

Chapter 1

I had spent the majority of my life in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota—thirty-two years of staring at lakes, and let me tell you, after the first billion, they all start to look like puddles with better PR. The air in St. Paul is a peculiar blend of lakewater, nostalgia, and the faint aroma of existential dread.

My career as a scout for the Minnesota Wild had kept me here for a decade, which is about nine years longer than my patience for the local weather and the local coffee, both of which seemed to be locked in a contest to see which could be more disappointing.

I walked into Stan Heath's office, clutching my Minnesota Twins mug like it was a shield against whatever disaster awaited—a disaster that, judging by the smell, had already arrived and was masquerading as coffee. The mug's contents tasted as if someone had wrung out a gym sock and called it "medium roast," which was generous. I was still in my sleepwear—gray basketball shorts and a tank-top—because why bother pretending to be a functioning adult on a day off? My head was shaved to stubble, which saved time, but my chin felt like a Brillo pad. I briefly considered inventing a new look: "hobo chic," but suspected it would never catch on outside of certain avant-garde circles in Paris.

Stan, my boss, was parked behind a desk that looked like it had been stolen from a medieval castle during a particularly rowdy siege. Stan himself was a friendly guy, if you define "friendly" as "will roast you alive but offer you a donut afterward." He was sixty-six, had more ex-wives than I had pairs of socks, and was built like a linebacker who'd swallowed a recliner and possibly the ottoman too.

"Morning, Stan," I said, attempting to sound like I hadn't just rolled out of bed and lost a fight with my coffee maker. I sat down in a chair that had clearly seen more action than a sumo wrestling ring, its springs groaning in protest.

"How's that diet going?" I asked, eyeing the Mojo Monkey Donuts box in the trash. The smell of sugar and regret lingered in the air, mingling with the faint whiff of lost dreams.

Stan leaned back, defying the laws of physics and furniture. His belly was a geographical feature in its own right, possibly visible from space. He gave me a look that could curdle milk.

"It's almost noon, Ray," he said, his voice rumbling like distant thunder. "I know you don't even recall eleven being a morning hour. Do you even own an alarm clock or do you set your TV to turn on for Sports Center?"

“I have an alarm clock, it’s called a boss who likes to call at nine in the morning on my day off,” I replied, swirling my coffee and wondering if I could use it to clean my car’s engine. “Do you know what a day off is, Stan?”

“Yes, it’s what you do every day,” Stan replied, with the air of someone who had rehearsed this line in front of a mirror.

Stan leaned back even further. I braced myself for the sound of splintering wood and a call to the fire department.

“So, what made you call me in today? You never want me in your office,” I said, trying to sound casual, but my Spidey sense was tingling like a faulty smoke alarm.

Stan leaned forward—a sit-up! I almost applauded, but restrained myself for fear of causing a cardiac event.

“If your uncle wasn’t the owner of this organization you’d probably be mopping floors at White Castle,” he said, his tone somewhere between affectionate and apocalyptic. “What happened to you over the years? Boy, you could’ve been the greatest hockey coach or player at your age.”

Where did THAT come from? I wondered if Stan had mistaken me for someone with ambition.

“Did you call me in to lecture me on mistakes? I could’ve rolled over in bed and picked up the phone and called the old man if I wanted that discussion,” I said, my sarcasm dialed to eleven.

Stan slid a folder in front of me. More like tossed it. I didn’t pick it up—maybe it would bite.

“Ray, you had the potential to be our top scout ten years ago,” Stan said, leaning as far as he could. The desk groaned in protest, possibly considering early retirement.

“Since you’ve been employed with us we’ve signed one prospect who is currently serving a five year sentence in the pen for tax evasion, and three others who are coaching girl’s lacrosse at the YMCA!” Stan’s voice echoed with the tragic grandeur of a Shakespearean monologue.

“Hey, have you ever tried coaching a girls sport?” I said, putting my mug on the desk. “How was I supposed to know that Darren Jacks didn’t pay taxes in Canada for eight years? At least he played a few years.”

