

# 1

Beneath a blazing sun, the B737-800 descended over the Four Peaks to the east, past Lake Roosevelt and Lake Saguaro on the EAGLE Arrival. The autopilot's NexGen navigation system captured the final approach segment for Sky Harbor International Airport. It was First Officer Fred Campbell's turn to land the aircraft. The Pilot Monitoring, Captain Mann, made the radio calls to Air Traffic Control.

"JetWest 753, you're following American on short final, three miles in trail, cleared to land on runway Two-Six."

"JetWest 753 has the traffic on short final and we are cleared to land on Two-Six."

The tragic crash of the Asiana flight in San Francisco was in their thoughts. Both pilots kept a close eye on the automation and traffic.

"Make me look good, Fred. I'm the guy who has to say goodbye to the folks at the gate," Mann said.

As if he needed to be reminded, the first officer laughed.

"I make you look good on every flight, *sir*."

The exchange was typical pilot banter.

The sky was clear and the visibility was better than ten miles. From over the mountains, the air currents churned and caused the wings to rock for the remainder of the otherwise smooth flight. Passengers sat up in the seats and tightened their seatbelts. It was always uncomfortable when *your* hands weren't on the controls. They had forgotten they saw the silver-gray hair of the captain during boarding.

Campbell held a firm grip on the control wheel and wrestled the aircraft to the runway using the painted runway numbers as his target point. The robotic voice of the radio altimeter counted down over the cockpit speakers.

"One hundred, fifty, thirty, twenty, ten."

At ten feet, Campbell raised the aircraft's nose and flared the large Boeing. The burbling currents under the wings dissipated. A second later, the main landing gear kissed the runway leaving behind a bluish-gray cloud. Campbell held the nose up for a second longer, and then eased it down to the runway, until the nose wheels made contact with the pavement. The ground spoilers extended automatically. He brought the thrust to idle, and slid his left hand forward, grabbed the thrust reverse levers and deployed them. The captain verified both the ground spoilers and thrust reversers performed as required.

"Extended, deployed," Mann said.

He watched the airspeed decrease.

"Sixty knots."

The captain was prepared to take control of the aircraft.

"Great job, Fred."

Campbell verified the transfer of control of the aircraft back to the captain. At the high-speed taxiway, Mann used the tiller to turn off the runway and commanded the flaps to be retracted. When clear of the runway, Campbell called the ground controller and told him their assigned gate. The controller gave taxi instructions, and the rest of the after landing workflow was completed. As they approached the gate, the captain first slowed, and then stopped the aircraft as the ground crew signalman's orange wands crossed. The

Jetway bridge bumped against the fuselage. Mann verified ground power was connected and shut down the engines. He called for the Parking Checklist. Both pilots completed the required paperwork. It was the end of an uneventful three-day trip, the kind every pilot prefers.

Campbell launched out of his seat before the captain. Mann knew he was headed to another gate to meet a friend. Campbell was a six-foot-three black aviator and needed extra room to climb out from the cockpit.

“See you next Wednesday, Bill.”

Mann shouted a goodbye, but Campbell was already gone. The captain contemplated how co-pilots always had *friends* to meet at gates. He smirked as he remembered chasing tail in the Old Days, alongside Orville and Wilbur. As Campbell bolted up the Jetway bridge, he knew the captain thought he chased women, a popular pilot recreation. He hadn't chased any since he had fallen in love with Andrea. He was simply anxious to get to the inbound flight from LAX, and find his lifelong best friend. Both of them left Atlanta about the same time for the change of scenery west of the Mississippi. Fred went to Phoenix. Jake went to LA. Fred and Andrea had only made acquaintances since they had arrived in his new base. He knew it would be great to see a familiar face, and talk about old times, life.

He hustled to D Concourse. The gate door had just opened, so he hadn't missed Jake's arrival. Passengers streamed out into the terminal. He knew Jake would be the last one to deplane. After the stream became a trickle, after strollers and parents, college kids with earphones, and old women and men in wheelchairs, out came Jake.

