

OUT OF  
MY LEAGUE



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A ROOKIE'S SURVIVAL IN THE BIGS

DIRK HAYHURST



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*With love,  
I dedicate this book to my mother and father,  
for showing me the right path to walk in life.*

*And to my dearest Bonnie,  
for agreeing to walk the rest of it with me.*



## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Of all the memories I have from my playing career, the day I told my teammates I was writing a book shall forever be one of the most vivid. This should come as no surprise since people often remember near-death experiences with uncanny accuracy. When I made it public I was authoring a book about life inside the game, I didn't expect anyone to throw a party for me, but I also didn't expect to be told it would cost me my career or, as some players promised me should they end up in the book, my life.

As the pages of *The Bullpen Gospels* came together, my world got a lot quieter. Lively conversations stopped instantly when I came into the room. Friends prefaced chats with, "This doesn't go in the book, okay?" Management monitored me with a paranoid eye, choosing criticisms more delicately for fear that harsh words might get them referenced in an unflattering way. Despite how many times I promised them I wasn't out to get anyone, it never seemed to compute. As far as they were concerned, *The Bullpen Gospels* was going to be another exposé diatribe fueled by destroyed reputations in its race to make a buck.

I'm pleased to report I'm still alive and, obviously, still writing. This is so only because I kept my promise: I didn't hurt my teammates. This promise I shall keep once again.

Let it be known that this book's purpose is to entertain, not to

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name names; pull the cover off the bare ass of drug use; show cheaters, adulterers, or tax dodgers; or do any other whistle-blowing. If you are looking for someone's dirty laundry, you won't find it here. Names have been changed at the request of some players and at my discretion, to give them more of a character feel as well as to protect identity. Some characters within are composites blended together for ease of reading. While everything in this work is based on actual occurrences, I have attempted to conceal identities for the benefit of those who don't want to deal with any extra drama this book may bring their way. Mind you, I was a teammate before I tried my hand at writing, and I hope to be one long after this book is published.

However, if there is one thing I've learned since my first book, it's that sometimes the things we think matter most in this world turn out to be rather expendable and disappointing, while sometimes the things we take for granted are absolutely priceless, and that is what this story is all about.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've always believed that a wise man makes friends with people smarter than himself. With that in mind, I would like to extend a special thank-you to four very gracious, patient, and incredibly intelligent gentlemen, without whose help I would not have been able to do any of this writerly stuff.

Steve, Keith, Richard, and Jason: Thank you for putting up with me long enough for me to be able to claim importance by association.



# Chapter One

“It’s dead, Dirk,” she said, without even so much as a concerned look from the wheel as we drove. “You’re just going to have to deal with it.”

I dealt with her tactfully delivered news by letting my head fall into the passenger side window glass with a disparaging *thunk*. What the hell was I going to do for transportation now?

“Cars do that, honey, they just die,” she added.

“Remind me to never leave you with a puppy,” I said.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, it’s a car. There are others out there.”

“That car and I had memories!”

“I don’t know what you want me tell you.” She accelerated our currently living car onto the freeway as she spoke, heading south from the Akron-Canton Airport. “Your dad thought it was the fuel injectors or something. I think it just rusted through and croaked. Either way it would have cost more than what you paid for it to fix. Your dad sold it for scrap already.”

“You sold my car!”

“It was dead! And your grandma said she could smell leaking gas. She demanded we remove it from her house, called every day until we did. Said it was going to blow up and kill her.”

“Was it leaking gas?” I could envision my deranged grandmother crawling beneath my car punching holes in the gas tank

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to spite me. She doubled as my landlord during the off-season and used some Gestapo-style tactics to get me to do her bidding, threatening me with everything from eviction to prosecution. I wouldn't put it past her to practice sabotage.

"I don't know, that's what she said. We didn't check," said my mother.

"How could you not check?" I threw my hands up at the injustice.

"It doesn't matter! It's gone now. Dad got \$150, since the tires were still good."

"My poor car . . ." I imagined it being obediently led to a dark scrap yard someplace, getting patted on the hood one last time, then rolled into a vicious crushing machine while a fat man with a cigar laughed and counted out a wad of money with my grandma. "You let it die," I said to my mother. "I asked you to keep it safe for me and you got it killed. You're a car *murderer*!"

Mom, taking her eyes from the road to look at me for the first time in our conversation, simply said, "I'm glad you're home, sweetheart. Now shut up."

When I got off the plane that brought me home from the 2007 Double A championship season, it was as if the whole thing never happened. There was no ticker-tape parade. No flashbulbs or requests for autographs. No screaming fans, endorsement deals, or bonus paychecks. The big leagues didn't call and request my immediate promotion, and I wasn't mentioned on ESPN. There was just Mom, waiting impatiently for me in her car so she could taxi me home before she was late for work.