“Three games in three years?” Stan replied, eyebrows raised so high they threatened to leave his forehead.

“Look at the bright side, even though I know you haven’t seen it back there since you were five, at least Jacks is staying in shape for when he comes back,” I said, deadpan. If sarcasm was a sport, I’d be in the Hall of Fame.

“You think this is all a funny joke, Ray?” Stan’s eyes bulged. I wondered if he was going to pop like a balloon.

“Well, it’s fun,” I smiled. “And the pay is a joke, so yeah, it’s a funny joke.”

“Ok, to the point.” Stan leaned back. The chair creaked like a haunted house door.

“We’ve decided to let you go, Ray. You haven’t cut it and even your uncle feels we need a change. Go coach soccer or something, we all know you’re a soccer guy. Maybe you can land a job scouting college soccer or something. But you’re done here.”

That was serious. How was I supposed to make ten grand last another thirty years? Maybe I could invent a new career: professional couch potato.

“You’re serious?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Stan nodded, reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a manila envelope. He tossed it across the desk like he was dealing cards at a casino.

“Your uncle felt you needed some time to clear the cobwebs before you tried anything else.” He tossed the envelope into my lap. “He didn’t want you going out with nothing.”

I touched the envelope marked RAY. It felt heavier than my dignity.

“What’s this?” I asked, puzzled.

“There’s a check for five thousand, a one-way trip to Rio and hotel reservations for a month at some exclusive beach club,” Stan said, his smile stretching wider than the Mississippi.

Stan smiled. Smiled! I checked for signs of the apocalypse.

“Your Uncle Dan said something about a World Cup in Brazil this summer and that you’d probably enjoy that.”

I shook my head as I opened the envelope and peered inside. Then I looked up at Stan, suddenly less sarcastic. The room felt like it was closing in, the air thick with the scent of impending doom.

“The World Cup was two years ago, Stan. One way trip?” I asked, my voice echoing off the walls.

“I’m sure you’ll figure out something creative,” Stan replied, with the confidence of a man who had never been creative in his life.

“Brazil?” I was slack-jawed. I’d always wanted to visit a place where I couldn’t speak the language or understand the sport.

“If Uncle Dan wants to get rid of me he could’ve at least sent me to England for life. Brazil?” I muttered, the word tasting strange in my mouth.

“Take it and do whatever you want, not my problem,” Stan said, waving a hand as if dismissing the entire continent.

“I love hockey!” I blurted, defending my pride like a goalie in overtime. “I love this organization. I’ve put in ten years. I gave up a normal life to do this, traveling back and forth every other day to Canada. Living out of a duffle bag and drinking tea three times a day and learning to park sideways on straight roads! What?”

Stan leaned forward again. Two sit-ups in an hour! I was witnessing history.

“Boy, you’re the smartest dummy I’ve ever known. More talent and potential than half this team had you had any work ethic. You were lazy. I know you have the eye for scouting great talent but instead you used that eye for spotting a good vacation spot or bottle of Jack Daniels. I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” Stan said, his voice tinged with something that might have been affection if you squinted.

“I want to talk to Uncle Dan,” I demanded, feeling like the punchline to a joke. “Is he in his office?”

Stan slowly stood up. My chair slid backwards as he rose, like a ship leaving port.

“Mr. Rucker is away on business for the next week and doesn’t want to see you around here when he gets back. Take your trip, Ray. Flight leaves tomorrow afternoon. Go home and pack and have a good time drinking whatever it is health freaks drink and get a tan. Maybe find yourself a beautiful Portuguese wife while you’re there. I don’t know,” Stan said, shrugging with the air of someone who had run out of advice.

“I can’t even speak Brazilian!” I protested.

“They speak Portuguese, Ray,” Stan replied, with the patience of a man explaining gravity to a brick.

I have never even been to Portugal! I was about to become an international man of mystery—minus the mystery.

I sat in my chair staring at my envelope, absent in thought. Bloody Brazil? I couldn’t even muster a fat joke about Stan. I could only mumble, “Brazil,” over and over.