They first became friends in grade school, inside one of the first desegregated schools in Atlanta. Jake was a poor white kid from the Holy Cross Home for the Perpetually Abandoned. Fred's neighborhood was long forgotten after white flight to the suburbs. Fred knew Jake was *color-blind* when, at their first meeting, Jake tried to hustle him for cash. Fred respected that. They became partners in crime from that day forward, but in spite of all of their antics growing up, no charges had ever been filed. Their teachers believed “the boys” were destined to do hard time in dismal penitentiaries. Both proved them wrong.

Fred became a skilled, professional airline pilot. His career approached twenty-seven years. An uncle, who flew with the famous Tuskegee Airmen, was a major influence for him. Jake had encouraged him to follow his dream. Fred couldn't prove it, but he always thought that the loan he got from Jake for his private pilot's certificate came from one of Jake's many shady scams. Fred trained in a single-engine Cessna, and progressed to multi-engine aircraft, and corporate jets. After he accumulated enough Pilot In Command time, he applied and was hired by a major airline. It was quite an accomplishment to get a foot, or a wing, in the door, at a time when the door wasn't open to black aviators.

Late one night, when Jake was seventeen, he was about to be arrested for a misdemeanor. As he stood against the police car, handcuffed, the officer decided instead to encourage him to use his skills for the good guys. They had a long talk. The result was Jake became one of Atlanta Police Department's homicide detectives. During his years on the force, he had seen it all, the gruesome and horrific. He had cracked a few cold cases, and sent murderers into the justice system. His first criminal arrest was a guy he used to hang out with on the streets. Mid-career, he shot and killed a suspect during an intense firefight. He also saved many lives.

They gave him commendations medals, but he never hung them on display. He believed those close to me, who died in the line of duty, deserved them more. The last case He worked had nearly cost him his life. To avoid prosecution for the tactics he used in the apprehension of a serial killer, he was “retired” from the APD. Caitland and he relocated to Los Angeles. She was a high profile, Hollywood agent and encouraged him to write novels. She guided him into a successful career as a novelist. He also opened the Roberts Agency that does private investigations.

As he walked up the Jetway bridge, Jake saw a small, pampered pedigreed dog in a baby stroller. The dog belonged to a woman in her mid-thirties.

*Looks like a hamster.*

The puny dog bared his teeth and added a ferocious growl at Jake. When the woman turned away, he snarled back at the canine. As he passed, the woman sized him up. She made note of his scrutinizing cop eyes. She thought he was her type and hoped he loved dogs. She knew men didn’t like cats. As he passed her, she only received a weak smile from. She knew right then there was no future for them. Her expensive perfume gave him a headache. He thought women’s perfume should smell more like a cold beer in order to entice men.

He had a random thought that all adult humans should enjoy the same treatment as the dog received. Maybe it would calm everyone to be babied, and pampered for a day. He found, at his age, such mundane thoughts creeping more and more into his head. Time and experiences changed a man.

Inside the terminal door, he received his first chest bump, and man-hug since he left Atlanta. They got multiple glances from those in the terminal, who didn’t think the gesture was appropriate. The black culture thing didn’t play well in Phoenix. The residents preferred firm handshakes, and cowboy etiquette, to fist bumps and street-cred.

“Hola, Fred.”

“Welcome to *Pumpkinville*, dawg,” Fred said

He said it loud enough for everyone to hear.

“My ticket said Phoenix.”

Jake turned to go back through the gate door.

“That was the *original* name, man.”

“Because it was carved and had a candle in it?”

“That’s my bro,” Fred said.

Fred turned to the passengers and made an impromptu announcement.

“Hey people, my man, Jake’s in town!”

They flashed a reluctant round of smiles. Fred shrugged.

“Where’s the love, people? Hey man, since you’re a famous author, let’s go by pseudonyms while you’re here. You can be Wyatt, and I’ll be Doc.”

“Doc wasn’t a pilot.”

