

Beanpole cupped his mouth, addressing the gathering throng. "You heard the man – move it back! Authorized personnel only!"

"Back it up, buddy," grunted Bug Eyes, putting his hand on my chest.

I pointed to Kowalski, who'd started to move towards the stretcher. "I'm with her."

Bug Eyes turned and grabbed Kowalski's arm. "This guy one of yours?"

"Naw," she said, "just a local volunteer."

"Let's see some ID," Beanpole demanded, getting up in my grill.

That'd be problematic. This far outside my jurisdiction, my LAPD badge only worked against me. Let alone that small, niggling, hardly-worth-mentioning issue of being on departmental suspension. I considered whipping out my library card – maybe they'd be impressed by my lack of overdue books. "Must've left my wallet in the car."

"Run along then," said Beanpole, lifting the sawhorse. "This ain't the 4-H."

“Sure thing, boss,” I said, backing away. Unlike the main crash site, nobody had time to properly secure this part of the clearing. One end of reflective tape was anchored in a cluster of Douglas-firs, away from the portable klieg lights. Jogging over, I discovered it wouldn’t be as simple as ducking under the tape. Blackberry bushes with neck-high tentacles created an impenetrable, thorny wall.

Everyone’s attention appeared to be on the paramedics, so I shimmied up the base of the nearest Douglas-fir, sap sticking between my fingers as I made my way along an overhanging branch fifteen feet high.

My landing zone was cloaked in shadows, so I pictured the ideal PLF – what us recreational BASE-jumpers call a ‘parachute landing fall’ – and leapt.

I cleared the wall of brambles and landed in shrubs, my shin banging against something hard. The judges awarded 3.5 for style points, but a 9.0 for effectiveness. This side of the barricade, I was able to creep up on the action. Still unable to get a clear view of the survivor’s face, I asked the closest rescue worker, “Who is he? Do you know?”

He ran a hand across his soot-stained brow. “Dunno. Maybe one of the pitchers, someone was saying.”

My breath caught. Maybe fate was re-paying me for the last hellacious year. Maybe NaNu just saved himself \$20 million bucks and I’d be off the hook.

What were the odds we’d all be that lucky?

My rhetorical question was answered with a stiff forearm across my throat. Then Bug Eyes saying, “You’re starting to piss me off” while patting me down with his other hand. He stopped at my back pocket. “Wallet’s in the car, huh?”

“How ‘bout a little foreplay?” I gasped. “Dinner and movie?”

Bug Eyes fingered my California driver’s license. “Local?”

“I can explain... just tell me the name of the survivor.”

“I’m flagging your address, Mr. Katz. Next time you step foot in this zip code, you’re spending six months behind bars.”

“Look, I heard the guy’s a pitcher. Just tell me which one, dammit! *Which one??*”

Three

Omar gave the password and waited for his call to be transferred. He scanned the darkened mini-mart parking lot. In the past hour, not a single car had entered or left.

“You best have a bloody good reason for calling this late,” his contact said, irritation grating his Oxford accent. “If you’re hoping to change my mind, next time try groveling, not waking my wife.”

“It’s finished.”

“What’s finished?”

Preferring to converse in his mother tongue, Omar could manage conversational English with minor effort. He chose his next words carefully, knowing the moment they left his lips, what’s done could not be undone. “You watch the news today? The incident with the baseball team.”

His contact sucked through capped teeth. “You winding me up? That’s not the action we’ve discussed. What’s your dialing status?”

“Unsecured pay phone.” Omar knew his contact assumed the Bush Puppet Government employed an army of translators, satellites, and supercomputers to monitor every phone call. Now that worked to Omar’s advantage, because he’d be excused for being intentionally vague. “I took a chance. My way of apologizing. You’re not displeased with the results, I assume.”

“If what you say is true, this will cause great celebrations at home.” The man’s voice was a study in contradictions. Pissed at being left out of the loop, wounded by the challenge to his authority, yet excited at the prospect of taking credit for the next strike against America – proving 9/11 was no fluke, but a harbinger of things to come.

Omar now played the loyal soldier, giving his superior a small victory. “I’m drafting a communiqué for your approval. Soon, our praises will be sung from Mount Sikaram.

Taṣbaḥo 'alā khayr.”

Four

“C’mon, help a brotha out.”

This time, I flashed my LAPD badge. A replica, actually, since I’d been forced to turn in my official shield last year. The Juniper Inn’s night manager barely glanced at it, keeping his attention on the outdated computer screen.

“Like I told the last twenty *brothas* who pulled that, we’re completely booked. Try the Elks Lodge.”

“It’s being used as a temporary shelter.”

“Loads of hotels back in Prescott.”

“That’s almost 30 miles away. It’s almost midnight... have a heart.”

The balding night manager regarded my plight with the smugness of a little man given a little power. “I have a heart. What I don’t have are rooms. Now if you don’t mind, I need to lock up so I can make my rounds.”

After today’s mammoth drive – made necessary by the nationwide airport closures – the last thing I wanted was to climb back into Higgins, my ’84 Camaro. And my knees ached at the thought of sleeping in Higgins’ backseat.

News vans and government sedans choked the hotel parking lot. A yellow-toothed bellhop struggled with an overloaded luggage cart, unleashing a string of expletives when a duffel bag toppled from the pile.

“Need a hand with that?” I offered.

“Leave it. That’ll teach that no-tipping cocksucker to order me ‘round like some wetback.”

“Sounds like you could use a break. Your manager’s doing rounds, so he won’t notice if you take five, right?”

Nodding, the bellhop reached into his vest for a pack of sin sticks. “Fuckin’ owner adds two guys in the kitchen, but does he think to send someone to help me? No, Barry, just pull another double, whydon’tcha.”

“That sucks, man.”

“You here ‘causa that plane, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m not with those big-city asswipes. I’m with a small insurance agency, that’s all.”

When pulling the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ card in Hicksville USA, it helps to be wearing a plaid shirt, faded jeans and shit-kickers. And to think my girlfriend calls my wardrobe ‘worthless.’

Introducing myself, I handed Barry a business card. It had NaNu’s name on it – my boss, Nathan Nutter – since I’d never planned on working at Lakewood Trust Insurance long enough to need my own.

Nearly a year later – thanks to the glacial pace of the LAPD board of rights – the finish line was in sight. And this time, with my ace in the hole, I knew my appeal hearing would turn out differently.

I’ll forgive the brass for calling me irresponsible, immature, reckless and the loosest of cannons. They’ll forgive me for calling my original department-appointed council a hippie-dippy, incompetent hack. Then my Lieutenant will re-issue my firearm, the newspapers will clear my name, and we’ll all share a group hug while singing Kumbaya.

It could happen.

Barry the bellhop studied NaNu’s card, tendrils of smoke curling from his nose.

“They got a nice Super 8 in Prescott.”

“So I hear, but it’s a long haul.” From my childhood in Colorado Springs, I knew the smaller the town, the greater the reluctance to drive outside city limits. And from my association with a certain muck-raking activist, I knew the best way to grease wheels was to start throwing around cash, so I held up a twenty. “Any chance you could help me find somewhere closer?”

Barry made no move to take the cash. “We got a cot the kitchen staff uses sometimes. Maybe I talk them into letting you crash... if you do me a favor.”

“Name it.”

If you were going to drop several tons of metal from the sky and didn't want to hit anyone, you'd be hard pressed to do better than Pleasant Hill. The town had one traffic light, a two-block downtown, and a three-digit population. Lot sizes were measured in acres instead of square feet, and the Gold Star enjoyed the county's only valid liquor license.

Asking for Chuck, I was told by his harried wife that he was giving a statement to the FBI – again! – and goodness knows how long it was going to take this time.

The room had the vibe of a high school reunion – frequent shoulder-claps and conversations starting with, “What’s it been, since Little Rock?” But the laughs were infrequent and muted, as though nobody wanted to risk the appearance of a good time. The drinkers looked to be an even mix of rescue workers, reporters, and official investigators, some still wearing windbreakers declaring their agency affiliation.

Locals hung around the pool tables, enjoying the extended bar hours and novelty of being at the epicenter of the latest national tragedy. Easy enough to spot the difference between the locals and outsiders... if the diameter of your belt buckle was under three inches, you weren't from 'round these parts.

My radar automatically located the hottest chick in the bar – a blonde standing by the jukebox who rocked a white blouse, charcoal businesswoman's skirt, and expensive high heels. She looked to be in her mid thirties, with toned calves and tennis pro's glowing tan.

Improbably, she walked those come-f-me-pumps straight at yours truly while the opening strains of Rod Stewart's “Do You Think I'm Sexy” piped overhead.

