

BIGGER THAN THE GAME

Restitching a
Major League Life

DIRK
HAYHURST



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discuss the details with him. If you have any issues, contact George, okay?"

"I understand. Thank you."

"Okay. Get better. We'll be in touch."

Alex hung up. I dropped the phone. Bonnie stared at me, anxious for details. "I'll be on the roster all year," I said. "The house will get paid for, all the loans, all the medical bills . . ." I shook my head, stunned. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it!" squealed Bonnie. She leapt from the couch and scampered to me for an embrace. "You can't hug Alex, but you can hug me."

George called later in the day. He explained that the Jays would release the decision to the press as "exploratory surgery." He said this was the best way to describe it since it sounded less critical, and they didn't know what was actually wrong inside. Next he asked me where I wanted to get my surgery done, and if I had a particular surgeon I was partial to. I said I didn't know much about surgeons because I'd never had to pick one before. He suggested a few, like the Jays' team doctor in Florida, the Indians' doctor Mark Schickendantz (who worked close to where I lived), and the world-renowned Dr. James Andrews in Birmingham. George said they were all very good, so I decided to work with the one closest to me: Schickendantz. He'd already evaluated me, plus, if there were any complications during the surgery, I'd be close to home and my caring wife. George said he'd set it up and get back to me. Then, one hour later, like destiny on a tight schedule, I received a phone call confirming my date with a very sharp knife.

Lying on the surgery prep table made me rethink things. I wondered if Dr. Schickendantz was good enough to work on

me, or if I should have gone someplace better. I'd heard there was a guy in California who'd resurrected dozens of pro careers. Rumor had it that Dr. Andrews, who had a clinic in Birmingham named after him, could heal me with a single look. What had the Cleveland Clinic ever done for baseball players? Who was the last major league pitcher to come off one of their tables? Would I even have an arm when I woke up from this?

The night before the surgery, I had to take two Blue Bombers to get some sleep. I wasn't supposed to. The clinic said no drugs before the surgery, not even fish oil or a multivitamin. I'm pretty sure it was out of my system by the time they wheeled me into the surgery prep room and slimed me with iodine and antibacterial goo. And if it wasn't, screw it: They were just going to knock me out again anyway.

An Asian doctor came in holding some syringes. Her being Asian made me feel better. I equated that with intelligence. She asked me if I wanted a nerve block for the surgery, or just standard sedation.

"What's the block do?"

"It will make your entire arm go numb for about twelve hours."

"Awesome, give me that."

"I have to tell you the risks first." She explained how the needle had to go into my neck—deep into my neck—and, while in my neck, it could over-penetrated and hit an important nerve, or my spine, or a large, life-giving vein. I thought she was just telling me this to make her job sound important because, in my mind, she was just going to give me a shot. Now it sounded like she was doing her best not to paralyze me for life. I went with the block anyway. Like I said, she was Asian.

Coupled with the nerve-block injection, she also gave me my first dose of sedation. I felt the effects instantly, and was

tumbling over clouds when the surgeon came in to talk to me about what was going to happen. I can't remember the specifics of what he said, something about a quick in-and-out of my shoulder, taking care of trouble he found in there like he was the head of a SEAL team. Then he switched to a soothing tone, explaining how I could die during this, but, statistically speaking, probably wouldn't. I gave him two *Top Gun*-style thumbs up, and things went black.

My first memory upon waking was the nurse telling my wife I was taking more time than usual to come to. Yeah, I was, because I wanted to stay asleep, lady. I knew that once I returned to consciousness I'd have to deal with what had been done to me.

As promised by the anesthesiologist, my arm was completely paralyzed. It was just dead weight hanging from my right side. Ironic, I thought, since even when the feeling returned, it would still be just dead weight. It would be dead weight until I could pitch again.

The doctor gave me a set of internal body photographs showing how chewed up my arm was. It looked grisly, like a crab had fallen into a blender. There were all these dangling meat fingers floating in the fluid injected into my shoulder capsule. It reminded me of undersea footage, as though clown fish should be swimming around in my rotator cuff and labrum.

"It wasn't *that* bad," said my surgeon. "No serious tears, or rips. Just fray, though your labrum has taken some significant abuse. It could have been worse, though. I think you'll be back to the game soon." Then, as he finished his *Thanks for flying the friendly skies* postsurgical spiel, he handed me something way better than a lollipop: a prescription for some heavy-duty painkillers. "Take them as you need them," he said.