“I’m done, no more hockey scouting?” I was still asleep and dreaming. This morning never happened, right?

“Brazil?” I repeated, the word bouncing around my skull like a confused ping-pong ball.

“Get out of my office,” Stan said, walking past me and opening his office door into a dark abyss that was a hall decorated with trophies and pictures when I arrived earlier.

“Go home and get out of town. I’m sure Dan will visit with you whenever you find a way to get back,” Stan said, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

What is so funny about getting stranded in Brazil? It’s not even soccer season.

I stood up, forgetting my mug, and walked to the door. I didn’t even look at Stan, I just continued forward into the abyss. Brazil?

The long walk to my beat up old Honda Civic seemed like days. Nobody noticed me. I didn’t notice them. President Trump could’ve been standing there with his big lips moving about cop shootings or Hillary Clinton lying about what toilet paper she used to wipe her mouth that day and I’d have been completely oblivious.

When I got to my car it wouldn’t start. Imagine that. Things were working smoothly that morning, right up until I walked in Stan’s office. Now the world had closed around me.

I took out my cell and called Windy in Tennessee.

“Hello?” A soft southern accent answered. At least something was working today.

I paused. “Brazil!” That was all I could muster with a sigh. “Brazil!”

“What you talking ‘bout, Ray?” Windy asked, her voice bright as a sunbeam.

“I was fired today, my car won’t start and I think the coffee I had gave me gas.” I should’ve cleaned my coffee maker six years ago.

“Fired?” she asked. Windy was always happy—even her bad news sounded like a weather forecast for sunshine.

“How could you get fired from work on your day off? Never mind, forget I asked that. What do you mean Brazil?”

“Uncle Dan is getting rid of me, sending me to Brazil for a long vacation.”

“That doesn’t sound bad,” Windy laughed. “A free trip to Brazil for getting fired? How long did he say?”

“Eternity!” I sat in my car staring out into blackness.

“Being exiled from Minnesota isn’t a bad thing, hun,” Windy said, her optimism undimmed.

I kept trying to turn the car key. “Damn car isn’t starting.”

“You need to look at the softer side of things, Ray,” she said. “At least it’s not December and your car is dead in a blizzard.”

“Gee, I never thought of it like that, thanks.” I found myself dazed and confused. That seemed like my entire life summed up in five seconds.

“Hey, I’ve gotta call a cab. I guess I’m going home to pack. My flight leaves tomorrow afternoon.” I didn’t feel like having this conversation. That was strange in itself. I could talk for hours with Windy.

“Okay, hun, then call me when you’re in Brazil basking up the rays,” she laughed.

I didn’t see anything funny about it.

“Maybe it’s time for me to come to Minnesota when you get back.”

“If...if I get back.” I sighed again.

My phone died on the last word. Imagine that.

I dropped the phone on the passenger seat. All I could think about was life with fifteen thousand bucks, a one way ticket to Brazil and no more hockey. No more Minnesota. No more looking at the same lake, or was it a few different lakes? It didn’t matter anymore.

I was going to have to be a cartel drug mule if I ever wanted to get back home. Maybe I’d get lynched by a street gang for being a gringo with no money. Hell, maybe there was a cartel looking for a good recruiter and they’d pay for me to get home.

What was I going to do in Brazil? I hated South American-style soccer. Why couldn't my uncle have exiled me to England or Scotland? At least I'd know the language and I loved watching European soccer. I could've been a vagrant in London and claimed I had my passport stolen by some Chelsea goon. I didn't even know how to say passport in Portuguese!

I got out of my car and started walking towards the parking lot exit, not caring if a bus loaded with Chinese tourists ran me over.

It started raining. I looked up and didn't see any clouds. Imagine that.

I walked to the roadside and held out my hand thumbing for a cab back to White Bear Lake.

This was going to be a very long day indeed.

Brazil?