“Wanna buy me a drink?”

It was a perfect moment – perfect, that is, if you ignored her slurred voice and the smudged mascara around her unfocused, red-rimmed eyes.

Husky voices called from the billiards table. “Yo! T! You're up!”

“Too late,” she blurted, then sashayed to a cluster of locals. They closed ranks, high-fiving their good fortune as they took turns feeding her tequila shots.

Turning away, I spied a familiar face in the entrance. Shelby Kowalski had changed from the bulky fireman's jacket into a long-sleeved cotton shirt that, sadly, revealed her soft middle and generous caboose.

She joined me at the bar. “I’m surprised you stuck around.”

“Well, my new friends at the FBI walked me to my car, but let me off with a stern talkin’ to. What can I get you?”

“Coke.”

While flagging down the bartender, I told Kowalski how I’d called all the hospitals in the state, but none would release the name of the surviving ballplayer.

“What’s it to you?”

“I’m kind of an insurance investigator.”

“Kind of?”

“Let’s just say I haven’t decided what I’m going to be when I grow up. In the meantime, my employer holds the life insurance policy on Donnie Walker. So if he’s our lucky passenger, no insurance claim. No insurance claim means my boss is off the hook, and I go home.”

“Life insurance, huh? I’ve been having a hard time getting my own policy approved – any chance you could put in a good word for me?”

“Absolutely.” I produced NaNu’s card and wrote his cell number on the reverse. “Here’s the owner. Call him day or night – the later the better, he never sleeps. Mention my name and I’m sure he’ll give you a kick-ass rate.”

“Brandon Perkins.”

“What?”

“That’s the survivor’s name. I wouldn’t call him a ‘lucky passenger’ yet – his heart stopped twice on the airlift to Walla Walla.”

“Fuck,” I said, more for my sake than Perkins’. “He gonna make it?”

“Hope so. It’d help to have an eyewitness to the crash,” Kowalski drained half her coke, whipped out a hip flask, and doctored her drink to the rim. “They never make them strong enough.”

Looking over Kowalski’s shoulder, I checked in on the Hot Drunk Chick, who prowled the pool tables, clutching the green felt for balance. Every time she passed behind a redneck leaning in for a shot, she cupped his ass, causing the locals to hoot and raise their domestic beers.

The scotch warming my belly, I re-considered Kowalski. She had fantastic green eyes and the face of a much thinner gal. Stress, pregnancy, long hours, relationship complacency – something must’ve put those extra 40 lbs. on her frame.

“I’m out of my league here,” I admitted. “Staged car crashes, fake neck injuries – that’s all I’ve been doing since leaving the force.”

“You were a cop?”

“Am a cop – on temporary leave. So, as a professional courtesy, care to share any thoughts about what happened to that plane?”

Kowalski wrinkled her nose, sparking a cascade of freckles. “Look, I can’t get into specifics. But 80% of crashes happen during take-off or landing. So when a plane goes down mid-flight – especially in clear weather – it has to be one of four things: human error, mechanical failure, sabotage, or terrorism.”

Honestly, I hadn’t considered the first two options. And judging by the talk radio stations, neither did the pundits or American public. With the impending 1st anniversary of 9/11, everyone assumed this was ‘the other shoe’ we’d been expecting to drop.

“Has anybody claimed responsibility?”

“Probably. But they won’t release any details until the voice and data recorders are examined.”

“Have the black boxes already been found?”

“Listen, the real mystery isn’t why that plane went down, it’s why something like this hasn’t happened sooner. These professional teams fly so often, it was only a matter of time before the odds caught up. Look around you. You’ve got all the top experts.” She motioned to a thin, gray-haired man sucking down a Heineken. “Paul Kirkpatrick, the FAA’s lead investigator on USAir #427 and TWA #800. Behind him, my boss at the NTSB, Martin Vanderslice, who worked on Lockerbie, ValuJet, and the Payne Stewart crash. You name the three-letter acronym, they’re all here... so why don’t you let the pro’s handle this? Thanks for the referral and the Coke.”

With that, she rejoined her colleagues, leaving me staring at her half-melted ice cubes. Checking back on the Hot Drunk Chick, I saw things had progressed from stupid to dangerous.

She listed to starboard as though taking on water. Between swells, she got passed between a pair of rednecks, who took turns groping her blouse and sticking their tongues in her ear. In protest – no doubt – she jerked her hand and knocked off her assailant’s cowboy hat.

My cue.

Moseying over to the rack of sticks, I selected a nice 42” with a rosewood and maple pattern.

“All gone,” she mumbled as I approached. “They’re all gone.”

“That’s right,” the taller redneck answered as he pawed her cleavage. “But we’re right here, sweet cheeks. About to show you a good time all night long.”

I stepped into his airspace and tapped his John Deere T-shirt. “You best step off, bud.”

“Scuse me?”

“Find somewhere else to put your grubby mitts.”

He squared on me, while his shorter cohort moved to flank. “I’ll put my damn hands anywhere I want.”

Whipping out the pool cue, I thrust it upwards, aiming for the lowest button of his Levis – only stopping when the stick’s rubber end wedged behind his scrotum.

He yelped and tried to squirm away, but I gripped his hand, turning the palm outside, which forced extreme ulnar deviation.

The natural reaction to an adductive wristlock is to drop to one’s knees... but with the fat end of the pool cue jammed into his taint, the redneck had nowhere to go.

“That’s my sister you’re groping. You and your pals better shove off before I have you singing falsetto.”

The shorter redneck reached inside his leather vest and grasped the handle of a hunting knife. “She don’t look like your sister.”

“Wouldn’t go there if I were you,” I said, pressing harder with the pool cue. “This bar’s crawling with FBI and CIA. Bust out a weapon and they’ll probably deport you to Guantanamo.”

Rising on his tip-toes, the taller redneck sputtered, “T-T-Trish came onto us. I sw-sw-swear.”

“Right. You won her over with your missing teeth, greasy hair, and sunny disposition. Time to go, sis.” I didn’t release the wristlock until she was safely behind me and I had an open corridor through the crowding locals.

Hot Drunk Chick – whose name evidently was Trish – felt like a football tackling dummy as I lugged her towards the exit. Her feet worked sporadically, high heels dragging against the dusty hardwood floor.

Nobody stopped us, nobody seemed to care. With over fifty corpses strewn across the nearby countryside, a drunken mini-spat was hardly noteworthy.

“You staying at the Juniper Inn?” I huffed, guiding her across the deserted street.

“All gone,” Trish mumbled.

Normally my approach with the ladies falls under the strategy: ‘make ‘em laugh, make ‘em breakfast.’ But in this case, I didn’t want to waste all my good punch lines on the borderline comatose.

Against my cheek, her soft hair smelled of oranges and cigarette smoke. Her purse hung around her shoulders on a gold chain – so while we swayed, I dug inside the tiny pouch until finding her room key.

Our two-block march to the Juniper Inn consisted of me chanting: “Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot, curb.”

Eventually, we made it to her ground-floor (thank goodness) corner room. With a king-size bed, sofa, bathroom and television, it was much nicer than my digs – which temporarily consisted of a military-style cot tucked behind cans of tomato sauce and refried beans, within earshot of the bustling kitchen.

I heaved Trish onto her mattress. She made kittenish sounds and her eyes rolled upwards. Even blasted out of her gourd, she was fiendishly attractive.

Way, way out of my league, though. Her manicure probably cost more than my monthly take-home. And for what she spent on those monogrammed suitcases, I could replace my Camaro’s engine.

Digging through her wallet, I found \$2,500 in cash, the full gamut of credit cards, and a Las Vegas Driver’s License: Trisha Poulig.

Poulig, Poulig... where had I heard that name recently?

That’s right, Art Poulig. The owner of the Outlaws.

I wondered if this was his niece or daughter. Or, knowing how those rich pricks operate, it could very well be his wife. But if that were the case, why would she be staying in this dump, alone?

Searching further, I found Las Vegas Outlaw's business cards listing her title as Vice President of Business Affairs. Nepotism at its finest.

During the walk/drag from the bar, Trish's silk blouse had pulled up from her waistline. And now the hem of her wool skirt rested halfway up her spectacular thighs, which spread invitingly, creating their own gravity field.

I thought of Jennifer, my girlfriend back in LA. Or ex-girlfriend. Whatever we were calling it now.

Things between me and Jennifer had been bad for months, with the last explosion involving the packing of suitcases and her issuing the parting shot: "Call me when you grow up."

That was two weeks ago. We hadn't talked since.