I read the prescription: oxycodone. I knew the pill based

on its effect: a warm and fuzzy feeling that didn't exactly take the pain away, but made you care less about it. As well as everything else. I'd never taken the pill before, but I learned about it and several others from playing ball for a living. Lots of guys used them to deal with, or recover from, injuries. Some, and these were the guys who told me what the pills did, just took them because they liked the way they made them feel. After seven years of playing, I knew these oxycodone could fetch me about twenty bucks a pop in Triple-A.

I first learned pain pills had value when I was in the low minors. I took a line drive in the junk without a cup on. I was laid up in the hospital for a night while the doctors discussed whether they were going to have to amputate. I was put on a morphine drip because the pain was astronomical. Then, after the swelling subsided and I was able to escape the place with my nuggets still attached, they gave me some high-milligram Vicodin for the road. I didn't use the pills much after the initial incident, but guys on the team made multiple offers for my leftovers. I even had a bonus baby offer me a thousand dollars for the remainder of the bottle and its refills. Unfortunately for him (and my wallet), one of my coaches threw his back out before I could become a drug dealer. He demanded I give him my leftovers, and finished the bottle in three days.

There is a market for pain relief in baseball. In the minors, getting relief is harder to come by because the cost versus the reward of treatment is different. Anti-inflammatories are still given out liberally, but anything more requires a lot of disclosure that could, in the end, be the difference between major league call-up and minor league backup.

Besides, anti-inflammatories aren't any fun. They do nothing to fight the off-field pains of minor league life, like bus trips, red-eyes, and all the other crap you endure. Two

oxycodones and one stiff drink makes that long bus ride a lot smoother. Can't get comfortable in an economy plane seat? Wash a twofer of Percocet down with a double of Jack and there is no seat. Starting on a travel day? A Blue Bomber could mean the difference between a call-up-worthy outing and another month in the minors. When results are the difference between a check with two zeros and a check with five, you don't want to manage the pain; you want to kill it.

It's an entirely different equation in the bigs. You don't need to buy a couple of extra happy pills from a teammate because you can get just about everything you need by asking for it. I was introduced to my first sleeping pill through a teammate, but once I decided I liked it, all I had to do was tell a trainer I was having trouble sleeping and, hours later, I had a prescription in hand. In the minors, if I told a trainer I couldn't sleep, he'd say, "Sorry man, it's a rough league, hang with 'em." This is one of the reasons major league players often become clubhouse dealers to guys in the minors.

Furthermore, as long as it was something you couldn't test positive for, it wasn't wrong. It's not cheating the system if the system made the loophole. If a player is producing under the influence of legal drugs, the system doesn't ask questions. Test positive for illegal drugs, however, and we have an issue. This makes greenies and steroids wrong, amphetamines and hormones wrong. Sleeping is natural. Managing pain is normal. Discomfort-free play is something we want our athletes to have. The bottom line is, as long as there is money at stake, production to be lost, and championships to be won, players will find ways to get an edge within the parameters of what is "allowed."

Some might say that turning into a prescription drug dealer inside the game is immoral, and I can see that. But in baseball, morality is bought and sold by results. A guy that

can help you find an edge or beat back your body legally isn't seen as a villain, he's seen as a good teammate. And twenty bucks for a legal fix was dirt cheap.

"Thanks," I said, looking from the prescription to the doctor. "I'm sure these will help a lot."

Chapter 20

June 2, 2009—the previous season

We flew back to Vegas on a Southwest-evening knuckleball. Hot desert air ran into cool mountain breezes, slapping our jet all over the sky. Nothing rough enough to stop the boys from seducing free booze from the stewardesses, but too much to let you fall asleep without cracking your head against the cabin wall. Sacramento to Vegas was a short trip, and if the boys were to get drunk before landing, they couldn't let a little thing like turbulence slow them down. Ask any player who's ever played in the City of Sin and he'll tell you the best way to endure the onslaught of buzzing casino ads and blitzing light at the Vegas airport is to have a good buzz of your own.

Vegas. Probably the best and worst place imaginable to put a minor league baseball team. The brass bit their nails every time they sent a prospect there. On-demand gambling, drugs, prostitution, cathouses, drunk driving, stolen goods, real fights, bar fights, bum fights . . . If you were a young man with an itch to get crazy—as almost all minor leaguers are—you were a kid in a candy store. In Vegas you could get high, naked, rich, broke, drunk, beat up, and arrested. All in

the same night. Case in point, one of our best relievers tied on a white tiger-print headband, got smashed at an eighties tribute concert, and spent the night passed out in a shrub outside the Luxor. He woke up when the sprinklers went off—and that was just his Monday night out.