One may wonder how the elation that comes with jumping onto a pile of screaming teammates and uncorking fountains of Champagne to celebrate ultimate victory can fade away so quickly. That's because minor league championships are great, but they are still minor league. Once all the champagne is sprayed, the pictures are taken, and everyone's had a chance to make out with the trophy, it doesn't mean much. I was part of an event I could al-

ways be proud of, and Lord knows, winning feels a whole lot better than losing, but in the grand scheme of the minor league economy, my name in a record book was just that. I was still going to be living the next six months on my grandma's floor, looking for another source of income, getting ready for a new season while wondering what being a Double A champion really meant.

Such is the lot of a career minor league baseball player, because, even at its best, minor league baseball struggles to translate into a better quality of real-world life. Sure, there are wonderful moments like winning, the thrill of competition, and the joy of watching teammates twenty beers deep get really emotional about how much they love you at a championship party. You get to put on the jersey, lace up the spikes, and listen to John Fogerty croon out "Centerfield" all summer long. But the season always ends, for better or for worse, and that's when you find yourself face-to-face with a reality that tells you your car is pushing up daisies and your dad only got \$150 for its tires.

Life seems so blissful when all you have to do is focus on the next pitch—assuming that next pitch doesn't get hit over the fence. When you are on field, living in the moment, it's easy to think all that matters is the here and now. Yet, when the pitching is done, the truth is revealed: league title or total defeat, the clock is always ticking, waiting for you to break into the big time or settle up the debt you made trying to get there. I had showered three times since my San Antonio Missions brethren and I celebrated our championship by soaking one another in cheap Champagne, but nothing got me clean like the cold, sobering splash of reality my mom gave me on the car ride home from the airport.

"So, do you think you're guaranteed a place on the team for next year?"

"I don't know, Mom." There was no way to know that.

"You don't think the championship made you more important to the club?"

"I don't know." Or that.

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“Didn’t they tell you what their plans are for you?”

“No.” Or that.

“Did they tell you they couldn’t have done it without you?”

“No.”

“Well, what did they tell you?”

“Good job, we’re proud of you. See you next year.”

My mom paused in her onslaught of prying questions for a moment and then declared, “Well, that sucks.”

“I thought it was all pretty cool until we started talking about it, actually.”

“Oh. My. God. You are so depressing. You’d think you’d be happier after winning a championship. ”

I caught myself before I could object to my mom’s logic. Telling her she was doing that thing she does where she inadvertently sucks the pride from a situation wasn’t going to work now since it hadn’t worked during any of the other years I tried explaining it to her, so I said, “I’m just telling you what I know, Mom.”

“This is why I read the Internet sites, you know. You never tell me anything.”

“Whatever.” I rolled my eyes.

“Fine, let’s talk about something else then.” My mom took a highway exit for the area of Canton where my grandma’s house was located. “What are you going to do for a job?”

“I just got off the plane, Mom.” And I was beginning to wonder if I could get back on it.

“I know, but you’ll need a job if you want to get a car.”

“I realize that.”

“I suppose you can borrow your grandmother’s car until you get one.”

I deflated with a long, exasperated exhale at the thought of patrolling the streets in my grandmother’s ark-like car-asaurous. It was a monster of steel and chrome that devoured economy parking like Tic Tacs and swilled down fuel like minor leaguers on cheap booze.

“Who do you have to impress? No one knows you’re back,” said my mom, noting my disgust.

“I have a date tomorrow.”

“A girl!” she squealed. Meddling in the events of my baseball life was only secondary pleasure to the joy she took from meddling in my love life. “How is that even possible?”

“Thank you for being so confident in your son.”

“I mean, how did you meet one from around here during the season? You’ve been gone all year.”

“On eHarmony,” I said.

“Oh, a technological romance.” She nodded her head as if she thought this was what all the kids were doing these days. “What’s her name?”

“Bonnie.”

“Does she know you’re a baseball player?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell her you sleep at your grandmother’s yet?” My mom giggled.

“No, Mom.”

“What do you think she’ll say when you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is she a nice girl, I mean, not a stalker or something?”

“No, Mom, she’s not a stalker.”

“Where are you taking her out to?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“Well, if you need my advice, I’m always here.” She smiled at me to let me know my questions were always welcome, though I knew I never had to ask her any to get her answers. “You can ask anything, honey, you know that. Even sex-related questions. I know you say you aren’t having it, but you can still ask me if you’re curious.”

“Okay, Mom. That’s enough.”

“I think it would really help you relax if you did. You are so high-strung. Does Bonnie know how high-strung you are?”

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“That’s enough, now.” I started humming something to tune her out.

“Has she had sex, or is she a religious type like you?”

“Okay, Mom, time for another subject change. How’s Dad doing?”

