

## OPENING DAY

It was a rough off season for Bucky, particularly the last week. Carlotta filed the restraining order. Katie's lawyers served him with the divorce papers. That square, head-on hit into the utility pole totaled his vehicle. The attorney told him a second offense, blowing a blood alcohol level like that, would surely take his license, anyway. According to the eviction notice he found taped to the apartment door, he had to be out in 27 days. On the up side, opening day was just around the corner. Everybody said the new stadium might just change everything.

He had yet to be in the new building or called about the schedule. He was without a way to get email and contact numbers were lost with his broken phone. Buying cigarettes at the Kwik Chek last week, he ran into Julio. Julio worked in the clubhouse, and his English wasn't that great, but Bucky left the conversation understanding that Tuesday afternoon was the first day everyone was expected to report. So today, when he got his head clear, he'd go down there to check out the new digs. *Sometimes things work out*, he thought. *Have to find a new place to live anyway, might as well be within walking distance of the new ball park.* For right now, he would roll over and try to catch a few more winks.

*But, you close your eyes and the replays might start.* Once rolling inside his head they were hard to stop, and the outcome never reversed. Flash back to late September when the loss within the division that afternoon meant the team would miss the playoffs. After Carlotta cried that night and told him she would no longer, and never again, date a married man, she had Caller ID added to her service. When he tried to call after that, she wouldn't answer. When she did pick up, that time he used a borrowed phone, he saw a narrow window of opportunity.

“Don’t hang up, Baby,” Bucky blurted out, “can’t we just talk it out?” He should have been able to detect, in the momentary silence that followed, just how irate she had become.

“You call here again,” she was resolute, “and I phone your wife.” He stood there blinking in the dark when the signal went dead. A week seemed more than long enough for her to cool off. He left a message on her machine.

“Got some big news for you, Baby,” although he wasn’t sure where he’d go with that if she answered, “call my cell.”

Next that haunting night comes back, him sitting on the couch, watching the late game of the Division playoffs, celebrating with spiced rum from the bottle and sun flower seeds from the bag. Katie was already in bed. He was taking a leak in the half-bathroom off the den when he heard the house phone ring twice. When he came out, the face of the console was illuminated with Carlotta’s number. He grabbed the phone, slipped out to the front porch, and gently closed the door behind him. He held the receiver to his ear, quieted his breath, and gingerly pressed the ‘talk’ button.

“And he told you he was married?” Katie was asking.

“He got around to mentioning it after a while,” Carlotta answered, “but he said that you never loved him like I did.”

“Oh, is that right?” Katie said at just about the same time Bucky chimed in.

“No, that’s not the way it was,” he pleaded, “I mean, I don’t think those were the words I used.”

“He told me that he was in a, oh, loveless marriage,” Carlotta interjected, “that you two hadn’t made love in two years.”

“Two years,” Katie replied, and barked, “HA!” into the phone without humor. “Well, what do you know about that? It was dark, all right, but all those nights I just assumed that was him rolling over, stabbing that thing in me while I was trying to sleep.”

“Ladies, listen,” Bucky offered, “this might not be the best way to . . .”

“You’ve said enough, Mister,” Katie barked back. “As I was trying to say, Carol . . .”

“That’s, uh, Carlotta,” Bucky suggested.

“I told you to butt out of this conversation,” Katie said, “so butt out,” then continued, louder and louder. “NO, you can take him, honey.”

“But that’s not what I . . .”

Bucky hurt when he heard Carlotta’s whine.

“No, you can have the whole package, Carla. The whole BASEBALL FANTASY WORLD he lives in, that keeps him from thinking ahead to a real job, a real career.” As if the shouting was just one more on a long list of wearisome things, she continued in a more reflective tone. “They don’t call them the ‘Boys of Summer’ for nothing.” The last thing she said was, “there’s not enough man there for either one of us,” and then hung up.

“Carlotta?” Bucky asked into the silence, but he heard her hang up, too. He was still sitting in the lawn chair on the porch when he heard the deadbolt slide into place, and his toothbrush, car keys, and two largest remaining pieces of his cell phone pushed through the mail

slot in the front door. The nightmare replay ends with him driving barefoot in the Jeep to Motel 6.