Ironically, for all the ways a player could destroy himself in Vegas, it's one of the best cities for training future big leaguers. It's uncanny how many similarities the legendary Vegas charm has with the motivation behind making it to the top of professional baseball. Both offer life above the rules, constant action, and adulation if you're a winner. Both have an aura about them that compels you to live for the moment. And both can have you playing under the influence of some will-sustaining drug long past quitting time. At least in the big leagues, the locker rooms aren't packed with elderly in Hawaiian-print shirts, or foreigners handing out coupons for call girls . . . Well, not *all* of the locker rooms.

This big league training mechanism has nothing to do with Cashman Field, home of the Las Vegas 51s. That place is a hotbox with a concrete infield, gusting winds, and towering wooden fences for hitters to play racquetball against. No, the real training happens off the field, starting about a month or so into the season, when the charm fades. The boys start to realize they're *living* in Vegas, not one-night-standing it. The reality of trying to do your job in a place where fantasy is the hottest-selling item isn't all it's cracked up to be. Locker-room conversations shift from the standard masculine exploits of how much was drunk, won, lost, and screwed, to how much everyone hates going out because "the damn tourists don't know how to act here!" In short, most guys get a taste of the wild side and realize that while it's fun to escape to every now and then, there's no way they could live in it forever, nor would they want to.

Most guys. Not all. There are always a few who don't want the party to stop.

The plane's in-flight intercom crackled as Brice Jared, a freshly minted big leaguer who started the year with the Jays but was recently busted back to the minors, made an announcement. I recognized the frequency of his voice, even through my noise-canceling headphones, and pulled them off to see what the fuss was about.

I wasn't particularly fond of Brice. I didn't mind him so much in spring training, before he was a big leaguer. Back then he was just a touch cocky, typical for a high draft pick like himself, but he wasn't overbearing. After he made the big club, however, that changed.

Brice the Big Leaguer was a whole new animal. He'd been to the Show and came back wearing it like a billboard. His wardrobe changed, starting with his suits. In every major league locker room there are catalogues from custom tailoring companies who want to slap their wares on big names. For the low, low price of around ten grand, anyone can wear a big league suit. Brice got six. Everyone else on the flight was wearing a blazer and slacks, thrown together to satisfy the travel dress code. Not Brice. He looked like he'd just stepped off the fashion runway.

He also got himself a new car, new watch, new shoes, and new sunglasses—which he wore even now, on an evening flight. Big League Brice blew money on ridiculous stuff because he could. Because "that's what big leaguers do." And that was the real problem.

When Brice came back from the Show, he could no longer have a roommate during hotel stays on road trips, because, "in the big leagues, you have your own room, and I can't go back." Brice couldn't eat the spread in the minor league clubhouse anymore because "in the big leagues, they have real

food and personal chefs, not this PB&J bullshit.” He’d also grown a little more liberal with his mouth, chirping at umpires when they didn’t give him the calls he wanted. He bitched about the travel, the clubbies, and the stadium lighting, making sure that we, his minor league teammates, knew “things are different in the big leagues.”

It was irritating. Especially since most of the guys on this Triple-A Vegas roster had big league time; in some cases, several years’ worth. We all knew players who had more money, experience, and time in the majors than Brice, but didn’t “do what big leaguers do.” And if those players, who had years of service and high-dollar contracts under their belts, wanted to splash the social pot with their wallets and titles, at least they had the service time to back it up. Brice had two months of service and was spending more bonus money than actual big league earnings. Despite his new look, swagger, and affinity for complaining, he was just another Triple-A player now, albeit with a bad case of Big League Withdrawal.

After the intercom crackled, Brice’s voice came over the speakers. “Hell-oooooo everyone,” he began. “Thanks for flying Southwest, the official airline of your Las Vegas 51s.” It came out in a drunken-but-trying-oh-so-hard-not-to-show-it slur. He might have gotten away with it if he hadn’t started laughing hysterically at himself. Two flight attendants stood by his side with nervous looks on their faces. Brice had most likely paid them for a chance to use the cabin announcement intercom. Before acting on any notions of backing out of their arrangement, Brice slurred on. “Hey,” he resumed, breathing heavily into the mic, “we got a new guy on our team . . . Ffff-irst timer here in Triple-A, and we have a special way of intro-ducting”—he made quotes for that word—“them. Rookie’s gotta sing karaoke, y’all!”

“Uncle,” said my seatmate, fellow reliever, and friend Bryan Bullington, or “Bully.” Like me, he had slid off his

headphones and was watching this spectacle unfold. We took a quick survey of the plane to see where the coaches were sitting, and if they were going to do anything. They were low in their seats, trying not to let anyone know they were affiliated with the performance.

“Aaaaand this is really going to happen,” Bully said, letting his head fall into the seatback.