Chapter 2

Standing in line at the terminal was a bit like waiting for new plates at the DMV, except here, nobody was chewing gum loud enough to drown out my existential dread. The air was thick with the scent of industrial-strength sanitizer, which clung to my nostrils like an overzealous octopus, and the faint aroma of burnt popcorn wafted from a snack bar that looked as if it hadn't seen a health inspector since the Clinton administration. No, this was more like trying to renew my driver license without a birth certificate, a social security card, or the will to live. My eyes felt like sandpaper, my neck was begging for lotion, and my skin was so dry I could have auditioned for a raisin commercial.

"Ticket please?" chirped the airline host, who looked as though she'd just stepped out of a toothpaste ad—her uniform crisp, her smile so forced I wondered if it was glued on with industrial adhesive.

I handed over my ticket, attempting to look like someone who hadn't just lost a bet with life. I braced for her to tell me I was on the no-fly list or to step aside for a chat with Homeland

Security. My gaze darted around the crowd for men in black with sunglasses, just in case my luck decided to go full Hollywood.

“Sir, would you mind if we gave you a door seat?” she asked, peering at me as if I were a puzzle missing half its pieces.

“My ticket is first class!” I protested, shaking my head and feeling the paper crinkle in my sweaty palm. First class, my last grasp at dignity.

“It seems there was an overbooking, sir,” she replied, her voice as apologetic as a robot programmed for customer service.

“There any Muslims on this flight?” I blurted, instantly regretting it. Why do I talk?

“Excuse me, sir?” she said, her eyebrows arching with the precision of a synchronized swimming team.

“Nothing,” I smiled, or tried to. “Maybe the plane will be hijacked and we’ll crash in the Gulf.” Honestly, at this point, a tropical island sounded better than Brazil.

She gave me a look that could freeze lava.

“Sure, why not,” I answered, my voice echoing in the terminal like a bad karaoke performance.

She handed me my ticket back, her fingers cool and businesslike. No tip for customer service today.

“Do you mind putting your bags on the scale, sir?” she asked, gesturing to the metallic slab with all the warmth of a mortician.

I plopped all five bags on the scale. The metal was cold, and the thud of each bag sounded like a drumroll for my impending doom. I’d packed everything except my dignity, which was currently missing in action.

“Sir, there will be a two-hundred dollar baggage fee,” she announced, with the cheerfulness of someone reading out lottery numbers to a crowd of losers.

Of course. Why not charge me for emotional baggage too?

“Take a check?” I asked, almost seriously. My bank account was already crying.

She smiled and shook her head. There goes two hundred bucks. The receipt was so thin it could double as a tissue for my tears.

There was a time when I loved to fly. Now, sitting in my seat with less legroom than a hamster cage, watching the baggage guys toss my future around like a sack of potatoes, I wondered if crashing into a lake would be considered a Minnesota homecoming.

A Spanish-looking gentleman wedged himself into the seat next to me, shoving a backpack into the overhead with the grace of a linebacker. He flashed a smile so bright I needed sunglasses.

“I’m Santiago,” he said, sticking out his hand with the confidence of someone who’d never lost a game of rock-paper-scissors.

I shook it. “Ray Dandy.”

“Dandy?” Santiago grinned. “Dandy of a guy I take?”

Like I hadn’t heard that since kindergarten. I pulled out my phone, pretending to be busy. Windy had texted: Have a safe trip ☺ Call me when you have a chance after you get settled in Brazil! I considered replying with a crying emoji.

I turned my phone off and sighed, sinking into the seat. The fabric was scratchy, like my mood.

The flight attendant started her pre-flight speech. I always thought these instructions were written by someone who’d never flown. If the plane goes down, there’s only two outcomes: crash and burn, or break apart in mid-air. Either way, the oxygen mask is just a party favor and the life vest is a fashion statement.

Suddenly my oxygen mask dropped from the ceiling and slapped me in the face. The universe had jokes today.

Santiago laughed as I shoved it back into place, pounding the hatch closed like I was sealing my fate.

Take-off was smooth, which meant my luck was still bad. Only a disaster of epic proportions could save me from Brazil now.