My mom shut up at this. The glee of sucking details from me like some social vampire dissipated. “Don’t ask,” she said, looking back to the road.

“Why? What’s wrong? I thought things were going well at home.”

She said nothing.

Concerned, I turned to her, “Brak isn’t drinking again, is he?”

“No, your brother kept his promise,” said my mom. She looked like me trying to answer her questions.

“Then what is it?”

“We’re here,” she said, and spun the wheel.

My mom pulled the car into the driveway of my grandma’s house and parked under the canopy of trees close to the garage. The leaves were turning in the autumn weather and had littered the driveway with reds and yellows. My grandma was vainly raking them up with a metal-fingered rake that scratched across the pavement of the drive. When we exited the car, I made my way over to my grandma and offered to hug her, which she accepted. It was a nice moment—maybe I was wrong to suspect her of punching holes in my deceased car’s gas tank after all? When we finished our embrace, however, she thrust her rake at me and said, “Finish gathering up these leaves. When you’re done, those stupid neighbors’ dogs shit in my backyard again. The shovel is in the shed.” Then she walked into the house.

“Well,” said my mom. “Welcome home.”

“Thanks.” I said, holding the rake, which smelled faintly like gas.

“It’s a place to live,” said my mom with a shrug. “If you need anything, call me.”

“I need a lot of things,” I mumbled.

I unloaded my luggage, told my mom I loved her, then watched her pull out of the drive and make for work. I was home, if you could call it that, and I had a lot to figure out. I needed a job, transportation, a place to train, the name of a nice restaurant, and the courage to ask my grandmother if I could borrow her car. Yet, before all that could happen, I needed to finish raking the leaves from the driveway, then go shovel some dog shit.

## Chapter Sixteen

Aside from a surplus of pornography in the locker room, the first week of camp passed in routine fashion. I threw my scheduled pens, fielded an excessive amount of comebackers, and gave Bonnie the abridged version of the more provocative happenings among the boys. At the start of the second week, the position players arrived. To greet them, the pitching staff was asked to announce their pitches during our first live batting practice matchup, a gesture we resented more than the use of the cumbersome L-screen we were mandated to pitch behind.

During batting practice of any kind, pitchers are sprinkled around the outfield, charged with picking up all balls struck in and out of play. We try to make games out of it—shagging for points or style—but more often than not, the tediousness of the job leads us to congregate into clumps and let the balls roll past while we bullshit about everything from nightlife exploits to our latest pitching failures.

“Sorry we got you into trouble, Digs,” said Rosco.

“It’s not your fault. I should have known better than to bring the crazy shit you guys do up with my fiancée. A subject like that is just toxic no matter how you handle it. We’ve agreed to discuss only the crucial stuff, and spare her the disgusting stuff.”

“Compromise is the key to any relationship,” said Rosco.

“That stupid fucking screen!” fumed Slappy, breaking into our conversation. “I never feel the same behind it.” He had just finished his turn announcing pitches on the mound, a particularly bad outing, and was stomping out to the rock pile of Maddog, Rosco and me in left centerfield.

“When’s the last time you pitched a game with an L-screen?” he wailed. Before anyone could answer, he continued, “Never, that’s when. Not fucking ever. It’s stupid.”

“Quit whining, Slap. You’re just mad because Chang took you deep.”

“No, no, no. I’m not mad about that. Hitters are supposed to hit you when you tell them it’s coming.”

“Well, he crushed it,” said Rosco.

“Crushed,” emphasized Maddog.

“Probably the longest bomb of all time,” said Rosco.

“Of all time,” echoed Maddog.

“Screw you guys,” said Slappy.

“You said you weren’t mad, Slap,” Rosco volleyed back.

“Not about Chang. I’m mad because you’re my friends. I felt I could express myself in an environment of trust and support. Apparently I was wrong.”

“I’m sorry, Slap.” Rosco threw a hand on Slappy’s shoulder. “How inconsiderate of me. I’m sorry the L-screen made you give up the longest bomb in the history of baseball to a guy who hit a buck-ninety last year.”

“He knew it was coming!” pleaded Slappy, throwing Rosco’s arm from his shoulder. “He should have hit all of them out!”

“They knew it was coming when I pitched and no one hit my fastball off the moon,” said Rosco.

“Was Earp standing behind the backstop when you were throwing?” Slappy asked Rosco.

“I don’t know, Slap. I focus on the hitter when I pitch. You should try that.”

“Whatever. I hope you get your tits lit up this year.”

“Whoa!” everyone gasped in unison. A batted ball rolled past the group. No one made any effort to get it.

“Gosh, Slap. My tits? That’s cold-blooded.” Rosco grabbed his nipples to make sure they weren’t damaged by the harsh words.