“This guy is a ten-year big leaguer in his own mind, Dude,” I said, nudging Bully. “You’ve got more time than him, and you were a first rounder. Why don’t you tell him to rein it in a little?”

Bully shook his head. “Other guys have said something already. It doesn’t help. Just makes him bitter. He’s got it bad, maybe the worst I’ve ever seen. Someone up there probably encouraged this out of him. And now he’s our problem.”

Like Bully, I let my head fall into the seatback. I didn’t have as much time in the big leagues as Brice or Bully did, but I’d seen transformations like Brice’s before. Some guys go to the Show and they come back different. They succumb to the myth that they are as big as the league they’re in purely because they are there. Worse, some of them stay up there. A cycle starts. Young players who don’t know how to act show up in the bigs, look to an older player to show them how to behave, and wind up following the lead of some established, veteran jackass. A high-dollar prospect already into digging himself is the perfect candidate to continue the tradition of unchecked jackassery. When the two meet, it’s like the uniting of a Sith Lord and a devoted apprentice. The majors have plenty of oversized egos, but you don’t learn the kind of swagger Brice was throwing around unless you have a master to help you hone it.

At Brice’s command, one of the younger pitchers who’d just joined the club appeared from behind the galley curtain. He was a country boy: shy, quiet, and not ready for flight-

attendant work. Ironically, he was probably a bigger prospect than Brice. The difference was that Brice had been to the Show and Shy Country hadn't, and service time means everything in baseball.

A group of relief pitchers close to the action—those who'd been testing their alcohol tolerance at high altitude—snickered at our country rookie like a pack of goons about to run someone's underwear up a flagpole. Bully and I, though annoyed by Brice, chuckled as well. Even the coaches, who probably needed a drink more than anyone else on the jet, were laughing. It was the minors, a place of irony and over-the-line gags. To take any of it seriously would be the real sin. If it made Brice feel better to think he was living the Big League Life on a cattle-car flight where drinks came in plastic cups courtesy of a lispy attendant who sang the preflight safety instructions to the tune of a Broadway hit, so be it.

"Tell the audience what you're gonna be singing for us to-night." Brice pushed Shy Country out into the aisle.

Country gingerly placed his hands on the microphone and told the audience, "‘Friends in Low Places,’ by Mr. Garth Brooks." The goons in front applauded heartily while the coach passengers offered a meager, out-of-sync clapping of hands.

What followed was a real mess. A jet plane's intercom is not built with a CD player, an MP3 hookup jack, or the ability to stream music from iTunes. In all our other rookie hazzings, which we did in the outfield with a boom box and a microphone, rookies at least had musical accompaniment. Poor Shy Country had nothing. He had to stick in an earbud from his iPod and sing *a capella*. He sounded like a baying dog in need of euthanizing.

"Jesus, where's an air marshal when you need one?" I said. "If this isn't an act of terrorism, I don't know what is."

"No kidding," Bully said. "I've heard this song sung a mil-

lion times by a million different drunk guys and this is the worst rendition yet.”

The music trolled on long enough for Shy Country to hit the chorus. When he did, a few of the white-haired passengers—soon to be clogging buffet lines and slot machines—sang along. Then, one of the attendants, probably feeling he’d kept up his end of the bargain, cut the music off and ushered everyone back to their seats. At this, the first universal round of applause was issued.

Following the performance, the voice of the plane’s captain came on and instructed everyone to take their seats for landing. Everyone did. Except, of course, for Brice. One of the flight attendants had to walk him back to his seat, and when the pair passed by Bully and me, Brice said, “In the big leagues, you fly private jets and can stand up when the plane takes off or lands. It don’t matter.”

“That’s nice, sir,” said the attendant, “but this isn’t the big leagues. This is Southwest Airlines.”

Chapter 23

The weather changed. Rain came into Philly and drenched the park before the next day's game. I believe the excessive rainfall played a key role in the toilet backing up. The fact that I might have eaten too many chicken wings the night before? That might also have played a role, although which played the bigger part in the incident was hard to tell. Regardless, one thing was abundantly clear: the toilet in the visitors' bullpen was clogged, and the water level inside the bowl was rising with me on top.

Actually, it had already risen, quietly, inconspicuously, all the way up to the brim, so that a turd was able to kiss the back of my thigh. Luckily, I was just finishing up when my bathroom experience became aggressive, and so I was able to leap from the bowl, thus saving my uniform from the ensuing overflow as it poured onto the floor of the visitors' bullpen bathroom.

Pants down and fresh sewage drying on my ass, I watched chunky brown liquid gush over the rim of the toilet bowl like some porcelain volcano. Panic gripped me. The ramifications of what would happen to me if this event made it outside the bathroom doors washed over me like a tidal wave of

poo. Surely this would turn into an utter social catastrophe, a rookie blunder for the record books.