Obviously, I hadn't grown up. Because if I had, I wouldn't have shifted positions to check out Trish's lacy, aqua-colored underwear.

She snorted, her eyes fluttering open.

"We gonna fuck, or what?"

Five

The communiqué was nearly complete.

Omar once crashed a journalism class at Texas A&M, so he knew how to write a compelling lede:

The Americans have lived another black day they will never forget. A day of fear, chaos, and terror, as one of their precious institutions has fallen from the sky.

Then he worked from the standard playbook. First, a call to arms:

O Muslims, the time is not to rise up and take revenge against the Americans and the Jews.

Next, the obligatory shout-outs to his brethren around the globe:

The mujaideen in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Chechnya and even in the heart of America are tracking your enemies and spilling their blood, God willing.

He even threw in some reverse psychology:

We love peace, but peace as laid down by Islam, not the so-called peace of crusaders and occupiers.

It was a fine communiqué, but Omar knew it required one key detail.

Something to kick it to the top of the pile. Something that only he'd be in a position to know. He wrote:

When the plane carrying the team from the City of Sin reached 32,000 feet, we struck. The exact details will not be revealed, in case the mujahids need to utilize our innovative methods again.

But the fact the pilots couldn't even regain control when they descended to 12,000 feet is proof enough that we are capable of bringing down your jets at our choosing. When and where will the next strike come??

Omar signed the handwritten message “Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades” and debated with himself the best way to send it to his contact.

He didn’t dare go back to the pay phone. Fax machines and cell phones were out. And finding internet access in his current location was going to be problematic.

Where’s a carrier pigeon when you need one?

Omar knew communication was only going to get worse once his message reached the FBI. Then, he’d be walking the knife edge between his own people and the weight of the U.S. Government.

But he would do it. Not for his homeland, adoptive country, or Abu Hafs. Not even for Allah.

He would do this for Rachel, Queen of the Food Channel, peace be with her always.

Yum-o!

I squeezed toothpaste on my finger, rubbed it around my gums, and gargled with a swig of hotel mouthwash.

To flush or not to flush, that is the question.

Attempting to muffle the sound, I lowered the toilet seat and stacked towels on the lid before pressing the handle. Even still, the whoosing echoed through the bathroom, followed by a whine of protesting pipes.

Sure enough, when I opened the door, Trish was sitting up in bed. Hair disheveled, she squinted at a sunbeam that dodged the blackout curtains.

“Who’re you?”

She didn’t appear startled and didn’t reach for the mace I knew to be in her purse, making me guess this wasn’t her first time waking in a strange man’s company.

“Call me Z. Like xylophone.”

“Doesn’t that start with an ‘x’?”

“Beautiful and a good speller.” My smile hid a flicker of guilt, since I’d used the same opening line on Jennifer. “Last night, I made sure you got home safe – you were pretty hammered.”

Looking around, she saw my pillow and twisted sheets on the couch.

“Why’d you sleep over there? You gay?”

“Hah, no... but I know someone who’d find that really funny.”

“So you’re Prince Charming?”

“In the flesh.”

Actually, Prince Charming would’ve ignored her drunken come-ons, tucked her into bed, and chastely made his way out.

Me, I helped her out of her blouse and skirt – telling myself it was wrong to be this close to a nearly-naked woman right now, telling myself only a first-degree shitheel would take advantage of someone in Trish’s state – before trying to unsnap her bra, cursing when she blacked out. Then, I tossed the night away on her too-short couch, my mind churning with impure thoughts, half-hoping she’d come to and repeat her request.

“You work at the bar? I remember shots.”

“That wasn’t me. Actually, I’m an insurance investigator from LA.”

With a snort, she swung her feet over the side of the bed. “You don’t look it.”

My flannel and cowboy boots might’ve curried favor with Barry the bellhop, but they weren’t helping me here. “Test me on my freeways if you want. 405, 5, 605, 710 – which is tricky ‘cause of the trucks and potholes – and don’t forget the 91, which always seems like a good option, but never is.”

“OK, I believe you. So what’s an insurance investigator doing...?”

She never finished her own question. By speaking those words, she must’ve remembered why she was in this dumpy, backwater hotel, because her face collapsed. Tears welling, she wrapped herself in the sheet and huddled into a ball.

As I leaned over to comfort her, my lower back barked. Stupid hotel couch. At least it was better than a cot tucked in a storage closet.

“You’re Trish Poulig, right? Related to Art Poulig?”

I barely made out her reply. “My daddy. Oh God, I feel so empty.”

“It’s horrible, I know. So have the investigators told you anything about—?”

She cut me off by turning her head upwards, engulfing my mouth with hers.

Taking advantage of a drunken stranger is one thing... what’s the gentleman’s rule on comforting a grief-stricken hottie? Would this be the moral equivalent of hooking up with a traumatized New Yorker after the Twin Towers fell?

Her darting tongue made it hard to keep my composure. This was wrong – I shouldn’t be remembering that under the sheet, she’s wearing nothing but lace panties and a matching C-cup bra. I shouldn’t be rubbing against her hip with my suddenly too-tight pants...

She sniffed. “I can’t believe they’re all dead.”

Her skin smelled so good. I really couldn't be blamed for becoming instinctive, inspired, inflamed.

"Well, not all," I panted. "Last night, they found a survivor in the trees."

She pushed away, the spell instantly broken. "What? Who?!"

"Uh, one of your pitchers. Perkins."

"Brandon Perkins? Where is he?"

"Hospital in Walla Walla," I said, cursing my big mouth. "But I doubt he's conscious—"

Dropping the sheet, she gathered her clothes and car keys. "Which direction is Walla Walla?"

Seven

“What do you mean I can’t see him?!”

Trish advanced on the charge nurse – for a second, I thought she was going to leap across the waist-high barrier and we’d have us a good ol’ fashioned chick fight.

“His family is with him,” the nurse said, shielding herself behind a clipboard. “And they’ve made it clear they don’t wish to have additional visitors.”

“Brandon’s awake?”

“I’m afraid he hasn’t regained consciousness.”

That seemed to take the piss out of Trish’s vinegar. “Will he make it?”

“That’s in God’s hands. Mr. Perkins suffered massive internal injuries, but thankfully, no burns. It’s a miracle he’s alive.”

Actually, the real miracle is that Trish allowed me to accompany her to Walla Walla General Hospital. She’d even suggested it, saying she didn’t want to drive alone.

At the time, I couldn’t think of a better arrangement, spending the trip with a smoking hot gal who happened to be the owner’s daughter.

But in real life, things are never as good as they sound.

Case in point: our drive, consisting of Trish alternating crying jags with long stretches of sullen silence. One of the few things that elicited more than a one-word reply was when I mentioned BASE jumping during my pathetic attempts at get-to-know-you chit-chat. Unlike Jennifer – who never approved of my hobby – Trish stopped sniffing long enough to ask if I ever gave lessons.

Arriving at the hospital, we braved the gauntlet of reporters choking the main entrance. I might not have recognized Trish at the bar, but we had no such luck sneaking past the TV cameramen, who hollered her name and begged for a statement.

Now, after getting shut down by the charge nurse, a more subdued Trish asked, “Have they brought in anybody else? Other survivors?”

“Just the one, dear.”

The door to the patient ward swung open, and out walked a tall blonde copied from the pages of Southern Living magazine. She spotted Trish and they met with an awkward embrace – not so much genuine affection as an acknowledgement of shared pain.

“I’m so sorry, Monica,” Trish whispered. “I came as soon as I heard.”

The blonde wiped away tears. “The doctors say even if Brandon wakes up, there’s a 75% chance of permanent brain damage.”

“Can we see him?”

Monica nodded and the charge nurse led us down a hallway to the last patient room, which was guarded by a pair of state troopers.

Lying on the bed, Brandon Perkins was stripped to his undershorts, blue neoprene pads circling his arms, legs and torso. His few areas of exposed skin were covered in gauze and bruises. According to Trish, Perkins was the team’s #5 starter, relied too much on his sinkerball, had a balky elbow that bothered him in cold temperatures, and in the offseason, played banjo for a folk band.

Having made my own hobby out of free-fall, I wanted to ask Perkins how it felt to make the entire descent without a parachute. But facing a lifetime of brain damage, the battered player clearly had more pressing concerns than satisfying my inappropriate curiosity.

“They’re going to try an experimental procedure called induced hypothermia,” Monica explained. “The doctors hope it’ll kick-start his system.”

The antiseptic smell, plastic tubing and chirping machines gave me uncomfortable flashbacks to my numerous hospital stays. I expected Trish to say something, but she just swayed at the foot of the bed, perfecting her thousand-yard stare.