“You can’t cold-blood me for that. I come out here looking for some encouragement and you guys put a dagger in my back.” Slappy took his hat off; he was really getting into the debate now. “You know Earp loves guys that throw hard, and guess what?”

“I dunno. What?” asked Maddog.

“I don’t throw hard.”

“Well, you better start.”

“Yeah, exactly. With Earp back there, that’s what I was trying to do. I wound up, threw as hard as I could and”—Slappy made a bat-smacking noise with his tongue—“See ya, ball.”

“So that’s why he hit it so far,” said Maddog. “You did all the work.”

“Thank you, Maddog. I did do all the work. All for Earp! That home run is Earp’s.”

“You can’t let that guy throw your game,” needled Rosco. “You make batters feel sorry for you so they groundout out of sympathy. That’s your strength.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Slap said defiantly. “In this game, you gotta show the brass what they want, which is fucked up because they all want something different.”

“You have to pitch your game, Slap, rule number one,” said Rosco, raising his hands as if delivering commandments.

“Ya, but you also gotta pitch *their* game. Ask Hayhurst, he’s been around, he’ll tell you.”

The group turned their eyes to me for an official ruling on the matter. I was the oldest of the bunch, which somehow made me an authority. I stared back, mouth open, wondering how I’d been turned from harmless spectator to batting practice arbiter. “Uh, well . . .”

There was truth to both arguments. To be successful in base-

ball, a pitcher has to know what he can and cannot do. Often, pitchers get into trouble when they pitch away from their strengths, like Slappy did. However, the guy who rises to the top of the heap in pro baseball isn't always the one doing the best job of sticking to his game. The job of the brass is to promote guys who'll translate successfully into the big leagues. This means that even if a player does well in the minors, if the brass—guys like Earp and Grady—don't think said player will get the job done in the Show, they won't put their seal on him. Or they'll get rid of him. Thus, while it's true a pitcher's best chance for success against a hitter comes from sticking to his strengths, his best chance for advancement means showing the brass what they want to see.

This paradox exists in every professional system, and because of it, players have learned to reverse scout those individuals scouting them. You won't read it in *Baseball America*, but players work just as hard at learning what certain coaches and brass members like, which tools they favor, and which aspects of the game they prioritize, as they do at honing their on-field skills.

As a matter of fact, Earp wasn't the only coach with scouting reports filed on him. While Earp was renowned for his obsession with power arms and radar gun readings, hence his nickname, it was generally accepted that Grady was all about pitch efficiency and guys with good changeups. When Earp was around, guys put a little more effort into lighting up the radar gun. When Grady dropped in, the percentage of changeups thrown seemed to increase substantially. There were other folks in the evaluation system, but none seemed to have as much pull as those two.

As polarizing as their views were, having two distinct scales for what constituted a successful pitcher in the eyes of the brass was actually a good thing. The soft strike throwers did their best to suck up to Grady whenever possible, earning them the nickname "Grady's Boys" for their trouble. In turn, guys who threw flames buttered up to Earp, and were dubbed "Earp's Boys." True or not, there is nothing shameful about surviving, even if it means being accused of kissing ass. When the life and death of a career comes

down to the opinion of a coach who sees you play once or twice in a season, holding on to a job can be as critical, and ridiculous, as a popularity contest.

"I'm going to have to side with Slappy here. Sometimes you have to show 'em what they want to see, fellas."

"Bah." The detractors waved me off. Not because I was telling them something they didn't know, but because I was allowing Slappy an exit from their bullying.

"See! See! Thank you, Hayhurst. I've always liked you," said Slappy.

"You're welcome, Slap. But remember, giving up a six-hundred-foot bomb is way more impressive than turning your 87 mph heater into 89 mph. Sacrificing what you do best when you have to tell the guy at the plate what's coming might not be the best time to accommodate the whims of some jackass with a radar gun."

"Amen!" said Rosco. "Pick your battles: rule number two." His hand went up again.

"Whatever. With friends like you, I hope I get released," said Slap.

"Keep pitching like you did today and you'll get your wish."

"I'm just telling you what I know, Slap," I said.

"Whose boy are you?" Rosco asked me. "Earp's or Grady's?"

"Anybody who'll have me," I said. "Rule number three: kiss all asses more powerful than your own."

## Chapter Thirty-five

On Monday, after losing a day game with the Bees, we packed up and hopped a flight to Colorado Springs, home of the Rockies' Triple A team, the Sky Sox. Sky Sox Stadium is the highest-altitude park in baseball, even higher than the infamous Mile High Stadium that houses its parent team, where ERAs commit suicide upon eye contact.

Like Salt Lake City, Colorado Springs offered gorgeous views of towering mountains. However, unlike Salt Lake, there were no pretty girls, or warm weather. We sat down the line on an unforgiving, bun-freezing aluminum bench. There were a couple of plastic lawn chairs, but only enough for the older guys who rested upon them like thrones.