Gearing up to pull off the big comeback with Carlotta, he called and left messages every few days. When he showed up at her apartment on Valentine's Day with a dozen long-stem red roses, he could see the lights turn off through the little peephole in the door. He stood there knocking until it was clear she wouldn't open, and left the bundle right there on the rubber welcome mat. After that, being served with the restraining order was like losing Game 7 of the series in late extra innings.

With all that running through his mind, it was hard to get back to sleep. Bucky lay there looking at the ceiling. A rust colored water stain, leaking through from the apartment above, looked like stitching on a curve ball cutting across the plate. That's what he wanted ever since Little League, watching the array of pitches come in, knowing instinctively when pitchers had their best stuff on any given day. After all this time, he could tell with the naked eye when a fastball topped 100, or a changeup dropped to the high seventies.

Even a brief doze might help. He had to dream up some angle to get out of eviction. He was current on his rent, including the late fees. There was that prior warning thing, in writing, but the swimming pool was just a short jump from the corner of his second floor balcony and, when the party cranked up last weekend, he couldn't resist. The water volleyball net was tied off to a serving table loaded with liquor bottles and pitchers of sangria. When Bucky's ankle caught the rope on his way in, it ruined an otherwise perfect cannonball, pulled two table legs into the water and splayed broken glass to all corners of the pool deck. Some tenants' wounds required Emergency Room stitches. None of this assisted in convincing the property manager to change

her mind. Those goons staking out the place to serve him with papers didn't help his case, either.

Persuasion was not among his strengths lately, anyway. He suspected Carlotta might be lost to him but couldn't convince himself to let it go. Sure, there were some plays he would like to have back, but he hoped she could look past all that. After the accident, he was so out of it on Vicodin and Percodan, the way Bucky reasoned it out, *the booze was just to keep it real*.

He'd been hot for the young intern working season ticket sales since the first time he saw her. She was excited about her first real job after college and seemed enthusiastic about every aspect of the game. His long tenure with the club impressed her, along with the inside stories on big name players. Her baseball knowledge vastly increased under Bucky's tutelage and it burned him to no end whenever he thought of her yammering that information to the new boyfriend.

She was dating that statistician college punk hired in as a new assistant to the General Manager. Artist renderings of the new big-shot skyboxes were all over the news these past few weeks. Bucky cursed out loud when he thought of her sitting up there each home game this season, behind the glass, with a clear view of him down there in the area behind home plate.

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His last conversation with Katie hovered over him like a slumping player's jinx. *'Fantasy world,'* is what she called it. *After all this time, she still doesn't understand.* Even if she could ever muster the patience to listen, Bucky most likely couldn't find words to explain it to her. It wasn't distinctly defined or clearly evident even to him, on a conscious level. Most of his life had been a search for an elusive, palpable magic he could never fully experience, and stolen mystery he sought to get back.

His dad made a living selling tools from a big, square red and white truck on worksites across several Sunbelt states. Bucky spent his school years moving from one affordable apartment to the next, in locations where building was booming. They'd live there until the boom went bust, then follow the business to the new hot spot. That meant Bucky would change schools every year or two and try to adapt to new surroundings.

Moving so often prevented him from staying with one sports team or coach. He was always the new guy who played second string on teams with positions already established. When he did play, it was usually at catcher because few players, or their moms, wanted to risk foul tips and thrown bats or wear all that hot gear. Bucky didn't mind. From his point of view he had the best view in the house; the long chalked lines came straight to him and ran infinitely in the other direction, judiciously separating the fair from the foul.

Proportions of the diamond were eternal, regardless of your age or the level you played. No matter how cold the winter was or people treated you, every opening day was a warm homecoming and a fresh start. In his unpredictable world, the consistency of the game seemed like its own kind of magic.

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The shower refreshed but couldn't dispel that lingering, foggy frame of mind. He stood there, hair dripping on the bath mat, formulating his game plan for the day. The solace of his bathroom seemed like the place to do that. A suggestion of calm and ease emanated from the residual scents of hair mousse, shaving gel, and soap on a rope. With sunlight from the narrow window cutting through the steam, the brightly painted parrot and palm trees on the poster board by the mirror emerged, framing the message; "Another Day in Paradise." That's where he would

be today. The notion propelled him to action. Every new season began with the hope of going all the way.