An hour in, the stewardess rolled up with a cart loaded with soda, booze, and peanuts. The clink of bottles was music to my ears.

“Would you gentlemen like anything to drink or something to eat?” she asked, her voice bubbling with artificial enthusiasm.

Santiago answered, “I’ll take a beer, please?” Then he looked at me. “Want a beer? It’s on me.”

“Sure.” I took the beer, the can icy cold and promising temporary happiness. “Thanks.” I downed it in four gulps, not caring who was watching.

“So, Ray,” Santiago started, “where you headed today?”

Conversation, my old nemesis.

“Brazil,” I answered. I flagged the stewardess. “Ma’am, could I get one more of those? Actually three, please. Give my friend here one.”

“Brazil?” Santiago’s face lit up. “I’m from Rio, just heading home.”

“Nice,” I said, channeling my inner robot.

“What do you do for a living, Ray?” Santiago turned to face me. Not what I was hoping for.

“Nothing anymore,” I answered. “I was a hockey scout.”

“Hockey?”

“Yeah, the sport with ice, a stick and little rubber puck.”

“I’m familiar with it.”

“Who’s your team?” I asked, desperate for a topic that didn’t involve my unemployment.

“Don’t have one,” Santiago responded. “I’m a futbol guy myself.”

Of course. Soccer. My favorite.

“I’m familiar with it.” I leaned my seat back, hoping to disappear into the upholstery. Maybe if I closed my eyes, he’d get the hint. No luck. “What do you do, Santi?”

“I’m in sports marketing and I coach a rollerblade soccer team in Rio.”

Roller what? Did I just step into a fever dream?

“What’s that?” I stared at the divider, which looked about as confused as I felt.

“Kind of like your hockey but with a small ball and no sticks.”

I turned to look at him. “How do you kick a ball with rollerblades?”

“Five players just like hockey with soccer rules and the players boot the ball around as they blade and try to score on a net similar to your hockey goals.”

Santiago pulled out a tablet. The screen flickered to life, showing kids zooming around like caffeinated penguins.

“Here, take a look for yourself,” he said, offering the tablet.

I leaned over, watching the video. Wheels screeched, kids shouted in Portuguese, and the ball zipped around like it owed someone money. Something about it sparked my interest, but I wasn’t ready to admit it.

When the video finished I sat back.

“That’s crazy.” I was actually impressed. “Hard to imagine those boys blading around like that and moving that ball with the same skill as if they were playing normal soccer.”

I laughed, surprising myself.

“These boys are all soccer players,” Santiago said, putting the tablet away. “If you grow up in Brazil and don’t play soccer it’s like growing up in Minnesota not knowing how to ice skate.” He winked.

“I’d like to see one of them do a bike kick with rollerblades.” I coughed, the dry cabin air making my throat scratchy.

“It’s been done.”

Of course it has.

“Boy, I’d like to see Wayne Rooney do a bike kick on rollerblades.” I laughed, shaking my head.

“Those kids ever play roller hockey?”

“Roller hockey?” Santiago looked puzzled.

“Hockey on rollerblades,” I said. “Pretty much the same as ice hockey.”

Something clicked in my mind, but I ignored it. I wasn’t ready for hope.

“These kids don’t know what hockey is, Ray,” he laughed. “Most of these kids are so poor they make blades from skateboard parts. None of them have been farther than Rio.”

We talked for another thirty minutes before Santiago finally leaned back and closed his eyes. Finally! Sweet silence.

I closed my eyes, hoping for sleep. I must have been tired because the flight attendant's announcement about Mexico City startled me awake.

"That was fast," I said to anybody listening, which was nobody.

"This is where I get off, Ray," Santiago pulled his seat forward. "I've got business here for two days before I go back to Brazil."

I sat forward and rubbed my face, trying to wipe away the wrinkles and the last traces of hope.

"You couldn't pay me a million bucks to get off this plane in Mexico."

Santiago chuckled.