“Thanks for sending a plane,” Monica said, finally breaking the silence. “I didn’t know how I was going to get here, didn’t even know if I’d be able to stomach flying, but once they re-opened the airports, our charter was first in line.”

Trish cleared her throat. “I didn’t send a plane.”

“I did,” said a wheezy voice behind us.

There, in the doorway, stood a small, wizened, white-haired man who was trailed by an audience of Ivy-League lackeys. Trish rushed to his side, crying out: “Daddy!”

Art Poulig gave his daughter a single pat on the head. Ashen, his hollow eyes never looked up as he choked out, “I should’ve been there. Should’ve gone down with my guys.”

One of the lackeys – a pudgy, middle-aged George Costanza with the spectacles and receding hairline – stepped in and gently pried Trish’s fingers off her father’s coat. As if distracting a toddler, the lackey asked Trish, “Who’s your friend?”

I tried to blend into the privacy curtain as everyone turned my way, except Trish, who never broke her focus off the elder Poulig. “My new boyfriend, Prince Charming.”

Oh, great. Daddy issues. My favorite.

Now I saw the real reason for my presence. I wasn’t just her driver, I was the detonation cord for a new round of family artillery.

The youngest lackey received a call on his cell phone. Unlike his companions, the baby-faced one spurned a funerary black suit in favor of a golf shirt and chinos. Upon answering, he passed the phone over to Art. “The commissioner wants to go over the rehabilitation plan.”

“Want me to take it?” asked Costanza.

“No,” Art said. He shuffled out to take the call, the entourage following in his wake.

“Which way’s the bathroom?” Trish asked Monica, who pointed her towards the nurses’ station.

That just left me and Costanza, who introduced himself as Tim Towers, one of the minority owners. He asked, “So, Prince Charming is it?”

“Yeah, but I also go by Z. Katz. It’s not what it looks like. I just met Trish last night.”

“That’s precisely what it looks like.”

“Nothing happened. I couched it. Seriously.”

Tim gave me a smirk. “Legged a long single out of a sure home run, huh?”

“I take it I’m not the first inappropriate suitor she’s brought home.”

“To make the top ten, you’d need Swastika tattoos and a stolen Harley. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t speak out of turn about Art’s daughter... it’s been a hell of a day.” He wrung

his hands, staring at the hospital bed. “And now, forget having time to grieve, we’re on to the rehabilitation plan.”

“What’s that?”

“How the MLB restocks a team after an emergency. Nice euphemism, eh?” he asked with a wince, his jowls wiggling. “I can’t imagine new players wearing our jerseys, but the president called this morning, saying he wanted to resume play next weekend for the good of the country.”

“I heard you had 53 people on the plane.”

“Our coaching staff, trainers, radio announcers, traveling secretary, even our general manager, who normally doesn’t fly with the team. What a mess.”

I nodded at the Perkins. “At least you’ve got one guy who could come back.”

“I didn’t want to get into it in front of the ladies, but the doctors say it’s unlikely Brandon will ever wake up, let alone throw a baseball.”

“Too bad he can’t tell us what happened.”

“I know what happened. Hubris,” Tim said. “I told Art that buying a team plane was a mistake – most teams charter from Delta or United. But no, we *had* to have our own jet that cost a fortune to maintain – and what happens? We make ourselves a target for some extremist who sees us as a symbol of American excess.”

Shouts rang out in the hall. Stepping outside, I saw one of the state troopers dragging Trish away from a doctor. Blood dripped from the doctor’s nose to the lapels of his white jacket as he bellowed, “I’ll sue your ass!”

“Just try, you piece of shit!” Trish fired back, brandishing a bedpan as a weapon.

Before I could intervene, a guy wearing a khaki foreign correspondent’s vest entered the corridor and inserted himself between Trish and the doctor.

“What’s going on here?” Khaki Vest asked. He had the gait of a hunter, two-day-old stubble, and a self-assured air.

The doctor clutched his leaky nose. “What’s it look like? She attacked me, the crazy bitch!”

Khaki Vest stepped forward and quickly patted down the doctor’s coat, finding a micro cassette recorder in the front pocket.

“Hey, that’s privileged!”

Waving him off, Khaki Vest hit the rewind button, then play.

What's the deal with this hypothermia treatment? Trish's recorded voice asked. *Are you sure it's safe?*

The second voice was clearly the doctor's. *Mrs. Poulig, you had two Cuban defectors on the Outlaws, can you comment on the possibility Fidel Castro was behind the downing of your plane?*

What? Who are you?!

Gary Sanchez, National Enquirer. I've also heard rumors of an inappropriate relationship between you and your left fielder, Randall Dunn. Care to comment?

The tape went silent for a second, followed by a scuffling sound and the gong of a bedpan to the face. Khaki Vest clicked off the tape recorder.

"You heard it. I'm pressing assault charges," said Sanchez.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Khaki Vest replied. "In Washington, impersonating a doctor is a third degree felony. You'll do more time than she does. Now scam, before I run you in myself."

Sanchez began to say something, thought better of it, and scampered off. I saw an opening to insert myself into the situation, claiming I was a friend of the family. Khaki Vest shook my hand, and introduced himself as Hudson.

"First name, last name, or body of water?" I asked.

Hudson ignored my question and turned to Trish. "I've been assigned to lead an inter-departmental task force. We're going to figure out what happened, trust me."

Trish didn't allow his friendly tone cool her frustration. "It's been nearly 24 hours and no one's come to me with new information! Nothing! If you're leading the task force, can you tell me you're ANY closer to figuring out what happened?"

"Over a hundred federal agents have already been assigned to this case. This investigation is receiving the highest priority from all branches of government. So once we finish examining the wreckage, interviewing witnesses—"

"I want a status report immediately following tomorrow's memorial," she said. "Even if it only takes five minutes for you to admit you're a bunch of incompetent pinheads."

Eight

“Don’t titty-fuck me, Katz. If you say ‘it’s premature to speculate’ one more time, I’ll reach through this phone and yank off your sack.”

Listening to Nathan Nutter, with his frequent use of ‘titty-fuck,’ you’d never guess the man sported feathered, fresh-off-the-yacht hair, tailored suits, and a Lexus SC 400 convertible.

Trying not to snicker, I reminded myself of the reasons I still needed this gig. Rent. Food. Car insurance. Credit card balance. Dwindling job prospects. A cessation of checks from the illustrious LAPD.

“Look, I’ve been snooping around the best I can, but the crash site is secured, and I’m not even sure what to look for.”

“You don’t seem to grasp the severity of the situation. I’ve already received *three* calls from Donnie Walker’s widow, that greedy bitch. This was the largest policy we’ve ever written – if we pay in full, it’ll drain Lakewood Trust. That means next month, we’re all looking for work.”

“Gimme a break, boss. I haven’t even been here a day... you can’t possibly expect me to know more than the FAA and NTSB. Speaking of which, you may be getting a call from a gal named Shelby—”

“Yeah, thanks for the belated heads up. What possessed you to give her my private number?”

“Her agency is first on the scene when a plane goes down – so hook her up with a cheap policy, and I’ll do the rest.”

“She had a fucking heart transplant when she was seventeen. Did you know that?”

“Uh... it didn’t come up.”

“Her premiums are a nightmare. But I’ll write it up – and take a loss – if you’ll pump her for info.”

“Consider it done. But I can’t promise she’ll give me enough to make an arrest.”

“You haven’t been listening. I don’t need an arrest. Just give me a plausible reason to delay Walker’s claim until we get our ducks in a row. Give me somebody to sue: air traffic control, the mechanics, Osama Bin Laden, I don’t care.”

“The *National Enquirer* thinks Fidel Castro is involved.”

“See? Was that so hard? What else?”

I’d mentioned Castro as a joke, but NaNu sounded genuinely happy for that nugget, so I continued. “I’ve got an inside line on Brandon Perkins, the pitcher who survived the crash. We just came from his hospital room.”

“Who’s ‘we’? You and that Shelby chick?”

Screwing in my gas tank’s lid, I glanced over my shoulder, making sure Trish was still in the bathroom. “No, Trish Poulig. I also hooked up with the team’s VP of Business Affairs.”

“The owner’s daughter?”

“Yeah. We’re supposed to get a call if Perkins wakes up. If that doesn’t happen, maybe the Feds will tell her stuff they wouldn’t share with little ol’ me.”

“Atta boy, stick with her. Or stick it to her. Whichever works.”

“She’ll be the Mindy to my Mork.”