The Sky Sox provided the pen with an oil-burning heater that looked like a miniature jet engine. It pumped out enough heat to melt our lawn chairs or set our uniforms on fire. Though its intensity was significant, its area of effect was limited, and we had to take turns standing in front of it to get warm, but not so close as to combust ourselves.

"Goddamn," said Ox. He was bending over, letting the heater warm his ass. "This feels tremendous. I might have to get one of these for the house."

"Careful, big man, or you'll melt a hole in your drawers."

“These fucking pants deserve to be melted. Besides, there’s no one here to watch this game,” Ox said, gesturing to the stands, which were virtually empty.

“Why people build stadiums in towns with weather like this, I’ll never know,” said Bentley.

“They say if you want to make a small fortune in minor league baseball, the best way to do it is to start with a large one,” I said, standing up and taking a turn in front of the ass heater.

“Has anyone seen Zarate?” asked Hamp.

We all looked around. “No.”

“Wasn’t he just out here?”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember. He’s like a ghost,” said Fish.

“Did he get sent down?” I asked.

“No, he was definitely on the plane. I know because Reek has to help him out with all the English stuff.”

“I don’t think he speaks much English,” I said.

“I don’t think he speaks much Spanish,” said Ox.

“I think he’s part Aborigine,” said Bentley.

“Maybe we should talk to him in clicks and pops?” offered Hamp.

“I never see him eat spread either. I don’t know how he survives,” said Bentley.

“He’s probably out behind the stadium hunting feral cats with blow darts.”

“Who gives a shit?” said Dallas. “He’s a strange fucking bird. Yesterday, I saw him spray his armpits with fucking hair spray thinking it was deodorant.”

“Yeah, but if the pen phone rings, he appears out of nowhere, like he was always there,” said Fish.

“It’s his witch doctor magic,” I said.

“You think if we whistle for him, he’ll show up?”

“He’s not a dog.”

“Just scream his name or something.”

“Z!” screamed Fish. “Z!”

There was a rustling in the tree line just behind the bullpen

fence. A dark navy jacket broke through and Z appeared, looking at us with wild eyes.

“Uh, Abby was looking for you.”

“Ahbee?” said Z.

“Yeah, he wondered where you went,” lied Fish.

“Ahh.” Z nodded his head but there was no way of knowing what he had heard.

“What the fuck were you doing?” asked Dallas.

Z held up a couple of waterlogged baseballs he had found. Probably batting practice balls struck over the fence but never retrieved. He made his way to the pen with his new clutch, hopped the fence, and joined us again, showing us his collection.

“That’s great, Z. You found some fucking baseballs. We got a whole bag of ’em right there,” said Dallas.

Z nodded appreciatively at Dallas and sat down. We all sat down as well, exchanging *Twilight Zone* looks like we were sharing a roster with some alien. We half-expected Z to sit on the balls and try to hatch them when, instead, he picked up a long metal tarp spike, usually used for holding the bullpen tarp down during bad weather, and proceeded to bang the ball into the sharp end of it.

We all watched him as he worked the ball onto the spike, pounding it over and over again.

“Five bucks says he makes a shish kebab and roasts it on the heater.”

“I may take you up on that bet,” said Bentley, staring at Z.

“If something living comes out of that ball, I’m done. I quit,” said Hamp.

We were all wrong. In the next strike on the ball, Z missed his mark and stabbed himself in the hand with the spike.

“*Ieeee! Coño! Coño! Diablo! Mamma—heuvos!*” He grabbed his hand as blood gushed forth.

“Speaks Spanish about as good as any other Latin guy I know,” said Ox.

“What a fucking dumb-ass,” said Dallas.

“Z, go see the trainer. *Comprende?* Trainer?” said Fish.

“No, no,” said Z. “Iz okay.” He started wiping large splotches of blood on his pants legs, then sucking on the wound.

“Z, you need to see the trainer,” persisted Fish.

Z got up, still sucking on the wound. He walked toward the heater, at which we all jerked back for fear he would stick his hand on the glowing red metal part and cauterize the wound. Z kept walking, though, hopping the fence and returning into the forest.

“What the hell?” We traded baffled expressions.

Minutes later, Z returned. He’d picked some vegetation from behind the fencing area and was chewing pieces of it in his mouth, and pressing it into his hand, which had stopped bleeding.

“Now I have seen it all,” said Hamp.

“Where do they find these guys?” I asked.

“Iz fine,” he said, smiling at us. “Iz okay. No trainer.”

“I wanna know what he rubs on his arm after he pitches,” said Ox.