His apartment door slammed behind him at the same moment he saw *that fox*, Kristen, across the narrow patch of courtyard, leaving for work. He'd seen her at the pool, waiting for the right chance to chat her up. *There's a lot to like if you just get to know me.* Sometimes he sat out on the overturned planter on his porch to catch a smoke and watch. Each time her A/C cut on, curtains rustling away from the window frame began a peepshow of narrow glimpses of her living room sofa, enough to suggest what might transpire between them in that flickering television light.

He had seen two different nerds coming and going from her place, one dressed in the same khaki pants and uniform shirt she wore to work. The other one looked like he could be her brother. Bucky didn't think either were competition for him when it came right down to pure animal magnetism. He hurried down the concrete steps.

"Hey, what's happening?" he called as Kristen checked to see if the door locked behind her.

"Hey," she replied, turning around when she heard his footsteps crunching across the grass, "just getting off to work. I'm on second shift this month."

"Guess so," he said, "any chance you headed downtown? Toward the new ballpark?"

"No, we carpool out the other way. Warehouse district," she explained, turning briskly toward the parking lot. She froze when his body language suggested he was about to follow.

"Oh, wow," Bucky mouthed as he nodded his head, "pretty cool job?"

“I work in fulfillment,” she said, “It meets the needs, as we say.”

“Yeah, well I’m going downtown, the ball club is meeting this afternoon,” his words came more quickly as she began to move away, “We have to . . .”

“Gotta go,” she flashed the palm of her left hand. “Have a good one,” were the words that drifted to him as he watched the back of her head get smaller.

He moved slowly in the direction of those dissipating syllables, until he stood at the edge of the parking lot in a charade of a man feeling for keys, watching for another possibility that wouldn’t materialize. It had been a long time since he rode the bus, but there was a stop right there in front of the apartment complex. A downtown bus was there within seven minutes.

It seemed like everyone was buzzing with excitement over the start of the season. The front page laying open on the bus seat beside him featured the new ball park and probable starting lineups for opening day. Prominent among the ring of bus ads above head level was the new team logo and theme for the year. In the center was an image of a Rawlings catcher’s mitt, a model like the one Bucky had as a kid. The baseball in the center of the mitt had script like an autograph with the slogan, “Catch the Fever.”

It was almost here. Nothing else was quite like it; excited fans shuffling into the park, old gloves pulled from closets in the hope of catching stray balls, antiquated organ music phrases, clever cries from roaming vendors, aroma of popcorn and hot dogs. Bucky already had the fever and a lot of other folks did, too. When it was his turn, there was nothing like the feeling of slipping into that suit on game day, doing a meet and greet with the fans, glad-handing hotties and little kids, bringing them a kind of joy that comes no other way. New logo gear was seen all

over town. Callers to local sports radio, their speech impaired with enthusiasm, mixed wild talk around enchanting words like “all the way,” and “World Series.”

Nothing like it; peanut shells crunching underfoot as fans squeezed past their neighbors every half inning, spilt beer running down under seats and around unsuspecting shoes, assholes who figure the price of admission grants the right to verbally abuse anyone down there on the field. But that’s all baseball, and it’s all good.

Stepping off the bus at the 12<sup>th</sup> street stop, there it was. The dude who wears the bow tie on Action Sports called the ballpark “a jewel in the crown of the downtown skyline” and, from where Bucky was standing, that looked about right. Retractable roof, huge glass panels for day games and the natural turf, and sixty-foot banners of Carlos and Logan streaming down the walls on either side of the ticketing alcoves. Bucky felt a grin on his face, strolling through the gate, taking it all in, when a black uniform and neon yellow vest stopped him.

“Have your ID badge with you, sir?” the officer asked.

“Guess I have to get inside to get it,” Bucky offered. “I work here. First day back.”

“All badges were issued and clearance registered last week,” the officer told him. “No one enters without appropriate photo ID.”

“But this is my first day back,” Bucky pleaded, “what am I s’posed to do?”