I played it out in my head. Camp, Frasor, Downs, and League would probably laugh about it. Of course they'd make their best jokes, then report to the rest of the team so they could make *their* jokes, but then the incident would fade. Skip Sunday, aka Rabbit, would have a fit. He and his collection of psychological tics would go into full system meltdown. Rabbit, a man who ate the same pregame meals, listened to the same pregame songs, and drank the same flavor and size pregame Red Bull. Rabbit, who could not walk over certain things or talk about certain things or even be *near* certain things before a possible game appearance. Rabbit, who equated success to taking the same pregame shit during the same inning of each game, was just crazy enough to think I'd do this to him on purpose. He'd go into one of his spastic freak-outs about ritualism and results, luck and karma, and how none of it was crazy if it kept him in the bigs.

His tantrum would fire up his surrogate mother, TJ Collins, lord and master of the bullpen, and then I'd be in the doghouse. Between Rabbit and TJ, they'd make me carry every last ounce of this putrid mess out in a paper Gatorade cup. Once TJ spoke, Downs would follow suit on the ruling. League would plead the fifth right behind Frasor, and Camp, depending on how much caffeine he'd had, would either make fun of me, or Rabbit, or both. Probably both.

It was imperative this event not leave the room, which, considering the sloping of the floor toward the door, seemed guaranteed. Luckily, the bathroom doubled as a storage shed for the grounds crew, which meant there were tools at my disposal that most normal bathrooms would not have. Most notably, a push broom, some Turface, a shovel, and a hose

connected to a spigot in the wall. There was also a drainage grate in the middle of the floor.

I calculated that I could use the hose to spray the sewage down the grate, busting up any stubborn logs with the power of the water pressure. Any standing water that remained could be absorbed with the Turface, which I could then broom into a pile and shovel into a trashcan. I could spray off the toilet and wipe it dry with toilet paper. By then, I hoped, whatever was still standing in the bowl would have sunk to a level of disgusting more tolerable for the average baseball player.

First, I sprayed my legs off with the frigid (yet strangely exhilarating) hose water. Then, pants up, I began the process of shepherding toilet runoff down the drainage grate. Three minutes in, I knew I had a problem. The drainage grate started regurgitating, just as the toilet had. In an effort to stem the flow, I grabbed the shovel and tried to stab the handle down into the drain hole, hoping to break up any clogs. This method failed to unclog anything. It did, however, do a remarkable job of speckling my uniform, hands, wrists, and even my cheeks with dirty brown water.

My only recourse would be to soak up everything on the floor with Turface. I decided to spray off the toilet, use Turface to absorb the water, then sweep it up and cut my losses. But the puddle had grown sentient. It was expanding with a mind for chaos, oozing toward the crack below the door, intent on escape.

I assailed the puddle with Turface, working to beat it back one handful at a time. When I ran out of Turface, I grabbed the shovel—still slimed and fetid from its failed audition as a plunger—and spooned the water into the trashcan. But I couldn't spoon fast enough.

In a reckless attempt to overpower this mess, I leapt onto the puddle and slashed at it wildly, hoping to spread it out

and weaken it. The gamble paid off. With the filthy water slung on the walls, equipment, pants, and shoes, the beast finally retreated into its hole. I brushed up what I could of its carcass, washed what parts of myself I could fit into the sink, and braced myself before turning the door handle to exit.

“Guys,” I said, stepping from the bathroom while smoothing out an impossibly disgusting jersey, “I think there might be something wrong with the toilet.”

“What did you do, dude?”

It was Rabbit, as expected. Even under normal circumstances, he’d get nervous if someone went to the bathroom before him, fearing they might still be in there when his internal clock of superstition struck potty break. He sprung to his feet to investigate.

“I didn’t do anything, I just tried to flush the toilet and . . .” I gestured as if pushing down a plunger to blow up life as we knew it.

Rabbit rushed into the bathroom. It looked like someone had tried to put out a fire. And then, of course, there was the smell . . .

Rabbit’s body language did all the talking. His gaunt frame of skin and bone contorted in anguish. League slid up behind Rabbit and peeked in, then started laughing hysterically. This induced Frasor into looking, then Camp, then Downs, and finally TJ.

Rabbit spun on me, veins in his eyes bulging to the surface. His hands rose up, briefly stopping level with my neck before continuing up to his shaved, malnourished head, which he grabbed trying to hold his freak-out at bay. After me, Rabbit was the next youngest player on the staff. He was the former rookie in the pen and that made him dangerous, because players fresh out of rookie-dom are always looking to show current rookies how grown-up they are. I had just given him his big chance.