After the game, we got our first paychecks of the season. They were sitting on our locker chairs waiting for us to discover them when we walked in from the field. It was a big moment for me since this year’s paycheck would be the biggest paycheck of my player career—the first time I saw a comma in my earnings since receiving my signing bonus in 2003.

I carefully tore off my paycheck’s perforated edging, opened it, and stared at the number. A nauseous surge of anxiety hit my stomach where glee should have been. I turned the paper over in my hands, then looked at it again. Then, in a cold sweat, I spoke aloud to the paper in my hands. “Is this right? This can’t be right.” I spun around to see the other players in the locker room. “Is this right?” I called to anyone who would answer.

Other players were looking upon their checks with wrinkled, angry faces. Heads twisted in confusion before going back to the checks for a second inspection. Fingers traced deduction lines, then silent counting indicative of mental math, then, like me, the

desperate search around the room to see if someone was playing a bad joke.

“This can’t be right,” I said, answering my own question, then diving into my check again.

Chip spoke to me from a few lockers down. “Tax in Oregon is harsh, bro. And, don’t forget, you’re missing two days’ worth of pay.” He didn’t seem upset about his pay, of course. His check was that of a free agent. A few hundred missing from a seventy-thousand-dollar-a-season salary is a lot different than a few hundred missing from a salary barely reaching fifteen thousand.

Chip was right about the two days missing, but, even after I factored those days in, my pay was still much smaller than I expected—almost three hundred dollars smaller. That was six hundred a month gone, over three thousand for the season! I sat down and gripped the check so tight I thought it might rip in two. In fact, if it weren’t for my desperate need of the money, I would have ripped the check up in protest and fried it on the bullpen heater. But whom would I be protesting? My own stupidity for not considering the deductions for playing in a major city?

Guys around the room were having similar reactions, especially the first year Triple A players who seemed shell-shocked. Most of them had signed for large bonuses, one of the reasons they made it to Triple A so quickly, so I didn’t feel too bad for them. In fact, I expected their checks to be less than mine, but when I asked them about what they made, it turned out to be more than me.

“How is that possible? How are you making more than me and I’ve been playing three years longer than you?” I asked Frenchy after consulting his numbers.

“I don’t know, man. I don’t know. Maybe there was a mistake?”

“There’s no mistake,” said Luke. “It has to do with the original contract you signed under, how it was negotiated, the way the pay level’s scaled, and so on.” He regurgitated this information in a sterile tone; then, looking at my devastated face, he offered a sympathetic frown and said, “Sucks. Sorry, dude.”

My anger was building. It was my sixth year and this paycheck was less than what some of the third year players were making, and there was nothing I could do about it. What the hell was the point of all this time spent in the minors if you made less as you went up?

I felt like a fool. I didn't factor in the local taxes, the state taxes, and all the other deductions that get taken out of a paycheck when I blissfully planned out my future in Triple A. My outlook for the future crumbled, falling down on me. Reality set in. I had to pay off Bonnie's ring. I had to pay the rent. I had to save for a wedding, scratch up airfare, and provide for a wife I hadn't even proposed to yet. Where was this money going to come from? How did I not see this? I thought of my poor pitching numbers, my poor earnings, my poor living arrangements. Maybe my parents were right; maybe I had no idea what I was doing.

I meandered drunkenly back to my locker and sat down, collecting my head in one hand while squeezing my paycheck in the other. We were not playing at home and I was glad of it because, if we were, I would have needed some strong Kool-Aid to come to terms with what I was experiencing. When I finally had enough strength to lift my head again, I noticed my cell phone's notification light was blinking; I had a text-message from Bonnie. The message read, "*I found my dress!*"

My head fell again.

## Chapter Fifty-five

I came to the park early the next day. I figured, since I was young, I should probably be there before anyone else. Showing up early says you're more prepared, hungrier, and more committed than other players. It says you want to stay in the big leagues and are willing to do whatever it takes.

I knew players and staff were still formulating their opinions of me, and I wanted them to be good opinions. It might only have taken me an hour to get all my pre-game work in, but an hour would not satisfy the people who were making judgment calls about my rookie work ethic. Every player knows that any exerting activity done in excess of what is required, which has no quantifiable relationship to on-field results but is pleasing to the eye of coaches and evaluators, is called "eyewash." But, no matter how disingenuous it is, eyewash is an important part of rookie evolution. Older players expect it, and younger players freely give it because it's the only way a player can avoid getting accused of being comfortable.

This is one of baseball's greatest ironies. Young players desire nothing more than being comfortable so they might succeed, but older players detest young players who act comfortable. Not on the field, per se, but in their everyday behavior. A rookie player

should always carry himself with the proper mix of terror, hunger, thankfulness, humility, confidence, and utter doubt.