“Call your boss, HR contact person, somebody,” the officer told him, “But for right now, I’m going to have to ask you to move along, sir.”

“Well, yeah, I just, uh . . . yeah,” came across Bucky’s lips as he turned to continue around the perimeter of the park. There was another black uniform at the third base gate.

“What’s up?” Bucky called out with an upward flip of his forehead. The officer nodded back as he walked on.

At the left field entrance, a group of fans held up phones to snap images of each other with the bronze statue of Willie in the background. A beer truck was parked right there, backed up on the pavement to unload. As the security guard herded the fans back into a cluster outside the fence, Bucky slipped behind him, nearly undetected. The motion registered in the officer’s field of vision caused him to turn quickly.

“Can I see your ID badge, sir?”

“Oh, yeah,” Bucky called out, thinking fast, “it’s in the truck,” he gestured in that direction and stepped to open the driver’s side door. In a fluid motion, he pulled himself up through the cab, snatched one of the distributor’s hats from the dashboard, and eased out the other side. Pulling a dolly from the truck latches and the beer cap down to his ears, he strapped a keg on the cart and rolled it right inside, disappearing with a hard left under the grandstands. He parked the dolly out of sight at the first seating ramp, left the hat on top of the keg, and started looking for answers from someone he knew.

There was plenty of activity on the concourse; vendors stocking cabinets and dispensers, filling kiosks with programs and souvenirs. Tradesmen hooked up water fountains and wired neon displays. He saw staff for sponsors and public service booths, but no one he recognized. Bucky did his best to keep his cool and act like he knew what he was doing; like he was supposed to be there. But he had nearly walked the full 360 and apprehension was building about a second time around. Then he saw the guy from accounting carrying an armload of

manila folders. The little bald guy had worked there for years and Bucky headed straight for him, trying to remember his name.

“Hey, how ya doing?” As the man turned to face him, his ID badge came into view.

“Franklin, how you been?”

“Oh, not bad, I guess. Busy couple of last days on the job,” Franklin said.

“What do you mean, man?” Bucky blurted out.

“I guess change is inevitable, as they say,” Franklin seemed to speak to the action posters on the wall.

“Yeah, but why leave now?” Bucky looked around at the new surroundings and shot his arms up at the ceiling like signaling the “Y” in YMCA. “Hell, you been working for the club as long as I can remember.”

“Well, the reorganization had different plans. I’m just on temporary now, helping with transition to the new system. Tomorrow’s my last day.”

“So what you gonna do?” As Bucky asked, Franklin set his file folders on the angular top of a chrome trash receptacle and held them in place with one hand.

“No set plans at this time,” was the answer. “How about you?”

“Well, that’s what I’m trying to find out. How do I get to Jimmy or Kyle’s office?”

“They’re gone, too, Chuck,” Franklin said, “Didn’t you get the letter?”

“Uh, that’s Bucky,” rotating his hand inward, in a gesture toward his chest. “What letter?”

“Oh, yes, of course; Bucky.” The side of Franklin’s face contracted slightly, as if developing a sudden tic in his left eye. “How did you get in here without a badge?”

“Wasn’t easy,” Bucky smirked, “Hey, who are those guys – Homeland Security?”

“No,” Franklin told him, “Homeland comes in to check off the day before the first game, when all systems are in place. Those guys are regular, full time stadium security.”

“So, what letter?” Bucky repeated.

Franklin dropped his shoulders a bit and began after a long sigh. “About three weeks ago, notice was sent to the home address of all former employees. Didn’t you get yours?”

“Nope,” Bucky mumbled, “I been going through some changes. Haven’t been by the house.”

“Well, yours is out there somewhere,” Franklin said. “Notification letter, tips on job search, gift cards in some cases, certificate of appreciation suitable for framing. Nice package, I guess, all things considered.”

“How can they get away with doing us like that?” The sense of the whole conversation remained as elusive as a hard breaking curveball.

“Well,” Franklin reflected, “some people say there should have been more notice but, with the new ownership group, the Sports Authority, season ticket sales campaign, some of us were lost in the shuffle. I guess everybody was so darn caught up in trying to make it all work by opening day.”

“So hold on here,” Bucky tried to process it all, “I run the radar gun for this team for eleven years and all I get is a certificate of appreciation?”

