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Untouchable

Cam Torrens

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My Air Force Academy roommate Brent juts his head over my shoulder as I reach for the slot handle. Reno casinos in the late '80s don't sport fancy electronic buttons or LED lighting.

I pull.

"How about we get a six-pack and head to my room, Big Boy?" he whispers in my ear.

We're three freshmen on a squadron orientation visit to McClellan Air Force Base in California, now living it up in Reno, Nevada on an 18-hour pass. None of us are old enough to drink. Our meager supply of money rapidly disappears into the slot machines.

Numbers, diamonds, and cherries tumble behind the glass.

"You come up with cash for beer or a hotel room and I'm yours," I say.

One diamond. Two diamonds. Brent grabs my shoulders.

The third diamond drops. Lights flash above the machine. A siren wails. Nickels rain like hailstones into the machine's tray. I turn to my squadron mate, all thoughts of homophobic rejoinders disappearing faster than the coins from my bucket.

"Guess you're off the hook for finding money, brother," I say. "Let's go tell Jeff."

Brent's jaw hangs loose. His eyes widen as he focuses on the totalizer. I turn back to the machine just as it freezes at 3,000.

"Did you just win three thousand bucks?"

"No. I just won three thousand nickels."

Brent doesn't respond. I turn again. He's counting his fingers.

"It's a hundred and fifty." I shake my head. "Multiply the three and the five, and then use the right number of zeros."

"Fuck. I thought you were rich."

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“Nope. But now we’re sleeping inside tonight. And you can quit drinking Cokes.” I point at the glass in his hand. “I’m going to cash this in. Let’s see if we can still get a room. Get Jeff. And find someone to buy us beer.”

I can’t believe our luck. All we’ve been lacking on this dash over the California mountains to Reno, Nevada, is beer money and a place to stay. Now we have both.

We’ve actually been lucky from the start of this trip. When they give us this pass, back at the California base, most of my classmates opt for the two obvious choices. Walk downtown while people stare at the uniforms we freshmen cadets are required to wear all year, or return to our billeting rooms and sleep in peace until the bus departs for the return flight. Sleep sounds enticing. Unlike the Academy, no upperclassmen will haze us on this field trip.

Brent and Jeff are on board with my idea of taking the road less traveled.

“Reno, baby. Reno. Let’s hit the slots.”

“I got fifty bucks.” Brent says.

Jeff has forty.

I nod. “We’ll figure it out.”

We borrow civilian clothes from upperclassmen and finagle a ride to a rental car facility. In our first encounter with luck, karma, fate—whatever—we talk the guy behind the counter into renting a car to three 18-year-olds by simply flashing our military IDs and leaving behind a Federal Credit Union check filled out with an exorbitant deposit.

We take I-80 east for the two-hour drive, pushing our four-door Pontiac Grand Am to its limits. The sedan struggles up to the Donner Summit, then barrels down the other side. I’m driving. Jeff has a map unfolded on his lap, calling out landmarks in the dark.

“That’s Donner Lake on our right.”

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“It’s dark,” Brent says.

“Tahoe is only seven miles south.” Jeff points.

“We can’t see, dude,” I say. A runaway truck ramp sign flashes by, letting us know the option is only a mile ahead. “Have you ever taken one of those?”

“One of what?” Brent says from the back seat.

“Those truck ramp things. I mean, what stops the truck? The up-slope, or the gravel, or what?”

“Probably both,” Jeff says. “Depends on how deep the gravel is?”

As we approach the ramp, I flip on my brights and we peer up the steep, gray strip disappearing into the trees.

“Let’s not find out,” Jeff suggests. “We got beer, gambling, and ladies waiting for us just thirty miles ahead.”

“Reno, baby!” I shout.

We’re not exactly acting like one would expect our nation’s future military planners to operate. We know we have to have the car back by noon tomorrow. We know we’ll need to return it with a full tank of gas. We know we want to gamble, drink, and catch a bit of sleep before we drive back—in that priority order. So the plan is to play the slots—none of us has any expertise at the tables—until we’re down to enough money to get someone to buy beer and fill up the rental tank when we get back to Sacramento. We’ll sleep in the car.

Flexibility is the key to airpower... they’ve drilled this mantra into our heads since we marched up the *Bring Me Men* ramp at the Academy. My nickel-slot jackpot has changed the equation. We adapt.

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The lady at the casino's hotel reception appears nonplussed at three young men requesting a room at one in the morning.

"All we have left is the penthouse suite. Two beds and a rollaway. Would that work?"

"A suite?" Jeff says. "How much are we talking?"

"It's normally \$300. But I'm not going to be able to fill it at this hour. Would \$75 work for you gentlemen?"

Brent coughs. I'm already reaching for my winnings.

Jeff glances at both of us before turning back to the receptionist. "That would be acceptable."

I fill out the paperwork. She gives me a single metal key.

"Return the key before eleven tomorrow. You can pay your minibar bill then."