"Well, Ray, look me up when you are in Rio," he handed me a business card, glossy and optimistic. "Maybe you can come check out a roller soccer game and I can show you around Rio from a local's view."

I glanced at the card before shoving it in my left cargo short pocket. The odds of me calling were about the same as me winning the lottery.

"Sounds great," I said, lying through my teeth. "Have a good time in Mexico."

"All business my American friend."

After we landed and Santiago departed, I laid back in thought. My mind was racing, mostly about beer. This flight was only six hours but felt like a lifetime.

Brazil?

Chapter 3

If there was a Nobel Prize for awkward transitions between climates, I'd have won it the moment I stepped out of the Rio airport and discovered that Minnesota's dry sarcasm was no match for Brazilian humidity. It was as if the universe had decided to wrap me in a moist towel and then left me out in the sun to marinate.

“I feel like a shower head is following me,” I said to Windy, clutching my phone as I stood on the roadside outside the airport. The humidity was so thick I could practically swim through the air, and my shirt clung to me like a needy ex. “Isn’t it supposed to be winter in South America right now?”

“I think so, I’ve never been there,” she replied, her voice drifting through the static like a warm southern breeze, the kind that makes you want to sit on a porch and contemplate the meaning of iced tea.

“I can’t get a taxi, they keep passing me,” I grumbled, thumbing a cab that promptly drove past and stopped for a couple a few yards to my right. “Imagine that. I’m starting to think my deodorant failed border security.”

“Try using Google translator,” Windy suggested, optimism undimmed.

“Out of data,” I said, staring at my phone screen, which was as blank as my future.

“Buy a Portuguese translator?” she offered.

“I don’t know which one to get, they’re all in Portuguese.” I squinted at the signs around me, which looked like alphabet soup after a particularly rowdy party.

“Ray, quit being so negative about everything,” she laughed, sounding like the world’s most cheerful weather forecast. “You sound like the world is going to collapse on you.”

“That would be nice,” I muttered, wiping my forehead only to discover my hand was wetter than my face.

“What do you plan to do while you are there?” Windy asked, her curiosity as relentless as the humidity.

“Check into my room and play drinking games ‘till I pass out,” I replied, with the conviction of a man who had seen the bottom of too many coffee mugs.

“You should go see a soccer game!” she said, as if this was the obvious solution to existential dread.

“Not soccer season,” I replied, watching another cab whiz by, the driver barely glancing at me. I was starting to feel like a ghost with luggage.

“Oh, come on Ray, lighten up, hun,” Windy insisted, her positivity bordering on supernatural.

“Go to the ocean,” she suggested.

“And get attacked by a shark?” I thumbed another cab and again it drove past. I stood there in crap-ass humidity with five bags and feeling like a prune again. No matter how many times I wiped my face it was still wet.

“Don’t you watch Shark Week? People from Minnesota must look like fresh, ripe carp to a shark,” Windy teased.

“You watch too much TV, Raymond,” she sighed, probably rolling her eyes in Tennessee.

“Hang out at the pool and lay in the sun. You’re in Brazil!” she said, as if this was a universally accepted cure for all woes.

“Rather be hanging out at White Bear Lake with the mosquitos and catching the itch,” I replied. At least the mosquitos back home had the decency to bite and run.

“Oh my Lord,” Windy said, her patience finally showing signs of wear. “Anyways, how was the flight?”

“I’m not sure, I passed out as long as possible,” I admitted. The inside of my eyelids was the best part of the trip.

At that moment, a young, dark-skinned man pulled up alongside the curb on a beat-up old blue moped. The driver was wearing an old German combat helmet with mud goggles, and a large sidecar bounced along beside him. I stared, wondering if I’d accidentally wandered onto a movie set.

“Precisa de um táxi?” the man said, smiling with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for lottery winners.

I looked at him, not knowing how to answer, or if that was even a question. The helmet looked like it had survived three wars and a disco party.

“Windy, I’ll call ya back when I get to the hotel,” I said abruptly, realizing she had probably already hung up or I’d lost connection. Imagine that.