Laughter hit Rabbit from all sides.

Frasor was first, talking down to him sarcastically the way one might speak to a dog who couldn't find his favorite toy. "Oh no, Rabbit, what are you going to do? You won't be able to pitch today? Oh no!"

Camp was next. "Uhhhggh. I'd better start warming up now," he said, slipping off his jacket. "You owe me, Rabbit, always bailing your skinny ass out."

"Downs," League said between giggly fits, "get Cito on the phone and tell him Rabbit can't pitch because he can't take his mid-game shit." Then, back to Rabbit, "Don't worry, Rab, you know how Cito *loves* the bullpen. He'll understand."

"Fuck, dude!" erupted Rabbit. He spun back to me once again. "You gotta fix this, Hayhurst. I gotta take a shit!"

"I did fix it. It overflowed in there and I was on the toilet when it happened. It got all over me. I had to spray my bare ass off with that frigid hose. Do you know how cold that water was?"

"Will it flush now?" asked Rabbit.

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," I said.

"Dude! Fuck! Ugh! Man! Dude! C'mon!"—contortions between each word—"You'd better make it flush."

"Come on, Rabbit, I got bit in the leg by a turd and you act like you're the one that has to suffer."

"You're a rook, dude! Find a way to fucking fix it. You got"—he looked at the scoreboard clock—"an inning to fix this. Tell em, Teej."

TJ, bullpen master, surveyed us all. He had the most service time of the pitching staff. He was loud, abrasive, and cocksure, old-school, hard-nosed, and a smashmouth. The kind of guy you wanted to have on your side in a fight, but not the kind of guy you wanted to screw up in front of, or piss off. He was quick-witted, too, which, coupled with his

imposing size, personality, and volume, made him not to be trifled with.

“Hell, Cock”—a pet name he had for Rabbit—“you knew this was going to happen eventually. But who would have thought Hayhurst would be the fucking guy to do this to you?”

“Yeah, but . . . but . . .” Rabbit was not pleased with this response. But TJ’s word was law in the social hierarchy, and so he’d have to swallow it.

“Go down there and ask the Phillies if you can use their shitter,” Camp suggested.

“I can’t . . . I’m not . . . C’mon, dude!”

“Relax, Rabbit,” Frasor said. “Have Hayhurst go fetch the grounds crew guys and get someone up here to fix it.”

“Yeah!” Rabbit snapped the idea up instantly as if it was his own. “Go get the grounds crew up here to fix this shit, Hayhurst.” Rabbit shook his head at me. “Fucking Hayhurst.”

“Don’t take that from *Rabbit*,” Camp said. “Make him go down and use the Phillies’ pen.”

“No way! He’s the rookie, he’s gotta fix this!” Rabbit glared at me, waiting for me to obey, while others watched with smirks, hoping that I wouldn’t.

I glanced around the group, reading faces and expectations. There was hidden meaning in each choice, even with something as ridiculous as a clogged toilet. As crazy as Rabbit was about routine and superstitions, the whole big league operation was like this, placing a ludicrous amount of weight on things that produced on-field results whether there was any direct correlation to those results or not. The ends always justify the means in the bigs, which has a way of elevating routine preparation to divine ritual. So much is at stake on every play and every pitch that every toilet flush takes on meaning as well. And guys will do just about anything to

keep themselves in line for success, to the point where they don't really understand why they do what they're doing anymore. The routine absorbs them like Turface on a brown puddle, and soon you can't tell which is the player and which is the crap he's sucked up.

"I'll get a grounds-crew guy," I said. "I don't want to screw up anybody's routines." Rabbit nodded his head that I'd done right. Frasor spun sideways as if I missed a key foul shot. Camp just snorted.

"You're lucky, Rabbit," said Frasor. "I'd make you use the Phillies' pen."

"You would, Fraze. That's the kind of guy you are."

"You're too nice, Hayhurst. You're too nice. But you'll learn."

Chapter 37

Next morning, I sat in the training room with bloodshot eyes and untamed hair. “You look like hell,” Luke said, appearing with the morning hot pack. “Late night?”

I grabbed Luke by the collar. “They can read, Luke. *They can read!*”

I explained the fallout on the net and the sleepless night that followed. I’d employed every technique Dr. Ray had taught me and I was still on the verge of a total anxiety meltdown.

“I don’t understand,” Luke said, “why you’d run to the Internet to talk about something like that.”

“What do you mean you don’t understand? That’s what social media is for, Luke, to brag about your brushes with people more famous than yourself. I don’t get on there and talk about how I hung out with you all day!”

