

# **Zero-Sum Game**

**Gregory Huffstutter  
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One

“What the hell was that?” asked Theresa Partridge, stumbling through the cockpit door. To her, it sounded like a pair of sneakers had thudded down an air shaft.

“Turbulence,” the pilot replied.

That’s what flyboys always said when they didn’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 team plane, including herself, was top-shelf. Art Poulig, the owner of Major League Baseball’s newest expansion team, insisted on stocking the latest amenities: fully-reclining seats, personal entertainment units, private chef, and deluxe bathrooms with more than enough room 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, Trish 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 the one 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 what we talked about in pre-game!”

“If he rolls that slider over and grounds out, you’d say how smart I am. We throw on his hands all day! Great hitters make adjustments – what the fuck you want me to do? Walk the *puta*?”

Despite his outburst, Señor Suave winked at Theresa as she moved past. He’d stepped in when the team’s All-Star receiver went down with a ruptured Achilles, providing one of the few bright spots to a lackluster season by nailing 50% of would-be base-stealers and contributing 18 jacks.

She winked back, remembering his promise 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 himself. “Or did your 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 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 where thousands changed hands per flight – tonight’s suckers including one surprising addition.

Donnie Walker, an up-and-coming 7<sup>th</sup> inning specialist, was new enough to the team that Theresa had yet to settle on a pet nickname. He was a Mormon who 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 run out of people willing to lose \$100 a point.

“We going to talk about this?” Walker was saying as she approached. His peach-fuzz chin trembled, like he’d been caught farting at a wake.

“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 parents. On the other hand, Mr. BJ was sweet – when he wanted to be – 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 blonde hair flip. Before she could complete the 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.

Rendered immediately unconscious, Theresa did not notice 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 pleasure would be finding her blackened, mangled body.

Two hundred yards away, in a clearing beyond the tree line, sat the largest chunk of the plane's fuselage. 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-flavored 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, corndogs, 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 thought it’d be bad taste.”

“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 the direction she’d approached, 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 scorched, 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 BBQ'd 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 bucked in his seat. The second he touched down, paramedics formed a huddle, obstructing my view.

"Keep people back!" shouted one of the medics. "Get that stretcher in here!"

Kowalski waved credentials and squeezed through a makeshift checkpoint made of sawhorses and reflective tape. When I tried to follow, two Feds in dark suits blocked my way, one a 6'6" beanpole, the other 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 in 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 department 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's."

"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 thorny, neck-high tentacles created an impenetrable seal.

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 blackberries and landed in shrubs, my shin banging against something hard. The judges gave me 3.5 for style points, but 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. Somebody said he was one of the pitchers."

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. "No wallet, huh?"

"How 'bout a little foreplay? 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 copying down 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-educated voice. “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 had an opening and I took it. Call it an apology. You’re not displeased with the results, I assume.”

“If what you say is true, this will cause great celebrations back 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 for victims’ families.”

“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 is rooms. Now if you’ll take it outside, 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-kicker cowboy boots. And to think my girlfriend frequently 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 LAPD board of rights’ glacial pace – 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 leaking 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 functioning traffic light, two-block downtown, and three-digit population. Lot sizes were measured in acres instead of square feet, and the Gold Star enjoyed the county's only working liquor license.

Asking for Chuck, I was told by his harried wife that he was giving his 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 appear having 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 and charcoal businesswoman's skirt. She looked to be in her mid thirties, with toned calves and tennis pro's glowing tan.

Improbably, she walked those expensive high heels 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?”

The only things keeping it from being a perfect moment was her slurred voice and 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, and 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 warning. 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 anyway?”

“I’m kind of an insurance investigator.”

“Kind of?”

“Let’s just say I haven’t quite decided what I’m going to be when I grow up. But 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. HDC 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 this plane went down. These teams fly so often, it’s amazing we hadn’t lost a major professional team sooner. 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.

HDC 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 filthy 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,” mumbled the HDC 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?”

“Hands off the lady. Before you regret it.”

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 Levi jeans – 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 turn you into a falsetto.”

The shorter redneck reached inside his leather vest and gripped 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 Feds and CIA agents. Bust out a weapon and they’ll probably ship you off 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 HDC 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 worth note.

“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 bed. 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 haircut 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 gamut of credit cards, and a Las Vegas Driver’s License in the name of 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, nothing will do you good but rising up and taking 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, that's when we struck. The exact plan will not be revealed, in case the mujahids need to use the same innovative method again soon.*

*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 good 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 the 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. 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 have ignored her drunken invitation to screw, tucked her under the sheets unmolested, 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 until clearing things up with Jennifer, telling myself only a first-degree shitheel would take advantage of someone in Trish’s state – before trying to unsnap her bra and cursing when she blacked out. Then, I tossed the night away on

her too-short couch, mind churning with impure thoughts, half-hoping she'd repeat her request.