“Who cares, get in the mood, man. Those dawgs were famous gunslingers here. Andrea and I went to the Heard Museum. The Hopi clerk in the bookstore and I talked about flying. He gave me the Native name *Blackbird*. Cool, huh?” Fred said.

“Do you know the other *two* black people in town?”

Phoenix was a different social climate. It had different cultural experiences, different worldviews, and a different time zone. They didn’t think about the ‘hood save for the Latino neighborhoods. Atlanta, on the other hand, was all about the ‘hood. They hugged,

because they didn't care if anyone liked it.

"Yo, Wyatt!"

"Serious?"

"You know, Wyatt, *Phoenicians* don't know they call it *hip-hop*, because that's how the kids learn to walk to keep their low-riding jeans from dropping to their ankles."

Jake shrugged this time. He pointed at the plane that brought him there through the concourse windows.

"I hate to fly, even short hops. I still cannot believe they let *you* fly. Oh, thanks for the buddy pass. What makes those big cylinders stay up in the air?"

"Stop it, *detective*. I thought you read a lot and were all into science and shi—oops, I'm still in uniform being adored by the passengers, can't say *shit*. You know it's your fault I became a pilot," Fred said.

Somehow, Jake knew it was his fault.

Fred remembered the days when pilots were respected professionals, before they were called bus drivers. The only attention the traveling public paid the crew in recent years was for delays, bad weather, or a hard landing.

"I do read a lot about science; the God-particle Higgs boson, evolutionary trends, HAARP spinoffs, and China's new lady astronaut. Voyager is in an unanticipated region at the edge of our solar system. Transcriptors, little DNA-engineered transistors, are on the horizon. We know the rings of Saturn rain on the planet. The Internet of Things, a network of intelligent devices, will automate our entire lives just like your autopilot. They're getting up-close photos of Pluto, but enough about education, I came to play."

"Amen, brother. You can leave those books on the shelf. You're not in A-T-L anymore. Some folks here still think the earth is flat. I think they buy dinosaur pet food. Speaking of Pluto, maybe we can get you to the Lowell Observatory. Percival Lowell discovered Pluto through the telescope there. The *P* and *L* stood for his initials. Better yet, you should go to the *Vatican* Observatory in Tucson, maybe you could find Jesus," Fred said.

Jake let it go. Some of the folks around them were offended.

"This is the *UFO* capital of the world—lots of abductees who have been *probed*, know what I'm sayin'?" Fred said.

He had Jake laughing. They walked further into the terminal, talking like little boys do, full of mischief, wrapped-up in an adventure, and talking nonstop. It had only been a few years since they had seen one another, but a lot had changed. They needed the connect time, to find some grounding, and recharge. Both of them could afford bail money now.

As they walked out through security into the main terminal, Fred made a point of joking with every TSA agent. He paid particular attention to a brown-haired, blue-eyed beauty. He always tried to make those with dreary jobs smile. It gave him a feeling of making the world right on a small scale.

Jake thought Sky Harbor was one of the most beautiful airport facilities in the country. The panoramic, plate-glass windows gave the traveling public a breathtaking view of mountain ranges. The interior of the terminal looked bright, fresh, up-scale with rows of high-end shops, and gourmet restaurants painted in southwestern hues and themes. McDonald's and Popeye's were nowhere in sight.

The two watched the women in business attire, skirts and heels, with fashionable

hairstyles, strut through the terminal. Jake laughed when he saw the young girl in a pink flowered dress, laced-topped socks and sandals, pass clinging for her life, while hitching a ride on her mother's roller bag. Fred told him all the kids do it.

Fred pulled Jake into the Arizona Highways shop. He looked at the cactus plants for sale.

"Cactus?"

"Yeah, originally from Russia, Russian thistle. They end up tumbleweeds I'm told," Fred said.

Fred picked out a bolo for Jake.

"I'm not wearing that."

"It'll make you *feel* more like Wyatt."

"I don't want to *feel* more Wyatt. I'd rather be the Lone Ranger. Make that, the *Alone Ranger*."

"You need a big, wide cowboy hat to go with it," Fred said.