“Why do I always get insulted?”

“Stop making this about you, Luke. I have a serious issue here. I’ve made a very large, wealthy, sadistic man upset with me and I need to get it fixed.”

“Talk to Kevin. He’s friends with Triple H. Maybe he’ll know what to do.”

Luke went off to find Kevin. Meanwhile, I lay on the table

with my shoulder warming, staring up at the poster of Triple H. His eyes seemed to bear down on me more menacingly than usual. Maybe because he knew something I didn't? I wondered who else knew something. Did the Blue Jays know about this? Did they get a call from World Wrestling Entertainment to discuss a lawsuit? Was José Bautista getting interviewed about how hard it was for him to focus when a loose cannon like Hayhurst was waiting in the background, ready to disclose players' secrets on the Internet?

I understood it now, clear and plain. This was what everyone worried about when I was around. That I would take some important piece of personal information and throw it into the hurricane of public opinion. That I would, whether intentional or not, wreck someone's life. This is why I was a toxic teammate.

"What the hell did you do now?" It was Kevin, marching onto the scene. I sat up and spun around to face him.

I re-explained what had happened, adding at the end, "Do you think he'll be pissed off? Do you think he'll sue? Do you think I really inconvenienced him or that this is just"—I laughed nervously—"no big deal and it will blow over?"

"Oh god!" Kevin put both hands to his head. "I don't know if he'll sue, but I'm sure he'll be pissed off. Oh Jesus!"

"R-r-really?" It was hard for me to tell if Kevin was being the sarcastic, needling, I-enjoy-making-you-suffer-while-I-help-you-heal Kevin, or honest Dr. Wilk, the guy who took the Hippocratic oath?

"Of course!" Kevin declared. "They spend months scripting their story lines, developing plots and characters. It's all mapped far in advance. You think they just go out there every night and beat the hell out of each other with steel chairs?"

Actually, that's exactly what I thought.

"Of course not!" I said.

“Everything that happens to them outside the ring has to be explained in their story lines,” Kevin continued, pacing around the training-room bench, hands wildly gesturing. “Why they got hurt, who hurt them . . . this upends tons of mapped-out scenarios not only for Triple H, but all his side-kicks and enemies too. That’s why they have to keep these things under wraps—they have to work the injury into the story. If the wrestling world thinks he got hurt doing something that isn’t part of the script, why, it casts doubt on the whole character. They’re not just wrestlers; they’re actors in a constantly evolving story.”

Kevin chuckled as he finished his explanation, as if to say, *Yeah, it’s bizarre and a real strain on the imagination considering the quality of the scripts we’re talking about, but you still fucked up in grand style, pal.*

My eyes darted around the room, searching for the nun. I needed her now. I needed her to speak to God on my behalf. But the sister wasn’t there. I grabbed my sinking head. I was horrified what would happen to me now—a peculiar kind of horror a person feels when they’re in big trouble but can’t discount the humor involved. I mean, who looks at wrestling and doesn’t realize it’s all made up? How could a tweet ruin something that couldn’t be taken seriously in the first place?

“I suppose this wouldn’t be that big of a deal if it didn’t come from you,” Kevin said. “But because it came from you, a professional athlete, it’s taken as truth. It’s ridiculous. I mean, I think all you guys are clowns and jack-offs—you especially—but that’s the way it is.”

He was right. My voice had power, which is what made me dangerous.

After a lot of frantic confessing, rationalizing, and hair-pulling, Kevin informed me that since I hadn’t signed any forms or waivers, I wasn’t legally liable for anything that I saw while in the hospital, and couldn’t be sued since HIPAA

didn't apply to me. That was nice to hear, but I still didn't want my reputation to be ruined. I didn't want the athletic world to think of me as the guy who sent private information to the world via Twitter. Being rumored as a guy who *might* do that was bad enough. I had worked hard to avoid the status of confirmed exposé writer, and this little slip of the digital tongue could make it all moot.

"You can contact him, right, Kevin? You can tell him that it was an accident and that I didn't mean anything by it? I feel terrible. It's really bothering me. I need him to know that I'm sorry. I need to know he's okay." Like a puppy, I stared innocently into Kevin's wise, compassionate healer's eyes . . . only to watch them glaze over and turn into the eyes of the sarcastic needling torturer.

This was the upper hand he'd been waiting for. He was the communications gatekeeper to Triple H. He could do anything he wanted. And, from the way a wicked smile curled up on his face, it was obvious that what he wanted right now was to make me squirm.

"What's in it for me?" he asked.

"I've already given you books and a movie spot."

"What else do you got?"

