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Final Fling

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Final Fling

a Ben Perkins crime novel

Rob Kantner

Hard Woods Press • 2008

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Published by Hard Woods Press

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ISBN: 978-1-60145-343-3

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For information address hardwoodspress@9sg.com.

Author website: www.RobKantner.com

Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 2

That first inning proved once again that, in sports, you really never know. Season-long, the Pepto Abysmals, lacking anything like big bats, had won games the long hard way. Walks, bunts, bloop singles, steals, sharp base-running (thanks to masterful coaching, especially at third), better-than-decent pitching, and stubborn defense. Our team won more one-run and from-behind victories than anyone else. Tonight, though, the players, evidently inspired by Bonabell, were the reincarnated Murderer's Row of 1927. We batted around the order and half again besides, and almost hit for the cycle, and by inning's end had put up 12. Tony Tranchemontagne, our #2 pitcher behind the sidelined Carole, baffled most of Reese's Pieces with his infuriating junk stuff, so after one full inning we led by nine. Sounds like a lot, if you don't know our league, but satisfactory it certainly was.

During the break I held Rachel and chatted softball with Carole while Raeanne signed autographs for a cluster of giggling early-teen girls. Raeanne's fluke hit single, "I'm a Knock-Around Girl in a Dot.Com World" had peaked weeks before, and was now, to Raeanne's intense relief, fading into the annals of one-hit-wonderdom. But she was still occasionally recognized by people who had seen the video or the spurtlet of news coverage that had raged for a couple of weeks there. Despite her personal misgivings about the song, which she had done on a lark, Raeanne was warm and kind to the girls, who were to say the least giddy.

Presently, the home team started trotting out onto the field. Transferring Rachel to Raeanne's lap this time, I grinned at Carole and headed for the diamond. Rip Brownlee fell in beside me as I sauntered down the base path toward third. "Great start, huh?"

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"Yeah, Bonabell really lit the fuse for us."

"Got *all* of that one."

"Yessir."

"Plenty of game left though."

"Never too early," I remarked, "to start winning."

"Yeah-boy," Rip replied, with a chuckle that I realized came from uncharacteristic nervousness. "So, Bonabell's doing all right?"

"Seems to be." I looked at him. "What makes you think I'd know?"

"Well, Carole's her boss."

"Carole don't talk to me about her people, Rip." Which was not strictly true. Carole had filled me in. "Sorry."

We reached third base. He squared around to face me. "Maybe," he rushed on, "you could talk to Bonabell for me."

I stared at him. For a guy who looked smooth and considered himself clever, Rip could be as clumsy as a Mack truck. "Me? What about?"

Before he could answer, we realized the plate umpire had ventured halfway down the third base line. "Think we could play ball some time tonight, gentlemen?" she called.

"Sure, ump," I said, relieved. "Assume the position, Rip."

"Yeah-boy." Holding the camcorder in one hand, he jogged across the diamond toward first, to the sarcastic applause of the opposing crowd. Rip, being Rip, beamed and waved his arms in acknowledgment.

That second inning, the Abysmals returned closer to form. The Pieces's pitcher, adjusting as good pitchers do, quit trying to overpower people and instead expertly mixed up pitch speeds, ball locations, and several of our batters. Plus, Rip unwisely and completely without Rich's green-light sent Gene Fouts on a hapless steal attempt, only to see him gunned down by a good three steps. Even so, thanks to Bonabell, who

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stroked a solid double, we scored two. The Pieces matched that in their half, so after two innings we led 14-5.

"Most satisfactory," Carole said, smiling.

"Ways to go yet," I inaccurately cautioned, steering Rachel over to her mother. "Having fun?" I asked Raeanne, who seemed quiet that night.

"I'm fine," she said with a quick smile.

"Okay. Later, babe." I trotted through the gap in the fence and down the third base line. Opposing players were strolling out onto the field. The sky was dimming as the evening sun neared a cloud bank in the west. The crowd was settled down, waiting for inning three to start. Rip, fresh from Rich's royal chewing-out, fell in beside me. "So you'll talk to Bonabell for me?"

Aw jeez. "What about?"

"She needs to forgive me."

"What makes you think I'd get anywhere, lobbyin for you?"