"I don't want a cowboy hat, *or* a bolo. I was a cowboy once. I was seven. I grew out of it. How about a T-shirt that said, 'I'm not a cowboy—I'm on vacation'?"

He handed the bolo to the clerk.

"Why is it when you're home, you want to be on vacation? And when you're on vacation, you want to go home?"

"What are you saying, Jake?"

They turned a corner and entered a long hallway. At the far end was the escalator that took them to the Sky Train Terminal. The murals secured to the walls and the inlaid tiled mosaics running the expanse of the floors, was meant to inspire and distract the travel-weary public.

The Sky Train, after one brief stop at Economy parking, left them at the down escalator to the 44<sup>th</sup> & Washington station, where they boarded the Light Rail. Fred's condo, the tallest residential building in Phoenix, was along the tracks, the right side of the tracks.

"Atlanta's MARTA wasn't this clean," Fred said.

Jake still did the standard cop surveillance of the passengers onboard. He never could break the habit, because there's no such thing as cop rehab.

"I don't get it."

"Get what?" Fred said.

"All these kids ride the train, but get on with a bike. What's the point?"

"They're the future."

"College kids with earphones and backpacks, oblivious to anything and everyone else, whose biggest decision-making involves, which tennis shoes, or cellphones, or video games to buy. And why do they dress like refugees?"

"Cellphones are the democratization of the world, man," Fred said.

"You know, if all you do is stare at your phone, you miss life."

Fred shrugged. A few seats forward of them, was a disheveled homeless man, a few blue-collar workers heading home from shift change, a weathered Native American off the Rez, and some young men in suits.

"We wore hand-me-downs," Fred said.

"We were poor. We had to dress like that. We weren't *entitled* and pretending to be poor. We used our imaginations. We didn't have Facebook, or YouTube. We spoke to

people face-to-face. I wouldn't mind *sexting*. Isn't sexting on page 129 in the Kama Sutra?"

"You don't know what sexting means. I thought you came here to chill out, have fun."

"Sorry, it's this aging thing. I'm crankier now. I hum."

"Hum?"

"Yeah, out of nowhere I start humming, whistling sometimes. I thought old people did that. Now I'm doing it."

Fred laughed out loud.

"So I can expect to hum, when I *get old* like you?"

The train glided toward downtown Phoenix. The city had a unique feel about it, different than Atlanta, or LA. For a major city, the fifth largest in America, Phoenix had a small cluster of downtown buildings dwarfed by a horizon of mountains.

Fred said he had been flying in and out of Phoenix for years, and watched the urban sprawl spread like America's waistlines. Technology, medicine, ASU and industry covered large areas of territory. Like other metropolitan areas, Phoenix had no definable boundaries with Tempe, Mesa, or Scottsdale.

The train stopped at 12<sup>th</sup> Street. Jake scrutinized the passengers getting on and off the train.

"I think I arrested some of these folks."

"Could be, this is the Witness Protection capitol of the world. Arizona tops the FBI's statistics in murder, identity, and auto theft. Something you would be interested in. We have penitentiaries on every street corner."

As the train glided along the tracks, Jake looked out the windows. The U.S. Airways Center and Chase Field, home of the 2001 World Series champion Arizona Diamondbacks, passed by.

"How's the airline merger going?"

"Like the third grade—long and hard," Fred said.

Fred removed his epaulets and tie and shoved them into his flight bag.

"We didn't expect the merger, but it happened. We talked about moving for months, and decided we'd go west for the climate change. We like the scenery. It's a whole different lifestyle. We're adjusting slowly. Airline mergers are never smooth, lots of turbulence. Pilots may be best friends when the cockpit door is closed, but they are bitter enemies when it comes to seniority. Seniority means everything to us pilots."

"And what about you, Jake? Why LA?"

It takes him a while to answer. The train slows for their stop. The train's doors open and they step out onto the platform.

"So why LA, Jake?"

"Simple—a woman, why else? I don't have the stomach for homicide investigation anymore, literally. If they ever did an autopsy on me, they'd find rusty pipes, a broken sewer line, toxic fumes, rats and an old Converse tennis shoe in my intestines. Caitland arrives tomorrow morning."