"You work at the bar? I remember someone delivering a tray of 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 father. 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 woman? Would this be the moral equivalent of hooking up with a traumatized New Yorker after the fallen Twin Towers?

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 intoxicated, 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 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 right now.”

“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 even alive at all.”

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 make the trip alone.

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

But in real life, things frequently sound better than they turn out to be.

In this case, my drive consisted of Trish alternating between crying jags and curling into a fetal ball. Things only improved when, somehow, we got on the topic of BASE jumping. Unlike Jennifer – who never approved of my hobby – Trish stopped weeping long enough to shoehorn me into promising I’d give her 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 comments.

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 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.

Brandon Perkins – who, according to Trish, 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 – was lying on the bed, stripped to his undershorts. Blue neoprene pads circled his arms, legs and torso. His few areas of exposed skin were covered in gauze and bruises.

Having made a hobby out of free-fall, I wanted so badly to ask Perkins how it felt to make the entire descent without a parachute.

“They’re going to try an experimental procedure called induced hypothermia,” Monica explained. “The doctors hope it’ll re-boot 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 swayed at the foot of the bed for a short eternity, 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 the Pope. At least it looked like the Pope – a small, wizened, white-haired man who was trailed by an audience of Ivy-League lackeys. The only things missing from his ensemble was the robe and pointy hat.

Trish rushed to the white-haired man, crying out: “Dad!”

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

One of the lackeys – a pudgy, middle-aged dude with George Costanza 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 drama.

The youngest lackey – who, unlike his companions, spurned the funerary black suit in favor of a golf shirt and chinos – received a call on his cell phone. He answered, then passed the phone over to Art. “It’s the commissioner. He wants to go over the rehabilitation plan.”

“Want me to take it?” asked the Costanza lackey.

“No, I got it,” Art said. He shuffled into the hall to take the call, the entourage following in his wake. Trish asked Monica to show her where she could find a bathroom to freshen up.

That just left me and the Costanza look-alike, who stared at the hospital bed, wringing his hands. “Do you think he can hear us?”

His voice was so soft, at first I didn’t realize he was talking to me. “Doubt it. Speaking from personal experience, when you’re that banged up, you get the heavy-duty painkillers.”

The Costanza lackey introduced himself as Tim Towers, one of the team’s ownership partners. 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.”

“A whirlwind romance.”

“Nothing happened. I slept on her couch. Seriously.”

“That’ll change.”

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

“To make the top ten, you’d have to add neck tattoos and a very loud motorcycle. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t speak out of turn about Art’s daughter... it’s been a long day.”

“No, I appreciate the heads-up. So what’s a ‘rehabilitation plan’?”

“Major League Baseball’s emergency plan for restocking a team. Nice euphemism, eh?” he asked with a wince, his jowls wiggling like a trout. “I can’t imagine new players wearing our jerseys, but the games must go on, I suppose. The president called and said resuming play next weekend would be good for the county.”

“I heard there were 53 people on the plane.”

“Our coaching staff, trainers, radio announcers, traveling secretary, even our general manager, who doesn’t normally fly with the team. What a mess. We’ve got one week to start all over – not even enough time to grieve.”

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

“I didn’t want to get into it in front of the ladies. But the doctors say there’s a very slim chance he’ll ever wake up, let alone walk or throw a baseball.”

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

“I know what happened. Hubris,” Tim said, his voice regaining strength. “I told Art that buying our own team plane would be a mistake – most teams charter from Delta or United. But no, we *had* to have a tricked-out jet that cost a fortune to maintain – and what happens? We make ourselves a target for some raghead 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!”

“Where’s your ID?”

Hesitating, the doctor took a step backwards. “Must be in my locker, or something.”

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! I’ve got sensitive patient information on there.”

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 possibility Fidel Castro was behind the downing of your plane?*

*Excuse me? 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.

“I’m still pressing assault charges,” said Sanchez.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Khaki Vest replied. “In this state, impersonating a doctor is a third degree felony. You’ll get more time than her. Now scram, before I run you in myself.”

Sanchez began to say something, thought better of it, and scampered off. I saw my 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 make sure whoever brought down your plane pays for it.”

Trish didn't allow his friendly tone cool her frustration. "I haven't received any updates yet! Not one! If you're leading the task force, can you tell me you're ANY closer to figuring out what happened?"

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

"The public memorial is tomorrow and I want a status report immediately following," 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.”

Nathan Nutter – with his feathered, fresh-off-the-yacht hair, tailored suits, and Lexus SC 400 convertible – did not look or sound like a man who used words like ‘titty-fuck’ whenever he got agitated.