"Oh, come on, man!"

"I'm serious. These wrestlers, their brains"—he spun his hands around his head like he was winding a tape into a knot—"they don't function like the rest of us. All the body slams, slaps in the face. Isn't that right, Luke?"

"Vicious O did grab my balls," Luke said.

"Whoa!" Kevin threw up his hands. "It wasn't a grab, Luke. There was no cuppage. The hand never closed. Vicious O only flipped your zipper. Just because you had movement doesn't imply cuppage. Stick to the facts." Kevin shook his head. "Now, Dirk. I'm supposed to call Hunter and tell him the reason he's in the middle of a media inquisition is be-

cause some blabbermouth Blue Jay outed him in my training room? Come on.”

“You don’t know that,” I protested. “It might be no big deal for him!”

“Dirk, *Dirrrrk*,” said Kevin. “I know, okay. Trust me. He’ll want to kill you. And you want me to talk him down. I’m saving your life here!” Then, as he was so fond of doing, he started talking about how I’d hurt him with my actions and ruined his professional reputation. “And all this happened in my training room. Do you know how that makes me look? You’re lucky I even keep working on you.”

Was he joking? Was he serious? God, I hated how hard he was to read! The fog of the unknown, the stress of impending death, the fear of my reputation slandered. My emotions started to race and the pit of my stomach fell. The situation played out the only way it could: “I’m gonna be sick,” I said, leaving the table and heading for the bathroom.

Kevin sprang into pursuit. “Alright, I’ll call him now,” he said. “We’ll talk to him about it.”

The prospect of confronting Triple H just made me more nauseated. “I can’t talk to him,” I said, pushing the bathroom door open, hoping to separate myself from Kevin and his scenarios of embarrassment. Undeterred, Kevin followed me in. I went into one of the toilet stalls and locked the door. Kevin stood outside.

“I’m dialing him right now.”

“No, you’re not!” I shouted. Seeing the toilet bowl made me want to pee, but I also wanted to vomit and cry. Because of all the duress, I couldn’t do any of it. “You’re screwing up my natural functions, Kevin!”

“It’s ringing.”

“I hate you! I hate you!”

“Heyyyy, Hunter. It’s Kevin Wilk. I’m good . . . yeah . . . How are you feeling? Good . . . Yeah, I know those guys and

they'll take good care of you. How's the family? Oh, great. Uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . Well, isn't that sweet."

I had to decide if I wanted to leave the stall, where Kevin could push the phone off on me, or stay inside and trust him to handle it. I decided to stay put. Triple H was his friend; he'd know what to do. I peeked over the stall door and looked at Kevin, who looked back at me with a casual smile through his reflection on the bathroom mirror.

"Hey, quick question," Kevin said to his phone. "Have you heard anything from the media about your surgery going public because of a baseball player here in my clinic?" As soon as he asked the question, Kevin pulled the phone away from his head indicating the volume had spiked to painfully high levels. Instinctually, I ducked back behind stall door, reduced to watching through a crack between the door and the divider.

"I know, I know," said Kevin. "Yeah, he's kind of stupid. No, he really doesn't think before he says stuff . . . Yeah, I know you would if you were here right now . . . yeah, I told him he was lucky . . . yeah . . . yeah . . . I know you would."

That's right, Kevin, I thought, let him get all his anger out, then tell him how bad I feel. Tear me down if you must, as long as he knows I'm sorry and didn't mean it!

"Well you see," said Kevin, "that's just it. He's not sorry about any of it."

My head shot up over the stall door.

"Yeah, he says it's a free country and he can say what he wants."

I attacked the latch of the bathroom stall. I had to get out so I could kill that malicious bastard. But Kevin was on the move; by the time I made it through the door he was back in the training room. I burst from the bathroom in hot pursuit and saw Kevin, moving to the far side of the room, past a confused Luke.

“That’s bullshit, Kevin!” I screamed. Patients stopped their treatment and watched me as I streaked across the room. “You tell him I’m sorry. You tell him it was an accident, goddammit! You tell him I want to live!” Having cornered Kevin, I reached to yank the phone from him but, instead of turning away, he held the phone out to me to take. The screen was blank. The phone was off. In fact, it had never been turned on.

“I hate you,” I said, again.

“He didn’t answer,” Kevin shrugged.

“I hate you.”

“You love me. I’m the best trainer there is.”

My eyes narrowed on him, but before I could say I hated him again, he said, “I’ll call him tonight and tell him how bad you feel, that it was an accident and that you’re sorry. It was probably going to go public anyway. It always does.” He took a big breath and seemed sad, his fun nearly finished.
“Geez, relax. This is a place of healing, remember?”