They walked down the ramp to the sidewalk. Jake laid his carry on bag on top of Fred's roller bag.

"I wish she had found me in the pound sooner. If I had a tail, I'd wag it for her when she comes home every day. She has been my healer, my companion. I can tell her

anything, and she still won't turn me in for the reward money. She loves me. She also accumulates *heaven points* for trying to save me."

"Any plans for marriage, make Caitland an honest woman? Mr. Jeffs, the Absolute Ruler of the Church of the LDS who *used* to reside in Colorado City, had seventy wives they say. Geronimo, the Chiricahua Apache shaman, had *nine wives*. Can you guess what made him a bad-ass?"

"How many travel books have you read about Arizona since you got here?"

Fred smiled. He's proud of his acquired taste for the state.

"And what makes you think Caitland *isn't* an honest woman now?"

"It's just sayin'."

"I can't force anyone to be with me because of a paper. It's a major tenet of my life. She has the option every day to leave if she isn't happy. Plus, *she* got papers when she picked me up from the pound."

"A major tenet? Geez, Jake, that's deep."

"I also don't think a bride and groom should exchange rings."

"I can't wait to hear this."

"I think he should be *welded* to her. He couldn't go off with his friends. He could never cheat on her. He could not watch sports, unless she watched with him. And, he would always be there for her."

"What if they want a divorce, Jake?"

"Siamese twins learn to get along."

Jake felt introspective.

"I think we all look back at our lives, consider the good times and bad, and we find some kind of weird safety in the past, because it's known to us. It's hard to look forward, because it's the unknown."

"Okay, Rumsfeld."

"You know what I mean. You've had flights that were dangerous, more than others, but you lived through it and stored the memory, it's part of you. But tomorrow, anything is possible, anything can change in a heartbeat."

"I get it, Jake, you're afraid."

Jake stopped walking.

"Afraid? I retired from *Homicide*. My last case, I chased a serial killer named Jared Hamilton, a rich kid who had an I.Q. that was higher than Einstein's. He started his criminal career as a hacker, then dove into felonies like robbery, but it wasn't enough for him. He decided he wanted to feel what it was like to kill. He had everything any of us could ever dream of having, but he wanted blood. In the end, he focused on me. I didn't know why, until late in the investigation, I killed his stepsister in a shooting.

Mika assisted with the investigation through her dad's Robert Scott Company. He passed away a year earlier. She left the FBI profiling business, took over the company and became a major player in the private intelligence gathering business. She took a bullet for me, Fred."

Jake's demeanor took a hard turn down Trauma Road. He stopped talking and felt a lump in his throat. Fred put a hand on his shoulder. A deep breath helped.

"I read about it in the newspaper. I tried to call, but you wouldn't pick up the phone. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was about Mika. She was a great lady. I always thought you guys would get back together someday."

“It still stings, Fred.”

With his head down, Jake dragged the back of his hand across his eyes. It took another second before he spoke.

“I aided in the escape of an inmate, a serial killer herself, to assist me in the apprehension of Hamilton. She shot him and ended his killing spree. Now she’s back in the slammer serving out multiple life sentences.”

“Now you have closure on both cases, right? So you *retired*?” Fred said.

“APD wasn’t thrilled about what I did in the pursuit of Hamilton. They *suggested* retirement, instead of *prosecution*.”

He studied the look in Fred’s wide eyes.

“Yeah, I broke a few department commandments, and a few local, state and federal laws in my pursuit of the perpetrator. There are times when you do what you have to do. I did it to stop Hamilton, even though I couldn’t stop him from killing Mika.”

“You okay now?”

“Yeah, thanks to Caitland.”

Fred changed the subject to help him refill his half-empty glass.

“So she’s your agent too?”

“I’m retired. I’m too young to be retired. I have nothing else to do, so Caitland said I should try writing. I find it *therapeutic*. She also finds me technical advisor jobs on movie sets. Who would have thought? I make a good living from it along with my pension. I do some expert witness testimony. I also opened The Roberts Agency and do some occasional private investigation for the over-indulged Beverly Hills crowd. The divorce lawyers love me.”