Nutter’s voice turned cold. “Notify me the second you find anything useful.”

For someone who went by the nickname NaNu, you’d think he’d have a better sense of humor about that particular show. Before ending the call, I reminded him that I needed to return to LA the day after tomorrow.

He acted like this was the first he was hearing about it. “For what again?”

“My appeal hearing. Now that they’ve reopened the airports, I should be able to fly in and out the same day.”

“Why not give it up? The LAPD is just titty-fucking you, and you’re doing the Lord’s work up there.”

“No, I’m doing your work. There’s a big difference.”

* * *

Tracking down someone in Pleasant Hill is much easier than in LA. Especially when your target owns the only watering hole in town.

Trish and I found Chuck Jenkins at the rear door of the Gold Star Tavern, busying himself with a short, foul-smelling cigarillo while taking delivery of six cases of Rolling Rock. Chuck gave Trish the once-over, the twice-over, then signed for the beer, never once looking my way.

“Hiya, Chuckster.” I snapped my fingers in his face. “Word on the street is that you’re the one cat who saw that plane crash.”

He blinked – which took maximum effort, as his eyelids resembled the Escher print hanging in my college dorm, with flaps of wrinkled skin folding and undulating upon itself.

“You cops?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“Then beat it. The lady can stay for a free drink, but I already said all I want to say about that.”

For the first time since our long drive, Trish allowed a tear to roll down her perfect cheekbones. “You don’t understand... my daddy owns the Outlaws. I grew up playing tag in the clubhouse, cooking Thanksgiving dinner for all the rookies. So when that plane went down, my extended family – all the people I’ve ever cared about – died.”

“I’m real sorry, ma’am. But I see those bodies when I close my eyes. And the smell... forty years of smoking Swisher Sweets, you’d think I’d be immune.”

“We just want to hear what you told the FBI,” I said.

Chuck ground his cigarillo into the oil-stained asphalt. “They warned me not to talk to anybody else.”

“It’s a free country. You can’t get in trouble for repeating the facts.”

“Please, I need to know,” Trish said. “I’m praying our plane didn’t malfunction, praying there’s nothing we could’ve done to prevent what happened.”

“I don’t know nothing about no malfunction,” Chuck said. “I just saw an orange light in the distance. At first, thought it was a shooting star. Then I lost track until it was

practically overhead, much lower, and that's when I saw the real fireball and heard the boom. Something landed on my truck and my dog started howling. That's it."

I stepped away from Trish, giving Chuck an unobstructed view – hoping the visual stimulation would lubricate his lips. "What time did all this happen?"

"Quarter to midnight. The plane went down two miles from where I was out walking Jethro. He's got a bad hip and sometimes wakes up all stiff, so I like to give him a little exercise after we watch South Park—"

"The crash," I prompted.

"Right. So I drove over and that's when I saw... no, a nice lady like you shouldn't hear this."

"I can take it," Trish said.

"Miss, there were body parts everywhere, all burned up. I accidentally drove over a leg – thought it was a tree branch – and it caught in my wheel well."

To her credit, Trish didn't lose her lunch of corn-nuts and gas station coffee.

"Why'd the FBI bring you back for questioning?" I asked.

"They kept wanting to know if I saw other planes in the air. Or any other lights in the sky – like from a missile."

Good questions. I should've of thought of that. "Well, did you?"

"No, nothing else. But you wouldn't see that, you know, with the cloaking field."

"Come again?"

"I watch Stargate. I know the government's got them cloaked space ships. They could've fired on that plane and nobody'd ever see it."

And that's when, no doubt, the FBI wrote off Chuck as a crackpot. But that didn't bother me, because I had someone else for NaNu to sue: Stargate Command.

Best of all, this cigar-puffing crackpot offered to pour us a round of drinks on the house, saying Trish reminded him of his daughter. I found that hard to believe, guessing that any spawn of Chuck would resemble a shaggy-haired cinder block, but a free drink's a free drink.

Inside the Gold Star, the disaster crowd was mixing early dinner with shop talk. Engineering binders were stacked between trays of sandwiches, while airplane schematics covered the far corner of the bar.

Happy to not be on the clock in the traditional sense, I ordered a godfather. Trish went with a white wine, then said, “So that’s what you do? Just go up to people and ask questions?”

“Pretty much. Not a bad gig, huh?”

“It made me feel better. Like I’m doing something, instead of relying on those FBI tools. Yesterday, they gave me a ride here in their jet – but two agents spent the whole trip grilling me, never once answering my questions.”

“You want answers? How ‘bout we shake some trees, see what falls out? I know you don’t want to rehash this stuff, but do you know of any threats made against your team, or someone on that plane?”

For a nano-second, her face betrayed something – a flash of suspicion, perhaps fear – but then it clamped down behind a mask of professionalism. “We play baseball... Cracker Jacks, bobble-heads, and ‘Take Me Out To The Ballgame.’ What could our team have done to justify this?”

“How about my guy, Donnie Walker? What’s his story?”

“He was a sweet kid who worked his tail off to be the 7th inning workhorse. Guys looked up to Donnie – even made him their union rep, which is unheard of for a second-year player.”

“How about when your dad moved the team from Montreal to Vegas? That must’ve teed off a few hosers.”

“Some hardcore fans formed a coalition to force us to stay in Canada. They made some threats against Daddy, but that was three years ago.”

“It’s still worth looking into.” Sipping my scotch and amaretto, I tried to think of other angles to ask Trish, now that I had her talking. Temporarily shutting my mouth turned out to be the best decision I made all day, because all around me, people were having the same conversation.

What the hell happened to that plane?

In the span of five minutes, I overheard theories ranging from malfunctioning jackscrews to suicidal pilots. From faulty yaw-damper valves to a mob hit on the Outlaws’ manager. From the IRA to PLO to Islamic Jihad.

At the hospital, Hudson said he was leading an interdepartmental task force. That sounded like terrorism to me, and he didn't look like your standard FBI drone.

Starting to take notes, I overheard two analysts wearing NTSB jackets argue about where Brandon Perkins might've been sitting at the time of the crash – because he survived, knowing his exact seat location supposedly provided new clues to how the plane broke apart.

Trish noticed what I was doing and didn't interrupt. This was brilliant, I was getting enough material to keep NaNu off my back for a month.

I would've stayed longer, but Trish said she had to go to her room to pack. Her father had arranged a charter out of the Tri-Cities airport for the Outlaw's public memorial.

Walking her back to the Juniper Inn, we passed Barry the bellhop as he loaded suitcases into a Land Rover.

"Where were you last night?" he asked. "The kitchen guys said you never showed."

"Got upgraded," I said, giving him a wink.

"Oh?" It took Barry a second to put it together. Evidently he too assumed Trish was out of my league. "*Oh*. I guess that means you're all set."

"I think I'm good."

Once we got back to her room, Trish asked, "What was that about?"

"Room service. I ordered some chicken fingers last night and missed the delivery."

Trish tossed her sunglasses on the bed and ran a hand through her blonde hair, which, of course, fell in perfect waves like a Pantene commercial. "So back at the hospital, did I make you uncomfortable calling you my boyfriend? It's just a game I play with daddy."

"No, no, it was fine. I knew you were joking."

"How old do you think I look?" she asked.

I clearly have gaps in my understanding of the female species, but even a moron recognizes this question as a mine-field. Trying to stall, I countered with: "How old do you think *I* look?"

"Twenty-six."

“Good guess.” Damn, she looked like she still expected me to throw out a number. Shaving at least seven years seemed like a safe cushion. “I’d peg you for twenty-seven, maybe twenty-eight.”

“Liar... but thanks anyway. Let me ask you – is there something wrong with me?”

Danger, Will Robinson! Warning! Deflect! Deflect! Forget mine fields... this was the frickin’ Hiroshima of loaded questions.

“Uh, how do you mean?”

“Last night you slept on the couch. And here we are, standing in an empty hotel room, yet you haven’t put the moves on me.”

“I was about to, but my moves are so strong, I didn’t want you to pull a hammy.”

There I go, letting my penis override my brain. All those unresolved issues with Jennifer, all my concerns about this chick possibly being bi-polar, I boxed them up and stuffed ‘em into my mental closet above ‘Memories Of Awkward Holiday Dinners.’

She stepped closer, her breath tingling with peppermint, chardonnay, and corn-nuts. “Is that so?”

“I have to say, your hammy’s do appear up for the challenge.”

“I’ve noticed yours as well.” She cupped my ass.

Woo doggies, this gal was forward.

Instead of being turned off, it was kind of refreshing, not having the sparks extinguished by another argument about my inability to make long term plans.