"Well," he said evenly, "this mess I'm in, I know you can relate. You been in the dog house plenty."

"Now hold it --"

"Don't bullshit me, Ben. I've heard the stories about you."

Reese's Pieces tossed warm-up balls around. Pepto Abysmals, in blue, swung bats and stretched. The Pieces's tattooed pitcher, looking smug after his respectable showing last inning, threw wicked-looking warmup pitches. "I done my time in the dog house," I admitted, "in way by-gone years. But I never had any jilted chicks show up at my significant other's door."

"Well --"

"No scorned woman," I cut in, "ever snuck into my car and pissed all over the upholstery."

"That was --"

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"Videotapes," I overrode, "never appeared on neighbors' windshields for blocks in all directions."

Rip nodded, blinking. "You're right. I hear you. Fixing things with Bonabell, that's a challenge."

"Challenge? Shit, man. Mt. Everest is a challenge. The Middle East is a challenge. What you got, buddy boy," I said, "is a *row* to hoe."

"So you'll help me then?" Before I could answer, his cell phone chimed again from his shorts pocket. Rip pulled it out, snapped it open, and answered, grinning, "Go." I stepped away toward my position behind third, hoping that Rip would finish his call quick and get over to first base where he belonged. Instead he clicked his phone shut, glanced at me, and muttered, "Be right back." And away he went, in a half trot, across left field toward the parking lot.

"Hey," I called. "Where you going, man." Rip ignored me. I turned toward our dugout and gave Coach the WTF sign. Rich, scowling, called time and beckoned me over. "What's his story."

"Dunno, man." Rip had disappeared by now, lost amid the cars and trees and gathering gloom of the parking lot. "What do you want to do?"

"Take first. I'll get Missy's grandpa to cover third."

"You got it, Coach."

"Butt-head," I heard Rich mutter, as I headed over to first.

As it turned out we needed no coach at third, because during our inning no Abysmal ever got that far. The Pieces' pitcher threw a gem and we went quietly with just one walk, to the obvious and noisy enjoyment of the Reece's-partial crowd. As I headed for my seat next to Raeanne, Bonabell intercepted me. Beneath the bill of her blue ball cap, her dark brown eyes were troubled. "Where's Rip?"

"I don't know. Said he had something to do."

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She stared toward the parking lot. "I think his van is still there."

"Want me to go check?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't bother. Who cares what he's doing." She went to the dugout and I rejoined Raeanne and Carole. Rachel sat on Raeanne's lap, contentedly – at least for her – taking a bottle of juice. Carole asked, "What's that idiot up to?"

It was not necessary to clarify which 'idiot' she was asking about. "He got a call," I answered. "Said 'be right back,' and off he went. Bonabell is irked."

"You'd think by now she'd let go," Carole observed.

In the bottom of the third, Tony Tranchemontagne and our defense stepped up pretty well, holding the Pieces to just two runs. I noticed during the inning that Bonabell, playing right field, kept looking back toward the parking lot. There was never any sign of Rip. The inning ended and our players trotted in, all but Bonabell. Rich and I watched her head out to the parking lot. "It's okay," Rich said shortly, "she's not up for a while."

Dick Slee squeezed out a walk. As I whispered to him from my first base coaching box – trying to keep him from taking too much of a lead, a chronic problem with him – I kept glancing out to the parking lot.

No Rip, no Bonabell.

Dawn Vojtkofsky got way underneath and skyed one in close. Dick, caught leaning despite my urging, was doubled up.

Still no Rip or Bonabell.

Jane Pepple was stepping into the box, melodramatically knocking nonexistent dirt off her spikes with the fat of her bat, when the sound came from the parking lot.

A piercing scream.

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*

“Okay, batter up!” the uniformed cop called over to me. “In a manner of speaking, heh heh.”

I rose. “Be just a minute,” I murmured to Raeanne, “and we’ll get the hell out of here.”

“Okay,” she said faintly, and got to her feet. “I’ll put the chairs in the car, meet you there.”

“Kay, babe,” I answered, and tossed her the keys. Face stark white, she folded the lawn chairs, and I followed the uniform to the gaggle of cars at the east end of the parking lot.