“You speak’a’de English?” I asked, stuffing my phone back in a cargo pocket. The humidity made the fabric stick to my leg like duct tape.

The man smiled. “Sure, boss! I can speak any language you want.” His grin was so wide I wondered if he’d borrowed it from a cartoon.

“Can I help you?” I asked, eyeing the poor excuse of a motorized vehicle.

“No, more like, can I help YOU?” he replied, pointing at the sidecar. “Need a taxi, sir?”

“Sure do,” I said. “Can you get me one?”

“You’re looking at one!” he declared, gesturing proudly at the moped, which looked like it had been assembled from leftover parts and hope.

“Where?” I asked, hoping he wasn’t seriously talking about that, and pointed at the sidecar.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, buddy,” he said, undeterred.

“I take you anywhere you want for twenty American dollars,” he offered.

“Brisa Barra Hotel?” I asked, hoping he wouldn’t take me to a back alley instead.

“Sure thing, no problem,” he replied.

“That thing safe, man?” I eyed the sidecar, which wobbled every time a breeze hit it.

“Sure, boss,” he smiled. I didn’t like the way he was smiling. It was the same smile John Wilkes Booth had just before he shot Lincoln.

“We tie your bags to bike. No problem.” He started wrapping bungee cords around my luggage like he was prepping for a NASA launch.

Why not? I reluctantly accepted, handing the man a twenty as he got off the moped, if you want to call it that. I watched him tie down my bags to the moped. This rickety thing looked like a World War II Sheridan tank when he finished. Probably a good thing considering I had a sinking feeling this ride was going to be like bumper bowling.

I squeezed myself into the sidecar. The seat was hard, the metal cold and unforgiving against my thighs.

“You sure this is safe?” I asked, my voice muffled by the helmet.

“No problem, boss,” he said, handing me a pink bicycle helmet with a purple mohawk.

I looked at the helmet, then looked at the man. “Really?”

“Protect your brain, boss,” he grinned.

I pulled on the helmet and strapped it under my chin. My chin rode up to my nose. This was a kids bike helmet, not made for an adult with an egg-shaped head. I couldn’t move my lips and had to breathe out of my nose.

“Here,” the man said, handing me a pair of old 1940 mud goggles. “Put those on so no bugs.”

“Great, I forgot about all that. Bugs,” I mumbled softly. If I ever found a way home after a month I’d go back to Minnesota with the Zika virus from a finger-size mosquito going up my nose. Imagine that.

Off we went, weaving in and out of the Rio traffic like a pinball. With every turn I felt the sidecar come off the road. Suddenly I had images of playing TopGun in the arcade when I was a teenager except if this thing hit a car or wall there was no CONTINUE button. This guy drives like a mad man.

After about five minutes I couldn’t feel my fingers from gripping the sides of the car. After about ten minutes I could no longer feel my arms. I couldn’t move my mouth to scream. The goggles, however, were so foggy from age I wouldn’t be able to see the wall or car if we hit. I had no sense of time, only terror.

All I know is that we made it to the hotel alive. It took me a few minutes to pry my fingers out of the metal and when I removed my helmet it popped off like a carbonated soda top. My face was permanently squished.

My driver helped me take my bags onto the curb of the hotel and spoke to a bellhop in Portuguese. As the bellhop hauled off my bags the driver shook my hand with a smile from ear to ear.

“You have good time in Brazil, boss,” he said.

I thanked him for what it was worth and stood there on the curb as he pulled away in a cloud of oily smoke.

I survived my first ride in Brazil. The only thing to go right in my mind the past two days was checking in. It was relatively simple considering all the reservation stuff had been done before I arrived. Everyone on the hotel staff that I came in contact with seemed to speak pretty good English.

The walk to my room was a welcome one and my room was bigger than my house back in Minnesota. Finally.

I didn’t even bother to unpack. I took one look at the California Queen and flopped down face-first, sprawled out like a snow angel. I told myself I was going to remain this way for a month.

Brazil?

I sighed in exhaustion. I was passed out in seconds.