Before I could seal the deal, Trish’s cell phone rang. She glanced at the display and caught her breath. “It’s Monica. Brandon must’ve woken up!”

“Ask her where he normally sits on the plane,” I hissed.

“Hi, Monica, how is... what? When?”

There was a long silence as Trish pressed the phone to her ear, her face saying it all. Cupping the receiver, she confirmed my suspicions in a tearful whisper.

“The procedure didn’t work... his blood pressure dropped... he’s... he’s dead.”

I just need to be alone.

That's what Trish said once she got off the phone. Not only had Brandon Perkins denied me the inside scoop on what happened to that plane, but he'd cock blocked me a second time. From the grave, no less.

I set off across the parking lot to find Barry – hoping my \$60/night cot was still available – and was so preoccupied, I didn't notice the two-by-four slicing through the air. Gut-level.

The wooden plank struck before I could flex, stealing my wind.

Gasping, I dropped to my knees and flailed for a nearby car bumper, but was unable to gain leverage. The next stinging blow landed across my shoulder blades, propelling me forward until my chin grazed the asphalt.

“Hold ‘em up,” said a rough voice.

I recognized it from the bar. The redneck I'd skewered with a pool cue.

Two sets of arms dragged me upright. It hadn't occurred to me that as easy as it was finding Chuck, with only one hotel in town, I'd be just as easy to track down.

“My cousin looked up Poulig on his computer,” the redneck said, pronouncing it *com-pooter*. “Trish don't have no brother.”

My diaphragm went into spasm and my extremities tingled, giving me unpleasant reminders of last year's collapsed lung.

“I'm her half-brother,” I gasped.

“Which half? This one?” The redneck unleashed a monster left hook to my ear. “Or this one?”

His follow-up to my opposite ear was accompanied by starbursts and the roar of crashing waves. From my side, another voice warbled from the deep, asking, “Should we stick him?”

The sensation of cold metal against my cheek. I remembered the redneck’s wingman from the bar. With the hunting knife.

“Not this time,” the redneck replied, gripping my hair. “But you better git out of town, pardnah. We see you again, we won’t be so forgiving.”

My brain said: *Hang on. You can take these punks.*

But my lungs refused to open, the wave crested, and the onrushing blackness was wider and deeper than the asphalt underfoot.

* * *

When I woke, my first sight was of the front grill of a KIA Spectra. Instantly, I knew I wasn’t dead, because in no version of the afterlife do they allow cheap Korean imports.

Quick inventory. All four limbs? Check. Fingers and toes functioning? Check. Neck mobility? *Oooh*. Turning my head made me want to puke.

So I did.

My abdomen exploded in shards of agony, and gripping my belly, I could feel a welt raised by the two-by-four.

Once the nausea subsided, I dragged myself to my knees. I was about to make an attempt at true vertical until I heard a voice from across the parking lot.

“Holey smokes,” said Barry the bellhop, jogging over. “What happened?”

“Welcome wagon.”

Even my own voice sounded muted. Maybe, while I was unconscious, someone stuffed bubble gum in my ears.

Barry stepped over the vomit and helped me to my feet. “Let’s get you inside and wash off that blood.”

Blood? What blood?

I let Barry guide me to the hotel’s employee entrance, sidestepping housekeeping carts and delivery boxes.

“Dios mio!” exclaimed Julio when we reached the back kitchen.

Oswaldo grabbed a clean dish towel and handed it over. “You don’ look good, my man.”

From my limited time skulking behind the kitchen, I remembered Julio as a temporary worker with velvet Elvis hair, while Oswaldo was lighter-skinned and spoke rudimentary English.

“¿Qué ondas?” Julio asked.

I pointed to my head. “Piñata.”

Julio gave me a silver-toothed grin and filled a plastic baggie with ice. I pressed the cold compress to my left ear – the one ringing louder. “How bad is it?”

The head chef, a goateed gringo named Damien, brought over a mirror and held it up. Not pretty. My face looked like I’d fallen asleep in a plate of spaghetti, with my ears acting as side orders of cauliflower and broccoli.

Wiping away the clotting blood, I found the source: a half-inch knife cut on my cheekbone. The redneck’s cohort evidently decided to leave a souvenir.

I looked forward to returning the favor.

But first I needed to sit down, because I was starting to feel sea sick. “That cot still available?”

“Sure thing,” Barry said. “Ain’t that right, guys?”

“Een de behind.” Oswaldo pointed to the pantry.

I couldn’t muster the strength to take advantage of Oswaldo’s easy lob as Barry helped me to the nook behind the canned foods, where my military cot awaited. I checked my front pocket – surprisingly, my wallet and cash were still there. The thugs in Pleasant Hill could learn a thing or two from their LA counterparts. Not even bothering to remove my shoes, I laid back and did some deep breathing exercises.

“I might change my audition song,” Barry said. “What do you think of ‘She Works Hard For The Money’?”

“I can’t hear a thing – so if you’re ever going to bust out Donna Summer, do it now.”

He harrumphed, but left without further injuring my eardrums.

Five minutes later, Oswaldo stuck his bloodshot eyes around the corner and held out a metal bowl. “Sopa Gujarati. Help to heal.”

The thought of food made me shudder, but the smell was savory enough to overcome my reluctance. Struggling to my side, I ventured a spoonful and was rewarded with flavors of carrots, garlic, ginger, onion, cilantro, followed by a sour blast of yogurt.

“Good stuff,” I said.

Oswaldo nodded. “Mexican.”

I thought about giving him a tip, but with the soup warming my stomach, my eyes got heavy and I closed them for a second.

Next thing I knew, it was morning.

The sound of banging pots dragged me from slumber. Julio peeled potatoes, Damien scrambled eggs – no sign of Oswaldo. I cobbled together enough words to ask for coffee, and Damien pointed to the lobby.

Temple throbbing, I shuffled down the hallway. Which hurt more... head, ears, shoulder, cheek, back? I decided on my left ear, which had been crushed against a makeshift pillow and now stung with pent-up fury.

Inside the lobby, I found the drink cart and a familiar face.

“You look like shit,” said Shelby Kowalski. “Bar fight?”

“New workout program. I climb in an industrial dryer, pump in quarters, and the calories melt away.”

She held up a cherry danish. “No pain, no gain. Where do I sign?”

“Norm’s Fluff and Fold. Ask for the ‘Extra Deluxe’ tumble.”

“By the way, thanks for the hook-up. Your guy got me rates for twenty-year term life that were half what I was quoted everywhere else.”

“That’s my boss. He’s a giver.”

The caffeine and banter started to make me feel better. Shelby seemed less defensive this morning. Flirty, even. Either the cheap insurance had done the trick, or she had a thing for bruises.

“So what’s the plan today?” I asked, wondering if she’d care to swap hospital stories. “Sift through some rubble? Crack open the black box?”

“You must be psychic.”

“Can I tag along? I’ll pack a lunch for two.”

She smiled. “Let me think about it.”

The lobby door tinkled as Trish pushed her way through. “There you are. You look like shit.”

“Those words must be tattooed to my forehead. Don’t worry, I fought the dingoes, saved the baby.”

“You were fantastic yesterday,” Trish said. “Sorry I kicked you out, but I had to get my head straight.”

Shelby gave an uncomfortable cough. I could see how she’d get the wrong idea about Trish’s statement. Hell, part of me wanted her to get the wrong idea. Feel free to fight over me, ladies. Line forms in the back.

“I thought you were already out of here,” I said to Trish, wondering if Shelby recognized her from that first night at the bar.

“They delayed the flight. If you’re interested in being my moral support – there’s extra room on the plane.”

I considered my options. Stay in Pleasant Hill. Work on Kowalski and *maybe* get some dirt about the official investigation. Find the redneck and his cohorts and play bongos with their skulls.

Or I could join Trish in Vegas. NaNu wants dirt and rumors – why not enter the belly of the beast? Plus, I could rent a car and zip down to LA for tomorrow’s LAPD hearing, which would save me arranging a last-minute flight.

Belly of the beast, here I come.

This couldn't be right.

I rechecked the address given by NaNu's secretary, swung to the curb, and killed my engine. 1012 Koval Lane was not a mansion, not a gated community, not even a single-family home, but a sad, two-story, U-shaped apartment complex with a courtyard of uneven gravel and browning cacti.

A major league ballplayer lived here?

Feeling new appreciation for my crappy LA apartment, I stopped at the mailboxes and spied the listing for "Walker."