We walk to the elevator without speaking. As soon as the doors close, we let loose.

"She said minibar."

"I heard it."

"Penthouse suite?"

We spend the next two hours drinking mini-bottles of booze while looking over downtown Reno from our whirlpool bath. There's the awkward moment where we're trying to figure out if we really want to climb nude into the honeymoon jacuzzi, but a shot apiece lowers our inhibitions. No one wants to drive back to California in wet underwear. Hell, we don't even want to fall asleep and waste our deluxe accommodations.

We crest Donner Summit westbound the next morning. Jeff hasn't touched his coffee. His excitement over lakes and mountains during yesterday's drive to Reno appears to have been overcome by the night's events. Brent sleeps in the back seat. I'm sucking down my coffee and

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already eyeing Jeff's. I'm tired, but not really hungover. I had a bad experience with Canadian Mist in my high school years. I'm not the spokesperson for moderation, but the minibar only had hard alcohol. I hadn't had much.

"No one's going to believe us," I say.

"What?" Jeff's voice is monotone.

"The rest of the guys. Remember Rob said he was going to sleep the whole rest of the time in billeting? Now we come back and tell them we gambled in Reno, nailed the jackpot, and drank booze in the penthouse suite until morning? We're gods."

"Gods..." Jeff drops his head in what might be a nod. Brent says nothing.

A runaway truck sign flashes by again. It's not the same one, because we're on the Sacramento side of the pass. I glance at Jeff. He doesn't notice, eyes pointed straight ahead, his mouth slightly open.

I ease off the gas and hit the truck ramp at sixty miles an hour.

"Fuck!" Jeff yells.

In less than fifty feet, we're stopped. I see gravel only a foot below my window. I turn to Jeff, realizing I've got his full attention.

"What the hell?" Jeff's eyes are wide.

Brent pulls himself up from the rear floor well. "What did you just do?"

"I wanted to see what would happen." I cringe at my own words. It's the stupidest thing I've ever done and the only thing more stupid is my reason. I have no idea why I've sunk a rental car into a runaway truck ramp after the night of our lives.

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To Jeff and Brent's credit, they only call me a dumbass twice before transitioning into "what do we do now?" mode. The car has stalled. I turn off the key. We roll down the windows and climb through them to exit the vehicle.

"No sense even trying to start it and back out," Brent says. "Too deep."

I nod. Jeff shakes his head.

Fifteen minutes later, a California Highway Patrolman stops to assist. He stares at us through his windshield before exiting. I can only imagine what he's thinking.

The patrolman asks if we're okay. Then he requests our identification. "You gentlemen lose your brakes?"

I know I'm not supposed to lie, cheat, or steal, but the thought crosses my mind anyway.

I step forward. "No, Sir. It's my fault. I wanted to see what would happen." Those words again. Except this time, the phrase elicits a stare that seems simultaneously to say "you dumbass kid," and "wait until they hear about this back at headquarters."

The patrolman checks the car. He radios for a tow truck, then returns to his vehicle while we wait. When the truck arrives, I catch snippets of the officer's conversation.

"Cadets...Air Force...eighteen." Then, "right—future of our country."

The truck takes only five minutes to get the rental back on the pavement. The officer encourages me to give the car a go. It starts right up. The sides of the sedan are covered in dust and streaked with light scratches from the gravel. I leave the Grand Am running, joining Jeff and Brent while the patrolman and tow truck operator talk.

"Three hundred," Jeff says. "Hell, probably two hundred just for the ticket."

"Tow might be two hundred plus. And ticket might be more." Brent stares at his feet.

They're both wrong. The officer lets us off with a warning.

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“You boys aren’t the brightest I’ve come across, but I just want to thank you in advance for serving our country. Don’t pull a dumbass stunt like this again.”

We each give a version of “No, sir.”

The tow truck operator charges us thirty bucks. “Only took me five minutes. Plus, the time to get here.” He smiles. “Good luck in the Air Force.”

In Sacramento, we stop at an auto parts store and buy rags and rubbing compound. We buff out the scratches in the parking lot before filling up the Grand Am with gas and returning it. The rental company accepts the car without questions. We don’t share our story.

Two weeks later, the three of us are drinking 3.2% beer at Arnold Hall, the on-campus hangout specifically built for those of us too young to have car privileges or drink outside the gates. We’re telling our story to freshmen from another squadron. They’ve just returned from their field trip to an operational base. Unlike our squadron, they didn’t get any time off.

It takes a lot of 3.2% beer to get a buzz going, but we’re determined young men. By the time Arnold Hall closes, we’re bloated and loaded.

As we stagger across the terrazzo toward our dorms, I pull Jeff to a stop in front of a display aircraft.

“You see that F-104 in front of us?” I ask.

“Yeah?”

“Five bucks says you can’t climb on top of it.”

“Five bucks says I can.” Jeff moves toward the plane.

“Naked, you god,” I say.