“Oh yeah, that’s got to be money in the bank,” Fred said.

“*Great* money. The writing is fun and I only *write* about danger now, I don’t have to live it. It pays well, but it will pay better after I’m deceased, that’s how it works for authors.”

“Is Diane Nyad, swimming from Cuba to Florida at age sixty-four, an inspiration for you and your retirement?”

“Yes, she gave me hope. I hope I don’t do something that dumb when I’m sixty-four. I think I’d rather be placed in a *humanitarium*.”

They walked a block to Fred’s condo, and saw protesters demonstrating against the Sheriff of Maricopa County. They wanted the sheriff to resign, because of the profiling tactics he used against the Latino population. Jake had heard about him while in the department in Atlanta. They also passed several homeless men who approached and asked for donations, each with the same scrutinizing stare. Jake told Fred how every city had its share of the forgotten. Fred noted the men looked like they had been on the streets since the late sixties, a time when revolution filled the air.

“I think we need a *digital revolution*. We should kill all the ones and zeros. Social media burns reputations. There’s no shame anymore.”

“You should post that on your Facebook author page, and see how that goes over. Social media has changed the world, Jake. Look at the Middle East. Think about what would have happened if Crazy Horse and his war party had cellphones at the Little Big Horn,” Fred said.

“Custer would have called in a drone strike. The Big Father would have sent the Spirit Horse.”

Jake dropped it. Fred wasn't looking for intellectual debate. It was too hot to debate. He did like Jake's uncomplicated flip phone. He trailed Fred through the double glass doors into the building.

"Man, I'm dry. My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth. What happened here, nuclear winter?"

"You're in the desert, man, 323 days of sunshine. You're only a few miles away from the Great Sonoran Desert. The biggest and oldest nuke plant is forty-five miles west in Wintersburg, the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station. It's even too hot for mosquitos. They go north for the summer. You have to drink a lot of water here, or you'll dehydrate fast," he said.

Inside the building, Jake luxuriated in the frigid air-conditioning. Fred said hello to the concierge. Standing outside the elevators, Fred started a new line of questioning.

"Have you developed a liking for golf yet, Jake? They have a lot of courses here."

"Golf, me? No, I already have two balls that rule my life. I was in Homicide man, not a clubhouse. A slice to me means a knife was involved in the crime, not a lost ball. I never saw a hole-in-one, because there were multiple holes from the stabbings and gunshots. I looked for stuff in the woods, but I was looking for a victim, or a murder weapon."

Fred holds up both hands flat.

"Okay, okay, I get it, you don't golf. Sorry I asked. I have a lot more attitude adjustment to do with you than I thought. But since we're on the subject, do you know what Tiger Woods said when asked why he always did waitresses?"

"No, what did *Tiger* say?"

"He said, 'Who better than a waitress to appreciate a big tip!'"

Jake shook his head.

"It always comes down to the size of a dick."

"Isn't that what they call you detectives—dicks? Well *ace detective* Roberts, if you like Beverly Hills then you will surely like Scottsdale—Beverly Hills East. You'll find plenty of aspiring actresses, actors and screenwriters there. They will make you feel right at home with all of their tight plastic surgery faces, tummy-tucks, liposuctions, and excessive designer-wear."

"Caitland made an appointment for us to meet with the owner of a bookstore out there, and do a book signing. They host book signings by every famous author in the industry—Clive Cussler, Tim Dorsey, Randy Wayne White, and Karen Slaughter. I can't wait to see if *my* novels are on *your* bookshelf."

Jake took an initial read from the look on Fred's face. It's too late to stock them, so Jake told him he brought more.

"Pilots don't read unless the book comes with crayons. If it's not an aviation manual, I won't read it."

During the elevator ride to Fred's floor, Jake prodded if Fred and Andrea had any plans to have kids.