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 wife, 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 24 hours... 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? You know the LAPD doesn’t want you back. 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 bar 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 initial drive to the hospital, Trish allowed a tear to roll down her perfect cheekbones. “My dad bought the Montreal Expos when I was ten, before moving the team to Vegas. I grew up at the ballpark, played tag in the clubhouse, and cooked Thanksgiving dinner for every rookie we ever signed. 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. Some debris fell 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 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 together—”

“The crash,” I prompted.

“Right. So I drove over and that’s when I saw... no, a pretty 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 jerkwads. 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 7<sup>th</sup> inning workhorse out of the ‘pen. Other players looked up to Donnie – even made him their union rep, which is unheard of for a second-year guy.”

“How about the move from Montreal to Vegas? That must’ve teed off some folks.”

“Some hardcore fans formed a coalition to force us to stay in Canada. They made some threats against my father, 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-dampner 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 a typical 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. Evidently, because he survived, knowing his exact seat location would give additional 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 get back to her room to start packing. The public memorial for the Outlaws was being held tomorrow at Citicorp Ballpark in Vegas, and her father had arranged a charter out of the Tri-Cities airport.

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 guys in the kitchen 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 won't be needing it again."

"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. "Did I make you uncomfortable calling you my boyfriend? It's just a game I play with my dad."

"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 morons recognize 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 response. “I’d peg you for twenty-seven, maybe twenty-eight.”

“Liar... but thanks anyway. Is there something wrong with me?”

*Danger, Will Robinson! Warning! Deflect! Deflect!* Forget mine fields... this was the frickin’ nuclear bomb 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 treatment 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.

Gagging, 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 even easier to track down.

“My cousin looked up Trish on his computer,” the redneck said, pronouncing it *com-pooter*. “She 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, “Want me to 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. His grubby hands gripped my hair, yanking my head back. “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 image 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. Limbs accounted for? Check. Fingers and toes functioning? Check. Lifting my neck... *oooh*. Turning my head made me want to puke.

So I did.

In doing so, my abdomen exploded in shards of agony. Gripping my belly, I felt a raised welt from 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 hearing a voice from across the parking lot.

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

“Your town’s welcoming committee.”

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 the blood.”

*Blood? What blood?*

I let Barry guide me to the Juniper Inn'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't look good, my man."

From my limited time skulking behind the kitchen, I remembered that Julio was the temporary worker with the Elvis hair, while Oswaldo was the lighter-skinned one who spoke rudimentary English.

"¿Qué pasó?" 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 the loudest. "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 dried blood, I found the source to be a half-inch knife cut on my cheekbone. The redneck's buddy evidently felt the need 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 back." Oswaldo pointed to the pantry.

Barry helped me to the nook behind the canned foods, where my military cot awaited. I checked my front pocket and surprisingly found my wallet and cash. 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'll give you twenty bucks if you promise not to sing it for me."

He harrumphed, but left without further injuring my eardrums.

Five minutes later, Osvaldo stuck his bloodshot eyes around the corner and held out a metal bowl. “Gujarati soup. Help 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 greeted with flavors of carrots, garlic, ginger, onion, cilantro, followed by a sour blast of yogurt.

“That’s good stuff,” I said.

Osvaldo nodded. “Old Mexican recipe.”

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, with the sound of banging pots dragging me from slumber. Julio was peeling potatoes while Damien scrambled eggs. No sign of Osvaldo. 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... my head, ears, shoulder, cheek, or back? I decided on my left ear, which had been crushed against my 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. “Sounds good to me. 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 really great 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 – what better way than by entering 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.

Ten

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 stopping by Men's Warehouse for a dress shirt and cheap black suit, I still had an hour to kill before the memorial. Hopefully, Donnie's widow would be willing to answer some questions. 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. “My mom says I’m going to get hurt, but I’ve been doing it like this ever since I was two and I haven’t gotten hurt except for that one time I had to go to the hospital and get a cast and some 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 one 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 children and lack of sleep had extracted its toll. Earlier, when I’d made the mistake of asking how she was doing, she’d 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. You’ll have to sit in it for a spell, ‘cause I’m sick of changing you today.” 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 change my address, ‘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 at \$2 million per. Thank goodness he talked me 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 plumb ‘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? That Dirk Ross?”

“Yeah, he was Donnie’s roommate at AA ball. 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 allowed, 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 about a strike date, and Donnie felt protective of 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 going 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 out? What if they stopped breathing? What if they realized their real 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 mimicked. 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 just like you, Z. You don’t call for two weeks, then immediately say something that puts 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 reminded. “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 from me?”

“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.”

“Why, is there something else you want me to give up? BASE jumping 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 leaving 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 your reinstatement?”

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

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

“I tried the insurance thing like you wanted. But it’s too boring.”

“It’s safe. I’ve been thinking long and hard about this. And I’m not willing to eventually bring a child into this world if I’m the one explaining why daddy’s always in

the hospital, or worse. It's not fair to me. It wouldn't be fair to a child. I'd rather raise a baby with no father at all than deal with losing you mid-stream."