Evening had gathered its shadows deeply around the ball park. The spectators had long since gone home. Traffic continued to clog Eight Mile Road, three lanes each way, in an unscripted symphony of headlights, bad mufflers, and deep rhythmic bass boomings. Though the crime scene was clearly visible from the road – the cluster of squad cars and the blinking light bar of the ambulance were, so to speak, a dead give-away – nobody bothered to slow down to gawk. In these parts crime scenes aren’t all that unusual.

The center of attention, right in the middle of the now mostly empty parking lot, was a gun ship gray Plymouth Voyager minivan. It had a cracked windshield, a long rust scrape, and a small naked Homer Simpson doll stuck to the tip of its radio antenna. Its sliding door was open and a plainclothes man was just climbing in. A couple of other plainclothes guys stood around, smoking and chatting under the stark white light of portable spot lights. It seemed like ages since I had been around a scene like this. I’d forgotten the jarring contrast between the enormity of the event, and the brisk, casual indifference of the people dealing with it.

Two city of Detroit squad cars blocked the east end of the parking lot. A plain black Crown Victoria parked next to it, attended by two more men. One was a young white guy in

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sand slacks, open-neck shirt, blue blazer. The other was a big blocky African-American who leaned against the fender of the Crown Vic, hands in the pockets of his expertly tailored gray pants, snapbrim hat at a jaunty angle on his oversized burr-cut head.

The uniform led me there. The white guy, obviously the case lead, had a small notebook in his hands. He gave me a quick appraisal with that slight, almost imperceptible double-take you get when a cop realizes you're not a typical civilian. "Name?"

"Ben Perkins," said the big black guy, tone lazy, body motionless, dark eyes glinting at me from under his hat brim.

"Captain," I greeted. "What's shakin."

Elvin Dance straightened to full height, which was not towering. But his bulk, his thickness through the chest and across his shoulders, made him seem massive. "Mothah," he said softly, savoring the word, "fuckah." I understood this to be merely an offhand expression of surprise. "Whatchoo doin way down here?"

"Hangin with the softball club," I answered. "You're interviewing the whole team, so --"

"Plymouth team," Elvin surmised.

"You make that sound like a bad thing," I grinned.

"Plymouth," he repeated, and not kindly, "Michigan."

"And there's nothing to laugh about here, Perkins," the younger cop chided. That's right, chided; a Detroit homicide detective actually *chided*. Man, have things changed. "This is a murder investigation," he added.

"Perkins don't take nothin serious," Elvin grunted. As ever, he wore an elegant suit, this one double-breasted and a soft silvery gray, over a crisp white shirt and bright yellow tie. Gold twinkled from knobby rings on his black-on-black fingers, and from his wrists, and from his teeth. He had a

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leathery catcher's mitt of a face, his eyes small glinting orbs, the lines and grooves deep and worn from years of being first. First 'spade' to make motor patrol, first colored detective, first Negro section head, first black lieutenant and captain. He'd have been the first African-American chief of police if he had not gone out of his way (with what some observers viewed as an excess of glee) to piss off a succession of persons-of-color mayors. "So what position you play on this-here *Plymouth* team?"

"Position?"

"First base, right field, whut."

"Left out. Heh heh." No reaction. "Actually, base coach." I'd been giving him the once-over. "You're looking good, Elvin. Great cut on that suit. Can never tell you're packing. What is it tonight, the Police Positive, or the .38 Military & Police?"

"Glock nine," he grunted.

"Whoo-wee, you've updated the artillery. What about the Beretta? Still got the .25 on your ankle?"

He nodded. His expression betrayed no recollection of what he used that .25 for once, years ago, in an abandoned factory building a few miles south of here. "You still totin that old .45 auto?"

"Naw, lost that last year. Listen, I hate to bust up the old-home-week bit here. But I got my girlfriend waiting for me. How can I help you fellas?"

I'd addressed this to the white detective. He glanced at his boss. "Looks to me like you two have a history," he said drily. "You care to do the honors, Captain?"

"You the lead," Elvin said wearily. "Perkins a distraction, nothin more. Go for it."

"Roger," Keyes chirped. He had a wide open face and a ready smile and, I swear, a sprinkling of freckles – picture

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Opie with hair – but there was weight in his eyes and no fear in his stance. He was a born street guy, like Elvin and like me, just without all our miles yet. “You know the victim,” he began.