"Kids? No. I've been careful when I sowed my seeds. There's plenty of opportunity in the aviation world you know what I'm sayin'? My moms said that the sound of a baby crying is like the sound of an angel. It's why I'd rather to go to hell."

A boisterous laugh followed.

We walk inside Fred's condo. The spacious living room had an entire wall of floor-

to-ceiling windows that provided a breathtaking panorama of the city, and the mountain ranges. In a few hours, the sun would slip below the peaks. Jake looked out toward the west where the woman he loved was beyond the sunset. Caitland was intelligent, beautiful, with shoulder-length brown hair, and intense indigo eyes, above an alluring smile. Her sensual, soothing voice, along with her heart of gold, comforted him.

He remembered the night in Atlanta when he first met Caitland. He had just slid his apartment key into the lock, when she surprised him from behind. He was unaware she had moved into the apartment across from his. He was so wired from the pursuit of a serial killer who had targeted him, that he spun around and pointed his Glock in Caitland's face. He fell in love with her that moment. He wasn't exactly sure when she fell for him.

She planned to join them in Phoenix the next day, after she concluded contract negotiations with Johnny Depp.

A striking woman walked from the master bedroom and stood next to Fred. She placed both of her arms around him and they kissed. She stroked his muscular arms.

"Jake, this is Andrea, the better part of me. Andrea, meet Jake."

The greeting included a stern warning.

"Don't touch, and stop staring. You're making her feel self-conscious."

Andrea blushed, but wasn't the least self-conscious. She knew the effect she had on men. Being an ex-cop, Jake took a second to study her. He couldn't find any flaws in her olive skin, high cheekbones, or her long model legs. She had passionate green eyes and displayed a wide, brilliant white smile. Her strut exuded self-confidence. Her silky, chestnut-colored hair hung to her bare shoulders. She had supermodel written all over her in several languages. He guessed she had an inner beauty as well.

Fred, he knew, deserved someone special. His divorce was less than amicable, and bordered on lethal. The deep wound it left behind had never healed. It fascinated Jake how the randomness of time and space, chance and luck, brings two people together to fall in love. Nature has a way. It was clear that when the planets *Fred* and *Andrea* collided—it created a supernova.

Jake reached out his hand to her. With the other, pointed at Fred's chest. Fred's eyes narrowed into tight focus.

"Andrea, please, explain to me why—"

"Wyatt, it's the O.K. Corral if you go there," Fred said.

"Stop calling me Wyatt. Don't make me go Walter White on you. And who were you supposed to be again?"

"Holiday, Doc Holiday."

Andrea was prepared for the question and simply raised her hands about a foot apart, and smiled.

"I knew it!"

All three laughed. Fred repeated an old joke we used to share.

"Have a good one? I do. What I want is a *bigger* one."

That brought on a high-five slap and another chest bump.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Andrea."

"And you, Wyatt."

Jake couldn't help but laugh.

"Pardon us, babe, come on, Jake, I want to show you the rest of the place."

The tour was brief. Jake would stay in the guest bedroom for the night. After Caitland arrived in the morning, they planned to stay next door at the Hotel San Carlos. The morning after that, they'd fly back to LA. Jake dropped his carry-on bag on the bed, peeked inside the closet and checked out the bathroom. He gave Fred an approving nod.

"You know I still wet the bed, right."

A smirk followed. It was one of his sarcastic remarks he used, whenever he wasn't in my own bed.

"I thought the nuns cured you. I never saw a kid take a beating like that with a wooden ruler. Mother Superior didn't stop with your knuckles either! I think she took the gold in ass-kicking at the Olympics."

"The good, but vicious Sisters of *Redemption* wouldn't have been so mean if they had gotten laid once in a while."

Our sarcasm had no boundaries.

"Just be sure and clean it up before Andrea finds out about it. She may be a beautiful and seductive woman, but she can kick your ass. You don't want to see her Latin temper."

"She's too good for you."

"And, she knows it," Fred said.

"We lived through a lot, you and I. If it weren't for your moms, I'd have never made it through all those years in that orphanage. She was the only one who took me into her heart. She left me on the street, but she took me into her heart."