“No, like I said,” Franklin continued, “A guy with your years of service probably got the \$200 gift card to Wal-Mart. It was in the package they sent out.” With the image flashing in Bucky’s brain, Katie pushing a cart full of bras and panties down the narrow clothing aisles, it was hard to formulate what to say next.

“So, What about Jackeroo?” was the phrase that found its way out.

“What’s his full name?” Franklin mentally sorted through payroll names to figure who that might be.

“Jack-a-freakin’-roo,” Bucky said with added emphasis, “you know, coyote head on the kangaroo body.” Franklin had the distant expression of an office guy who didn’t catch much activity on the field. “The team mascot, for chrissake,” Bucky explained. “After the third and sixth inning, Jimmy would cover for me on the radar gun while I slipped into the Jackeroo suit. Walked the baselines,” he continued plaintively, “high fived little kids. You know, meet and greet with the fans.”

“Oh, yeah,” Franklin seemed to recall. “Jackeroo’s gone, too. Now it’s Zipper.”

“So who, and what is Zipper?”

“Body of a rabbit. Baseball head,” he seemed to search for words to explain. “Stitches on the ball look kinda like a zipper. Somebody said the new GM’s daughter just graduated with a degree in graphic design. And it’s nobody, I mean, Zipper is just virtual. Animated. He zips across the Jumbotron. He zips around the digital display ring above the mezzanine. You’ll see him on commercials, as well.”

Bucky was trying to clarify a bigger picture in his mind. “So, who runs the radar gun?”

“Nobody,” Franklin told him, “it’s all digital, part of the whole graphics display package one guy runs from the booth. They were testing it out this morning. Balls and strikes, sliders, curves, splitters, all displayed on a grid in a panel of the Jumbotron. Amazing, really. A game changer.”

“Well,” Bucky muttered, “sure as hell changes my game.”

“Yeah,” Franklin’s tone seemed aimed at the end of the conversation, “I heard that.” He paused, “Now, you might want to think about finding your way out of here. They’re arresting trespassers this last week.” Awash in a wave of total desolation, Bucky looked like he’d have a hard time finding his ass with both hands. “Hey, you should take a look before you go,” Franklin suggested. “Go down here, walk out to section 126. Looks like a million bucks. More like billion, with a ‘B’, actually. Stand right there at the end of the ramp and no one will see you.”

He stepped tentatively through the darkness toward the white end of the chute and emerged to, indeed, a magnificent sight. Five-story window walls inside the massive, quiet space cast a majestic, canonical light. Grass glowing so green, the field seemed illuminated from underneath. Coarse red, fresh dirt in the base paths ready to be chalked up for game time. Sparkling metal tags on each seat back reflected the bright light like stars in a galaxy all their own. The gravity of that galaxy rendered all past, and all future into one place for Bucky. In slow motion, it pulled him into JJ26, the end seat of the row in front of him, to live right there in the moment, as long as it could last. *Oh, Katie, if you could only see. Fantasy? Boys of summer? The perfect season that doesn’t set until the next one rolls around. No matter where you ended up, another opening day brings the same virgin hope and promise as the one before.*

New sponsor ads flickered on the auxiliary score boards above first and third. He watched them go through the whole cycle, pause and begin again. The big screen fired up to run feature checks. The welcome screen flashed a new team logo that must be sixty feet tall. Video feeds of past team highlights played, backed up, and ran again. Zipper appeared, bunny-hopping around a giant graphic of the ballpark, marking the emergency exits, ridiculous flapping ears protruding from his baseball head.

Next came the old between-inning crowd pleaser: cover the ball with one of three animated ball caps, slide them swiftly around in a slight-of-hand tease, and let the audience see if they can guess which hat it's under. It plays in ballparks all over with serious staying power; everyone who starts it thinks they can win. People play it every time even though they know, in the end, the only prize is in knowing you made the right call.

Everyone knows even losers get lucky sometimes, but all you have to do to feel like a winner is pay attention and persevere. Focus on the path like you follow a dream and, when the jingle ends and the hats stop swirling, you know the prize is right there for you under the cap in the middle. *Isn't it?*

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