“I knew him. Not well.”

“And his wife?”

“Oh sure. Bonabell’s on the team, Rip was kind of a hanger-on.”

“We’re told,” Keyes said, “you were one of the first on the scene here.”

“Took off running,” I agreed, “after Bonabell screamed from out here. Van door was open, Rip was inside, half on the floor, just the way you saw him. I didn’t touch anything, didn’t let anyone else near.” Of course I’d told the uniforms all this, 90 minutes before, but I understood the detectives had to mop up.

“And he was dead?” Keyes asked.

“Uh, yeah.” I looked at Elvin and thought I saw just the slightest eye-roll.

“How about the wife. Bonabell,” Keyes asked. “What was she doing, when you got here?”

“She was by the front of the van, kind of half crumpled over, moaning and groaning and crying. She was in shock.”

“Did you observe any marks or scratches on her.”

“No.”

“Blood stains, tears in her clothes --”

“Blood on her hands. I mean, when she found him she reached down for him, to. . . . For Chrissake – don’t tell me you’re liking her for this.”

“Perkins --”

“We don’t like her for it,” Elvin intoned without looking our way.

Brought up short, but not wishing to appear to have been,

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Keyes said, "We're talking random street crazy at this point."

As Keyes leafed through his pages, I glanced at Elvin again. He was watching me, dark face an indefinable mask. I had a million questions, comments, issues with this Opie-idiot who was skimming his notes, humming. But I tamped it all down and waited.

Keyes tapped a page with his pen. "We're told the vic and his wife were separated."

"Serious estrangement," I said. "Living apart."

"Bad blood there?"

"I'm not first-hand knowledgeable there. You talked to Judge Somers, she probably filled you in."

"Carole Somers," Elvin said. "She the same one that --"

"Yep."

"Damn," Elvin said, making it sound like *day-em*. "You fuckin a *judge* now."

"Judge part's recent. The other, we been done with that a long time."

Elvin reached into his coat pocket and came out with a pack of Kools. "Anything else, Keyes?"

"Not right now. I need your contact information," he told me.

I gave him my address and mobile phone number as Elvin lighted a cigarette and thoughtfully exhaled cones of smoke. "Still in Belleville," he commented as Keyes bustled over to the van to confer with the uniforms.

"Some things don't change."

"That so," he said thoughtfully. "Then how come I ain't seen you 'round in what, a year or more."

"Things change," I said. "Fact is, Elvin, I'm pretty much working the paperwork side of things now."

"Really." He eyed me. "No more street?"

"Nope."

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"How come?"

"Made a promise."

He gave me a look. "How that workin out for you?"

"Well, not bad. I ain't been shot at, punched out, or car chased in all this time. Well," I amended, "I did find myself downwind of a fistful of knives flung by a displeased woman, not that long ago."

"Why am I not shocked. You and your girls."

"Was not 'my girl.' And was no way no how my fault."

"Sure it weren't. Nothin ever is." Elvin drew on his smoke, dark eyes still on me. Behind us a big lime green wrecker pulled in off Eight Mile Road and, diesel roaring and backup alarm pinging, closed in on Rip's minivan. "So make your pitch."

"Scuse me?"

"Bout how you gone investigate this-here incident."

"Incident?"

He waved his blocky hand, the Kool glowing and smoldering. "An' I'm gone tell you to stay out of it, and you gone get all chest-out and *manhood* with me about how you gots a job to do, and --"

"Elvin, be still. Please." He stopped short. I leaned closer to him, close enough to get just a whiff of his cologne. "I'm out of that stuff," I said. "I want no part of this mess here. I won't be in your backfield, or anywhere near it. Trust me."

Elvin was staring hard at me. But then the expression broke into a smile, so broad I thought I could hear his scowl lines breaking. "Congratulations, son."

"For what?"

"For turnin' over a new leaf!" he beamed. "Keepin your nose clean, losin the weapon, fuckin a judge, stayin out of other folkses bidness. Congratulations."

I could not tell if he was being sarcastic or not. It didn't

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matter. Turning, I made for my Mustang and the patiently waiting Raeanne, parked at the far end of the lot. As I walked I heard Elvin laugh, and then laugh again, and then say: "Now I seen everything."

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