"Whoa. When did kids enter the equation?"

"You know I want kids someday."

"Fine. So you're saying you'd rather not give it another go than face life's little risks together."

"*Little risks?* Little risks are jogging after dark. When you go on patrol, you get shot at for a living."

"Insurance has its dangers too. Yesterday, I got jumped by a couple of yokels who didn't appreciate me breaking up their date rape. I can barely hear out of my left ear."

"Why would you tell me that? Are you thinking I'll come over and baby you back to health again?"

"No, I'm not even home. I'm in Vegas investigating the crash of that team plane."

Ironically, it took the excitement of this case to underscore how much I missed my old job; the rush of kicking in a crack-den door, breaking up a Crip fight, chasing perps down piss-soaked alleys. The rest of NaNu's gigs had been basic surveillance and banal interviews. And if I kept doing insurance claims, 99% of my job would be more of the same.

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

"You're chasing after terrorists? That's your idea of a boring job? You make me want to strangle you!"

"That," I pointed out, "is not a sign of a healthy relationship."

"Whatever. Do what you're going to do. 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 depressed 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 instead of a ballgame. Then you had Trish’s initial comments to me upon reuniting: “You know, three-button polyester is still polyester” and, with a sniff, “Eau d’ sour milk?”

To cap it off, the chicken wings ran out while the UNLV gospel choir sang the National Anthem.

The subsequent Jumbo Tron video montage, however, brought everything back into focus. Cut to a medley of “Centerfield,” “Boys of Summer” and “Glory Days,” the tribute spent a minute per player, interspersing game highlights with community-event footage.

The capacity crowd – who’d received free admission, although beers were still \$6.50 a pop – roared for their favorite Outlaws, with Dunn, Martinez, Tenibel, and DeJesus receiving the loudest ovations. 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 bitch-slapped Lady Liberty.

It didn't matter that I wasn't authorized to investigate the crash, or that NaNu was more interested in 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.

But first I needed more chicken wings.

I found the desired chafing dish 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.

This room had obviously 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.

Hanging in the rear of the suite, I enjoyed the exterior view overlooking the 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 heads of cattle.

Turning back to the crowded suite, 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 I met at the Walla Walla hospital.

"There you are." Trish came alongside and touched my injured cheek. "I can have Dr. Gibbs take a look – give you a couple stitches."

"Don't worry about it," I said, still grumpy about her knock on my suit.

For her part, Trish looked undeniably radiant in a high-collared black dress, pillbox hat, veil, and fingerless gloves. As a fashion statement, grief 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, now officially my ex-girlfriend. In heels, Trish was nearly 6-foot, whereas I'd stooped to hug Jennifer. Voluptuous on top, whereas Jennifer was sporty.

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

“I'm worried about dad,” Trish said, steering us back towards the owner's box. The other wives, I noticed, gave her a wide berth. “He looks like he hasn't slept in days. And you, you didn't have to be here at all. So thanks again for being my date. Get you a drink on the house?”

The many faces of Trish. Who knew there was enough room for small kindnesses?

I smiled. “That's what us Prince Charmings do.”

Back in the main suite, Trish dropped me off next to Tim Towers while she hunted down booze. 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 that ‘rehabilitation plan’?” I asked.

“Painful. We're supposed to hold a 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 suite's balcony. Trish was right, he did look like an insomniac, with puffy eyes and a dreary expression. As the UNLV choir started into ‘Amazing Grace,’ various well-wishers tried to come up and 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 inside the souvenir shop.

“We've stockpiled talent in our farm system, but youth movements are inherently risky.” 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?”

“Young guys like you think you're invincible. But it's never too early to start practicing good 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 hooked to 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 I put in my mouth taste like pennies.”

Not sure how to respond to that, I went with: “Geez. That sucks.”

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

That’d explain why his co-workers weren’t standing too close.

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

In the far corner, a short, red-headed 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 been hand-stitching 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 mustache, and 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 Jordan Downs housing project. “I only wanted to pay my respects...”

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

For I second, I couldn’t tell if the guy was going to cry, make a run for it, or self-immolate. Ultimately, he decided to back out the way he’d come, 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.”

A sonic boom – loud enough to rattle the exterior windows – punctuated Tim’s comment.

“Didn’t expect you to do fireworks,” I said.

“We didn’t.” He crossed to the rear of the suite, and joining him, I saw dark plumes of smoke rising from the preferred parking lot.

One of the world's largest cowboy boots was engulfed in flames, its leather hide bubbling and blistering. Hundreds of car alarms filled the noise vacuum, filtering through the exterior windows like cicada chimes on a summer's eve.

If there were any fans still 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. “My father's car.”