The afternoon heat vibrated the air, sucking every last drop of moisture from my pores. A mile to the south, planes carrying drunk, broke and stupid tourists lifted off from McCarran. It was a short walk to the strip and UNLV, but on a brutally cloudless day like today, you'd need a camel or portable A/C unit.

After a detour to Men's Wearhouse for a dress shirt and cheap black suit, I hoped to catch Donnie's widow before leaving for the memorial. Play my cards right, and maybe she'd answer some questions in exchange for a lift. Or at least offer an ice bath. Instead, I got screaming and a floor show.

"They're sick," explained Ginny Walker as she juggled fussing infants under each arm. "Junior wakes up Jake, Jake wakes up Caitlin, and nobody gets their nap. Hold on, Jake's all pooppy."

When his mother took the twins to the bedroom, Donnie Walker Junior leapt from the couch to the carpet and landed froglike on all fours. The couch was one of the only pieces of regular furniture in the mostly-bare apartment. Instead of a dining room table, four plastic beach chairs huddled around a portable ironing board.

Junior sprung up and repeated his suicide couch jumps three more times, not once breathing hard. “Mommy doesn’t like it, but I’ve been doing this ever since I was way little and haven’t gotten hurt excepting for that one time I had to go to the hospital and get a cast and about four thousand stitches.”

There was something disconcerting in the way Junior spoke – his inflection too loud, the words rushing past his braces as though they’d throttle him if he tried holding them back.

“I’m six. But my birthday is next week and I’ll be seven and I’ll get a toy car because I always get a toy car for my birthday. I have 423 toy cars in my room, do you have a car?”

“An ’84 Mustang named Higgins.”

He ran to the door. “Cool, can I see it? Can I see it? Can I see it?”

“It’s in another state right now. I’m rocking a rental Chevy Malibu.”

“Oh,” he said, unimpressed. “Did you get in a fight?”

“Let my face be a lesson. When you crap in someone’s backyard, don’t stick around to see how bad it smells.”

That’s me. Lover. Investigator. Educator.

Instead of thanking me for the solid advice, Junior stared two feet beyond my left shoulder. “I’ve got ADHD and Aspergers. Do you have problems too?”

“All kinds,” I said. “Don’t get me started.”

Ginny returned with infants cradled under each arm. Her T-shirt looked like it had been used for a ‘capture the flag’ paintball tournament. She’d obviously been Prom Queen cute at some point, but grief, children, and lack of sleep had extracted its toll. Earlier, when I’d made the mistake of asking how she was doing, she’d tersely replied: *How the H-E-double-L do you think?*

The baby wrapped in pink started crying, while the one bundled in blue squirmed and released a truck-driver’s toot.

“Dammit, Jake. I guess you’ll have to sit in it for a spell, ‘cause we’re running out of diapers already.” She buckled her infants into matching swings and set them in motion. “So you’re with Lakewood Trust?”

“I’m an investigator, yes.”

“About time someone contacted me. I’ve been calling to make sure you know where to send the checks, ‘cause we’re heading back to Tennessee to stay with my folks. And with Junior’s condition, bills pile up fast.”

Junior punctuated his mother’s comment by yelling “Cowabunga!” and doing wind sprints up and down the hall.

“How long have you lived here?”

“Ever since Donnie’s call-up by the Outlaws. Before that, it was nine cities in six years. We were just about to make it.” For the first time, grief overtook the exhaustion in Ginny’s face. “Donnie was eligible for arbitration this summer – his agent thought his next contract would be at least three years, \$6 million. Thank goodness he talked me into increasing his life insurance. *Junior, put that down! That’s not a toy!*”

I flinched, remembering all the times my mother used that exact warning. Growing up, they didn’t have fancy acronyms like ADHD... you were flat-out ‘hyper’ or a ‘pain in the ass.’

“Any specific reason your husband beefed up his policy?”

“Dirk Ross got us a good rate though his brother-in-law.”

“The catcher for the Dodgers?”

“He was Donnie’s roommate in Double A. At the time, I was upset we went with Lakewood Trust, ‘cause everyone in our church uses Beneficial Life.”

“Did Donnie happen to mention if anybody on the team was receiving death threats? Other players? Coaches?”

She hesitated. “We tried to stay out of the day-to-day dramas... but Bobby Tenibel was an unrepentant sinner. You can bet there was more than one person who had it out for Bobby The Terrible.”

Junior climbed onto the portable ironing board, knocking aside baby wipes, sippie cups, and a Book of Mormon. “Guess how high I can jump this time!”

“Why don’t line up your cars so Mr. Katz can see how they look in rows.”

Grinning at his mother as wide as his braces would allow, Junior jumped off and sprinted to his bedroom. “Cowabunga!”

“That’ll keep him busy for at least five minutes.” From her tone, I could tell that to Ginny Walker, five minutes of quiet was better than sex.

“Donnie was the team’s rep for the player’s union, right?”

She nodded. “His dad was an AFL/CIO organizer, so his teammates thought he could handle the pressure.”

“Stressful gig?”

“More than the pitching. The union was talking strike dates, and Donnie wanted to protect the guys making the league minimum. So how does this work... will you send a check for the full amount, or are the payments broken up?”

“That’s really not my department. I’ll have to get back to you.”

This was an easier gig when I thought Ginny Walker was a spoiled trophy wife who’d treat \$20 million like pocket change. Now I felt like I was standing in front of a roomful of orphans about to cancel Christmas. To cover my unease, I asked if she was sure she didn’t want me to help her get to the memorial.

“Junior doesn’t do well in big crowds. And I never clicked with the Blonde Mafia.”

Kerr - Thump!

The noise, and subsequent high-pitched wail, emanated from the back room. Ginny pointed at the twins. “Watch them!”

I stared at the swinging babies, feeling ill-equipped to be entrusted with such responsibility. *What if they fell from the swing? What if they stopped breathing? What if they realized their daddy wasn’t coming home?*

When I stood over the one swaddled in pink, she locked into my face with her dark pupils. I stuck out my tongue and she smiled. I’m not exactly what you’d call a ‘baby person,’ but it was amazing to imagine this little blob someday going to college, falling in love, and walking down the aisle. Or maybe rebelling, developing a drug habit, and having a baby out of wedlock. All the infinite possibilities awaiting her.

I leaned closer.

And she spit up on my new dress shirt.

“So we’re done, right?”

“That’s so you, Z. You don’t call for two weeks, then immediately put me on the defensive.” From Jennifer’s strained voice, I could tell she’d started pacing, chin forward, arms crossed.

“You haven’t called either,” I replied. “And I’m not the one who moved out.”

She let a full ten seconds elapse before giving an exasperated sigh. “What do you want?”

“To know where we stand. It’s a simple question: Are we done, or not?”

In typical fashion, she took my request and twisted it around. “That depends on you.”

“Is there something else you want me to give up? BASE and my career weren’t enough?”

I’ll be the first to admit, I’m not good with breakups. Previously, when a gal saw through me and stopped laughing at my jokes, I’d do us both a favor and stop calling. That’d lead to one screaming fight, two tops, and both parties would move on. But with Jennifer, my first live-in girlfriend, the process was drawn out, exhausting – each encounter left me aching in spots I never knew existed.

Jennifer made a clicking noise with her tongue – the one she saves for DEFCON Four, a warning the nukes were in the silos. “Are you still fighting for reinstatement?”

“You’ll be happy to know my lawyer called and my hearing got bumped again.”

“So you *are* still planning to return to the LAPD.”

“I tried the insurance thing like you wanted. Big time boring.”

“It’s safe. I’ve been thinking long and hard. And I’m not willing to bring a child into this world if I have to explain why daddy’s always in the hospital, or worse. I’d rather raise a baby with no father at all than go through that.”

“Whoa. We’re not even engaged, and already you have our son bawling over my flag-draped coffin.”

“You’ve always known I wanted kids.”

“Fine. So you’re saying you’d rather give up than try facing life’s little risks.”

“*Little risks?* Jogging at night is a ‘little risk.’ You get shot at for a living.”

“Insurance has its dangerous side. Yesterday, I got jumped by a couple of yokels who didn’t appreciate my spoiling their date rape. My left ear is so swollen, I can barely hear.”

“Why would you tell me that? Are you hoping I’ll come over and baby you back to health?”

“I’m not even home. They’ve got me out in Vegas investigating that plane crash.”

Ironically, it took the excitement of this case to underscore how much I missed my old job; the rush of kicking in a crack-house door, breaking up gang fights, chasing perps down sketchy alleys. NaNu’s gigs had been basic surveillance and banal interviews, and if I kept doing his claims, 99% of my job would be more of the same old, same old.

Jennifer, however, had a different reaction to my current assignment.