Thankfully, I was in no danger of being comfortable. If anything, I felt guilty, like someone had given me a gift far too expensive for me to accept. The jet, the hotels, the money, the treatment—it was all so overwhelming it was nearly impossible for me to fake anything but utmost unworthiness. Yet, there was no way to express this sentiment except by pitching well and working hard. Like anyone who has been to the big leagues for the first time, I wanted to show I could handle the gift. I wanted to show I could be a good rookie to all who judged such things, I wanted to perform well on the field, and I wanted to be loved by my teammates.

Since I was a starter now, I had to throw mandated bullpens between my starts. I'd be facing the Rockies in a few days, and I was bound and determined to recapture the focus that got me to the Bigs—to do what everyone told me I should keep doing, which was not having hyperemotional freak-outs like the one I had in San Francisco.

Balsley and the team's bullpen catcher escorted me out to the pen before the team stretch. Since the night I talked to him on the hotel phone, I'd felt uncomfortable around Balsley. He seemed cold to me and, since he was the boss and I didn't want to piss him off, I steered clear unless he needed something from me. I thought we'd get a better feel for one another during our bullpen session. He was the big league pitching coach, after all; I wanted his approval more than anyone else's, and I would do or say anything it took to get it.

Stretched, warm, and ready to throw, I took the mound in the Padres' bullpen, told the catcher to get down, and set up low and away. I flicked my glove to announce a fastball, fired, and missed wide. The ball came back. I reset, flicked my glove again, fired, and missed, again. The ball came back. Balsley watched impassively at my side. I took a focusing breath, gave another flick, and

this time threw a strike, right down the middle, belt high—the only kind of strike you’re forbidden to throw.

I cringed. By this point, Abby would have said something out of nowhere about my ears not being pulled back and how it was messing up my finger extension. Balsley, however, said nothing. Instead, he walked down to the foot of the mound and looked at me. Not at my eyes like he was trying to convey a thought, but at me as a unit, like I was some piece of machinery and he wanted to see the parts move from another angle. I flicked my glove again, fired, and missed.

The silence was crushing. I shook my head and mumbled, “What the fuck is wrong with me?” *Come back to it later*, I thought. Sometimes you don’t find your groove in a practice session on the first couple of tosses. Moving forward and hitting spots with your other pitches can help you get your feel back. Abby would say there is no sense in dwelling on a bad pitch when you’ve got other pitches that need work. I waved my glove to tell the catcher to move to the other side of the plate, then signaled for a sinker, but Balsley stopped me.

“No,” he said, “stay down and away.” He continued looking at me like a mechanical instrument. “No use throwing to another spot on if you can hit the one that matters most. Low and away is where you make your living; you should be able to hit it nine out of ten times at this level.”

I nodded my head, consenting to his command. In fact, the catcher moved back as soon as he spoke, leaving me little option. I wouldn’t dare voice my difference of opinion, of course; the big league pitching coach’s word was law. I flicked my glove again, even though we all knew what I was throwing, wound and fired low and away for another miss. The ball was returned, the motion repeated, and the result the same. This went on for ten or so throws with me mixing in strikes like they were accidents. In the silence and the scrutiny, I began feeling like I had forgotten how to pitch.

I kept taking nervous glances at Balsley, but his face was stone.

He did, however, count the strikes he thought worthy, announcing them so I might hear how low the number was. When I got to ten strikes out of who knows how many, I stopped and looked at him, completely lost. I knew I was making a bad impression. Or at least I thought I was. Maybe he'd seen this before and wasn't worried about my lack of control. Maybe he knew this would happen. Maybe he knew how intimidating he was to rookies. Why wouldn't he talk to me?

In fear of suffocating in the silence, I spoke in his place. "I don't understand it," I said. "I know this sounds like a cop-out, but I'm a strike thrower. It's what I do . . . I . . ." I stopped there as Balsley turned his head away from the comment, seemingly disgusted by excuse-making.

"I believe you," he said, though I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic. In fact, despite his softly spoken three-word reply, his face seemed to scream, *This is the big leagues, either you get the job done here, or you don't. I have no sympathy.*

I thought about the words I shared with Bentley on the roof of the hotel last night, about how this was the only place you could really make an impact. Then I thought about the type of people who made impacts up here, if I was one of them, and if they made excuses. I tried another player/coach relationship technique: an appeal to arrogance, like I did with the strength coaches back in spring training.

"I, uh, don't know how much time I'll get up here in the Show, so I want to soak up as much info as I can. Anything you see wrong, I'm all ears. You're the best coach in our system, and I obviously need to make an adjustment. I want to stay."