"Yeah, I didn't mind sharing her. She was enough for both of us. You deflected a lot of pain that would have come in my direction," Fred said.

The tour continued.

They walked out to the open, well-equipped kitchen. Fred loved to play master gourmet chef when he was home. Fred made some drinks, one for each of them, and one for Andrea. She was in the living room sitting on the long black leather sofa, long legs crossed, in a black tank top and beige shorts. On the wall behind her, hung two massive Asian paintings, which added to the peaceful Feng Shui atmosphere.

Fred handed the drink to Andrea. He held a hand for her to take, and pulled her up from the sofa. They walked out onto the balcony hand-in-hand. Jake followed behind. A breathtaking sunset was on the horizon. As the sun fell behind the mountains, the last moments of the daylight came in a burst of radiant hues. A backdrop full of stars replaced the sunset.

Jake looked over the railing and saw the hot tub on the recreation level, several floors below the condo. A couple cavorted buried in bubbles from the jets. He watched as the Light Rail train snaked along the tracks. Its bell clanked to alert its arrival at the next station. He saw and heard the popping sound of skateboarders performing acrobatic feats on the downtown sidewalks. He sees the bright yellow lights of the Wells Fargo sign illuminate. A hovering news helicopter departed north from over the downtown courthouse, where a famous murder trial had just ended. A fire truck blared a warning on its way to a reported fire, or take-out food.

He was glad he had made the trip. Jake needed to reconnect with Fred. He needed to recharge his own life battery. He looked out toward the west again and thought about Caitland. It will only be a day, but he missed her.

"I thought the Atlanta skyline was impressive, but the skyline here wins."

"Ah, come on, you get this in the City of Angels all the time," Fred said.

“Not like this. It must be the desert air, or the elevation, I don’t know, but its—more powerful, more intense.”

“It’s because of the dust,” Fred said.

Andrea sat on Fred’s lap, arm around his neck.

“Andrea and I wait for it every night. We feel disappointed if we miss it. We sit here and talk. It’s peaceful.”

“It’s a good thing when someone listens.”

Fred gave Andrea a kiss.

“She lets me ramble, then she takes me home,” he said.

Fred tapped his heart.

“Andrea reminds me why we’re on this planet. The world doesn’t always have to be a cold, hard place. She makes all the difference.”

“I feel the same with Caitland. She makes today, better than yesterday. We are lucky men.”

I look over at Andrea and smile.

“I can’t wait for her to get here,” Andrea said.

“Amen,” Fred said.

“You boys are sweet,” Andrea said.

They looked at her with puppy dog eyes. Andrea scratched behind Fred’s ear.

“What time does she get here?” Fred said.

“Flight gets in at 9:30.”

“So what would you two gentlemen like for dinner this evening?” Andrea said.

“Beautiful, classy, intelligent...and she cooks?”

Jake gave Fred an approving smile. Fred pulled him out of his seat, and said to look over the railing again, while he pointed at the building across the street.

“Pizza, and not just a pizza—a Z Pizza! It’s right there. I dream about it on layovers. You good with that?”

“I’m good with it. Andrea?”

She nods.

“I’ll call it in and bring it out after its delivered. That gives you boys some time to irritate each other.”

She smiled, stood, leaned over, and gave Fred a kiss on his forehead. She went inside the condo. Both of them retreated from the railing, and sat back down in the patio chairs.

“Thanks, babe. Jake, on Friday nights, Z has live music out on the sidewalk. We can hear it up here—desert nights, eating pie *and* a free concert.”

“Do you like Phoenix?”

“I do. They’ve got some different ways. They see the world through different eyes, and it takes some getting used to, but we like it. We’ve been up to Sedona and Flagstaff. You haven’t seen anything like it, spectacular—the mountains, the colors. They have that laid-back attitude. We should all go up there for a weekend. We could explore.”

“Andrea looks happy, and so do you.”

“She’s the one, Jake. Never thought this old aviator would ever say that, but she is.