“You’re chasing terrorists? That’s your idea of boring? God! You make me want to strangle you!”

“Dr. Phil would suggest,” I pointed out, “That’s not a sign of a healthy relationship.”

“Whatever. Keep doing things your way. Just take the cable bill out of my name... it’s three months overdue and I’m sick of getting your collections calls.”

Twelve

I started getting pissed midway through the video montage.

Before that, my attitude ping-ponged between distracted and annoyed. I tried to block out my conversation with Jennifer. Stuff it in that mental closet; reach for a higher shelf.

I was already bummed that my first time inside a luxury suite – the owner’s box, no less – was for a funeral rather than a ballgame. Then there was Trish’s snide greeting: “You know, three-button polyester is still polyester” and, with a sniff, “Eau d’ sour milk?”

To cap it off, they ran out of chicken wings halfway through the UNLV gospel choir’s rendition of the National Anthem.

The subsequent Jumbo Tron video montage, however, brought everything back into focus: a medley of “Centerfield,” “Boys of Summer” and “Glory Days.” The tribute spent a minute or two per player, interspersing game highlights with community-event footage, home movies, and little-league snapshots.

The capacity crowd – who’d received free admission, although beers were still \$6.50 a pop – roared and wept for their favorite Outlaws, with Dunn, Martinez, Tenibel, and DeJesus receiving the loudest reactions. On the field, each player was represented at their position with a wreath and empty uniform.

Gazing at the outfield Jumbo Tron, half-mast flags, hot dog vendors, and foam fingers, the spectacle reminded me this wasn’t just an expansion franchise filled with high-priced free agents. This wasn’t a job assignment getting in the way of my disciplinary hearing. This was America. By bringing down that plane, someone had attacked America, as surely as if they’d confiscated our fireworks, poisoned our apple pies, and desecrated Lady Liberty.

The montage kept rolling – so many players, coaches, support staff. To this point, I’d lumped the deceased into a single entity – “The Outlaws” – even after spending time with Brandon Perkins and Ginny Walker. Like my brain couldn’t process that each individual had their own families, kids, wives, parents, relatives, friends, fans – a cascade of grief rippling in all directions.

Finally open to the magnitude of it all, my eyes stung, fingers tingled, and gut churned. I wanted to hit something, someone, find whoever did this and tear their freaking heads off. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t authorized to investigate the crash, or that NaNu was more interested in outrageous Fidel Castro rumors than actual leads. Right then, I decided to work this case as though the Founding Fathers had come back to life and put me on retainer.

Trying to compose myself, I took refuge in the adjoining suite, which was decorated with pictures of Citicorp Ballpark in various stages of construction. White hardhats – engraved with names of corporate sponsors – hung behind the wet bar, alongside oversized pairs of ceremonial scissors.

No sanctuary here, as I soon realized the room had been reserved for the players’ wives. Ginny Walker had called them the Blonde Mafia, and they definitely shared a look. Ramrod-straight golden hair. Perfectly-carved button noses. Generously-plumped chest implants. Victoria’s Secret Pod People who milled about, dazed, aloof, crying, but without enough force to ruin their makeup.

I quickly moved to the rear of the suite, occupying myself by gazing out the windows overlooking the exterior VIP entrance, preferred parking lot, and world’s largest cowboy boots. According to the team’s media kit, each boot measured 50 feet tall and 20 feet wide, containing the hides of 25 head of cattle.

Turning back to the crowd, I saw Hudson – the mono-named head of that mysterious ‘inter-departmental task force’ – huddled in a corner with Monica Perkins, the not-quite survivor’s wife.

“There you are.” Trish came alongside and touched my injured cheek. “I can have Dr. Gibbs take a look – maybe give you a stitch or two.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, completely forgiving her earlier crack about my suit.

Trish looked radiant in a high-collared black dress, pillbox hat, veil, and fingerless gloves. As a fashion statement, mourning suited her. It occurred to me that we'd been close to getting busy twice, yet never gone on a proper date. Or even talked about much beyond the plane crash.

Physically, she couldn't have been more different than Jennifer. In heels, Trish was nearly 6-foot and voluptuous, whereas I'd stooped to hug the sporty Jennifer.

At one time, I really believed Jennifer was the one. Someone I could buy a house with, spend our off-days fixing it up. We'd host BBQ's with friends, maybe get a puppy. But now those dreams were dead – thanks to her insistence I coat myself in bubble wrap – so I needed to remind myself that Jennifer was yesterday's news. Kaputsky. Sayonara. Auf wiedersehen.

"I'm worried about daddy," Trish said, steering us back towards the owner's box. The other wives, I noticed, gave her a wide berth. "He hasn't slept in days."

"Last year, my patrol partner was murdered, and it threw me for a loop. I can only imagine what you and your father are going through right now."

"I'm just trying to keep it together for his sake. So thanks for being my escort – you didn't have to be here at all."

I smiled. "That's what us Prince Charmings do."

Back in the main suite, Trish dropped me off next to Tim Towers while she cut in line at the bar. Sipping a can of diet soda, Tim stood away from the crowd, not observing the on-field ceremony, not mingling with the other front office lackeys.

"How goes the 'rehabilitation plan'?" I asked.

"Painful. They're holding a supplemental draft with the other teams, but instead of picking up their cast-offs, Art wants to go young and promote from the minors."

Speaking of the head cheese, I saw that Art Poulig hadn't moved from his spot on the balcony. Trish was right, he did look like an insomniac, with puffy eyes and a morbid expression. As the UNLV choir started into 'Amazing Grace,' various well-wishers tried to offer their condolences, but Poulig never looked up from Billy, the miniature dachshund in his arms.

Named in honor of Billy the Kid and ex-Yankee manager Billy Martin, the unofficial team mascot had his likeness replicated on doggy bowls, shot glasses, T-shirts, and stuffed animals.

“We’ve stockpiled talent in our farm system, but youth movements take time and faith.” Tim glanced at my overflowing plate of wings. “Speaking of youth movements, have you ever had a colonoscopy?”

His question caught me off guard. “Excuse me?”

“You young guys think you’re invincible. But it’s never too early to start practicing proper rectal health. If I’d been better about checking the plumbing, I wouldn’t have this.” He lifted his jacket to reveal a fanny pack, with lines of surgical tubing snaking under his shirt. “Stage 3 colorectal cancer. All day, I’m getting chemo pumped into my veins, which makes everything taste like rusty pennies.”

Not sure how to respond, I settled on: “Geez. That sucks.”

“That’s not the worst part, trust me. When the pain hits, sometimes the only thing that helps is shitting your pants.”

No wonder his co-workers gave him plenty of personal space.

“Makes going out in public loads of fun. You come into this world in diapers, and go out the same way.”

In the far corner, a short, white-haired woman slumped to her knees, wailing uncontrollably. Two suite attendants rushed over, helped her to her feet, and whisked her from the room.

“Poor Edda,” Tim said. “She’s hand-stitched the team uniforms since the early days in Montreal. I don’t believe it. The nerve.”

Following his eyes, I saw a slight man with salt & pepper hair, pencil-thin mustache, and a skinny tie making his way through the crowd towards Art Poulig.

“Morgan!” Tim shouted, before the guy could reach the observation balcony.

The man halted, wringing his hands with the nervous energy of the tweakers I used to roust in the housing projects. “I only wanted to pay my respects...”

“Get the fuck out of here. And pray none of this was your fault.”

For a second, I couldn't tell if the guy was going to cry, make a run for it, or self-immolate. Ultimately, he decided to retreat, not even stopping for a canapé. "Who was that?" I asked.

"Morgan DeWitt, our chief mechanic. He was fired by United for showing up drunk. Another of Art's reclamation projects – and one that may've caused this whole mess."

Rattling the exterior windows, a sonic boom punctuated Tim's comment.

"Didn't expect a firework show," I said.

"That's not part of the program..."

We crossed to the rear of the suite, and joining him, watching as dark plumes of smoke rose from the preferred parking lot.

One of the giant cowboy boots was engulfed in flames, its leather hide bubbling and blistering. Hundreds of car alarms filled the noise vacuum, the honks pelting the exterior windows like a summer thunderstorm.

If there were still fans outside the stadium, they must've been vaporized by the blast, because I didn't see any bodies.

Ground zero appeared to be a limousine parked in the handicapped section – its entire front end was blown away, exposing the axel and engine block. Neighboring cars had been shoved aside, as though Zeus had reached down for a game of dominoes.

"Wait a second, isn't that...?"

Trish appeared at my elbow and finished my sentence. "Daddy's car."