I regretted saying anything almost immediately. Balsley picked me apart in short order, a regular dissection on the mound. He missed nothing, factoring my stride length, my landing foot's angle in relation to my hips, the degree to which I crossed my body, and the length of my inseam compared to my torso. He even had me walk to see which way the balls of my feet struck when my foot fell. Most of the critiques focused on the mechanical, but when he

was done, he told me that much of my delivery was just me compensating for me. It was like getting genetically sequenced and finding out I had more in common with poop-throwing monkeys than I did with strike-throwing big leaguers. I didn't know how I was supposed to process all the analysis, or if I even could. Balsley did confess that this point in the season wasn't the right time to work on it, which brought us back to square one: finding a way to hit the mitt low and away. The only difference now was, as I spent the rest of the bullpen time winding and missing, I could take comfort in the fact that it wasn't really my fault, what with my entire body being a grab bag of inferior products and all.

I was hoping that when the pen was over and I made it back to the locker room, I would do so with a new confidence in my ability to perform here. I wanted to believe that I could match up against the Rockies. Instead, I felt like I was an excuse maker who couldn't hit the most rudimentary of spots on account of my terrible delivery. I wanted to believe that wasn't true, but when I looked at Balsley's face, I couldn't shake the feeling I was wasting his time, and no amount of early eyewash was going to change that. This was the big leagues, after all, and not some developmental minor league practice session. What mattered here were results, period.

## Chapter Sixty-four

I got the call again that night. It was getting easier to manage the big league stadium factor now that I'd made a few trips to the mound. I wasn't comfortable by any stretch, but I did make it through the eighth inning without much trouble, which gave me some confidence that I was improving. I felt like I'd found my command again. I felt like I'd remembered my delivery. Maybe it was calmer nerves. Maybe it was Frenchy's pep talk. Whatever it was, I didn't dwell on the issue. After punching out the next two hitters in the following inning, I got back on the mound ready to face Andre Ethier and finish my first real appearance as Dirk Hayhurst, San Diego Padre.

I knew what Ethier was capable of, the year he was having, and, most importantly, who was on deck behind him. It's funny how so many threads of life can intersect on a baseball field. In this forgettable game, one where the home team cheered more for the Dodgers than their Padres, one that I was allowed to pitch in because we were losing by a jagged number, so much of my life hung in the balance. Baseball revolves around what a player is able to repeat: throwing balls or strikes, getting hits or making outs, wins and losses, success and failure. I finally had a chance to repeat success. I could finally tune out the crowd long enough to hear my

teammates cheering. I could even hear Balsley, a voice I would never be able to tune out, telling me to keep it up.

Pumping in strikes like the Dirk of old, I got Ethier to swing at a hook. I aimed it for the bottom of the zone, a plate topper that would look like a fat, juicy strike leaving my hand but fall deceptively short of hittable. When done right, bats are drawn to it like a tractor beam and Ethier's bat was no exception. He made contact with the top tenth of the ball, enough to send it sputtering on the ground between Adrian Gonzales at first and myself.

It was a "tweener," a groundball so slow and awkwardly placed it commits both the pitcher and the first baseman. I chased the ball, but, realizing I wouldn't get to it in time, broke off and headed toward the bag ready to take Adrian's throw. Ethier was right behind me, bolting down the line, unwilling to concede the at bat as a failure. Adrian, unwilling to concede it as a success, scooped and flicked the ball to me in stride. I stuck out my glove while breaking down to hit the bag, and in the rumbling of my footsteps and Ethier's, I lost the ball for a split second. It deflected off my mitt, hit the dirt, and Ethier crossed the bag safe.

There was a collective groan from the audience, which only served to punctuate the one in my soul. I'd worked on that play roughly a million times in my life. It was a play that pitchers made so many times they universally hated practicing it for its monotony. It's the one play coaches tell us we will never get beat by because we work too hard to make sure we don't . . . and I just did. Now, as a punishment for my crime of poor coordination, I would have to face Manny Ramirez.

I returned to the mound with the weight of my own self-loathing fresh upon my shoulders while one of baseball's all-time great sluggers, not to mention one of this season's hottest, strode to the plate with the carefree bounce the world had come to know him for. His pants were so baggy he looked like one of MC Hammer's backup dancers. In fact, the way his uniform billowed around him, he looked more like a gray trash bag with dreadlocks and a Dodgers' cap than a uniformed player. This was all part of his

charm, and the roar of his fans nearly blew me off the mound. They kept chanting his name, screaming how much they loved him while tugging at shirts that bore his name—some even wore fake dreadlocks in imitation.

I stared him down from my elevated position. I told myself he was nobody special, that he was just another player. I told myself to not be intimidated by his legacy, or his horde of screaming worshippers. I told myself he was a clown, that he made the game look bad with all his antics, and that I would put him in his place by getting him out quickly and quietly. Then, as I watched the third pitch of the at bat sail over the right field fence, I told myself I hated the game of baseball, the big leagues, and Manny Ramirez.