

PROLOGUE

CALIFORNIA LEAVING

ONE

LOS ANGELES

THE WORK VAN WAS a new Mercedes, white and high roofed, with the bloodred words **TURNKEY LOCKSMITH** hand-painted on its side.

At a little before 7 a.m., it was winding through the Hollywood Hills northwest of LA, the steady drone of its diesel engine briefly rising in pitch as it turned onto the long climb of Kirkwood Drive in Laurel Canyon. Two hundred feet below the intersection of Kirkwood and Oak, the van coasted to a crackling stop on the gravel shoulder of the secluded road and shut off its engine. A minute passed, then two. No one got out.

As the bald Hispanic driver flipped down the visor to get the sun out of his eyes, he spotted a mule deer nosing out through the steep hillside's thick underbrush across the street.

Go for a lung shot, he thought as he imagined getting a

bead on it with the new compound hunting bow his girlfriend had gotten him for his birthday. *Track the blood trail down between the infinity pools and twenty-person funkadelic hot tubs before lashing it to the van's front grille. See how that would go down with George Clooney and k. d. lang and the rest of the Laurel Canyon faithful.*

He was feigning a bow draw when the elegant deer suddenly noticed him and bolted. The driver sighed, leaned slightly to his right, and depressed the intercom button under the drink holder.

"How's this? Line of sight OK?" he said.

"Yes. Maintain here until the hand-off, then head for position two," intercommed back the sharp-featured, copper-haired woman sitting directly behind the driver in the sealed-off back of the high-tech surveillance van.

There was a dull mechanical hum as the woman flicked the joystick for the high-definition video camera concealed in the van's roof. On the console's flat screen in front of her, an off-white stucco bungalow a hundred and fifty feet up the canyon slowly came into view.

She panned the camera over the bungalow's short, steep driveway of bishop's hat paver stones, the broken terracotta roof tiles above its front door, the live oaks and lemon trees in its side yard. She'd been here several times before and knew the target house as well as her own at this point.

She was halfway through the tea-filled Tervis tumbler from her kit bag when a truck slowed in front of the target house. It was a new Ford Expedition SUV, glossy black with heavily tinted windows. After it reversed up the driveway almost butt-up against the garage, the

passenger-side door opened and out stepped a lanky middle-aged white man in a gray business suit. He adjusted his Oakley sport sunglasses for a moment before he reached into the open door and retrieved what appeared to be a military-issue M-16.

Then, up on the porch above him, the bungalow's front door opened and Detective Michael Bennett came out of the house.

The woman almost spilled the tea in her lap as she quickly panned the camera left and zoomed in on Bennett and the crowd of people coming out behind him. His kids were in cartoon-character pj's, their tan and striking blond nanny, Mary Catherine, in a bathrobe, drying her hands with a dish towel. One of the Bennett boys—was Trent his name? Yes, Trent—immediately started climbing out over the stair's cast-iron rail, until Mary Catherine pulled him back by his collar.

The cacophony of the family's calls and laughter rang in her earphone as she turned up the volume on the van's shotgun mike.

"Arrivederci," Bennett said playfully to his rambunctious family as he went down the stairs. *"Sayonara, auf Wiedersehen.* And, oh, yeah. Later, guys."

The woman in the van watched silently as Bennett smiled and crossed his eyes and stuck his tongue out at his family. He was pushing forty, but still tall and trim and handsome in his dark-blue suit. Biting at her lower lip, she didn't stop focusing until his dimples and brown eyes slid out of the bottom of the frame into the SUV.

As the Ford rocketed out into the street, the copper-haired woman had already put down the joystick and was

wheeling the captain's chair around toward the three men in bulky tactical gear sitting and sweating on the steel bench behind her.

If it hadn't been for the glistening snub-barreled Heckler & Koch machine guns in their laps, the large men could have been professional football players. Wide receivers in the huddle waiting for the quarterback to call the next play.

"To repeat one last time," she said calmly as the work van's engine suddenly roared to life and they lurched into the street. "Front door, side door, back door. When the doors pop, you will stay low until you are in position."

The poised woman quickly lifted her own submachine gun from the foam-lined hard case at her feet. Easily and expertly, she worked the H&K MP7's action, slamming the first HK 4.6x30mm cartridge into the gun's chamber with a loud snap.

"This isn't a drill, gentlemen," she said, looking up at the Bennett safe house growing rapidly now on the flat screen.

"Welcome to life and death."

TWO

“SO-OO,” I SUDDENLY CALLED out into the SUV’s dead silence after five minutes of zigzagging up and down and hither and yon over the roller-coaster roads of the Hollywood Hills. “Anybody read any good books lately?”

I smiled encouragingly at each of the four large gentlemen sitting around me. But try as I might, I couldn’t get the conversational ball rolling. Not one of the armed-to-the-teeth business-attired behemoths I was riding with smiled back or even said a word. I thought briefly about trying to start up a hearty round of “Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall” to break the ice, but then I finally dropped my grin and shrugged.

“Yeah, me neither,” I mumbled as I turned back to the bulletproof window. “Exactly. Who reads?”

I guess I couldn’t really blame the fellas for ignoring me. My US Marshal buddies were busy at work, busy

keeping their eyes peeled for things like snipers and machine-gun ambushes and IEDs as we made our way from my Hollywood Hills safe house toward downtown Los Angeles.

I was being accompanied by the marshals so early this Monday morning because of a trial. The DEA had tried and convicted five of the recently deceased Manuel “the Sun God” Perrine’s Tepito cartel pals in a huge coke bust and were about to sentence the drug soldiers today.

I was involved because, in addition to the drug charges, the cartel death squad had already been convicted in absentia of the murder of a federal ADA in New York, a woman named Tara McLellan who had been a very close friend of mine.

I’d spoken to her still-devastated family and, death threats or no death threats, I was going to the courtroom today to speak for her at the victim impact statement.

On a happier note, after the trial, it was going to be checkout time for me and the Bennett clan from the Hotel California. The Golden State had been a nice place to visit, but we were finally going back home to the Big Apple where we belonged.

Myself, and especially my stomach, really couldn’t have been happier. The four corners of my carb-jonesing Irish heart—real pizza, real bagels, real rolls, and especially real Italian bread—were a mere day away.

As was our freedom from all this aggravating hiding and security, I thought, glancing at the marshals, who had been nothing but expert in their care of my family during our time in the witness protection program.

BURN

In twenty-four hours, we'd finally be home in New York with our lives back.

Now all I had to do was get through them.

"Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall," I hummed to myself as I stared out at the insanely blue California sky.

THREE

I WAS IN THE midst of a daydream where I was locked in overnight at an Arthur Avenue bakery with several tubs of Breakstone's lightly salted and a butter knife when we pulled off the 101 and approached the white stone pile of the Los Angeles Federal Court in downtown LA's Civic Center.

That was when my gluten-filled fantasy came to an end. Abruptly.

Forward through the windshield was a huge commotion. A large crowd of civilians was assembled in front of the august court building. They stood behind metal sidewalk barricades and a line of nervous-looking uniformed LA cops holding plastic shields and wearing full face-masked riot helmets.

"What the heck is this? OJ can't be on trial again, can he?" I said.

As we came closer, I could see that the crowd consisted of about a hundred fifty young people clustered on the sidewalk. More than a few in the crowd were wearing blue-and-white bandannas, bandit style, over their faces. There was even a muscular guy in a wife-beater wearing one of those spooky antiestablishment Guy Fawkes masks.

People began yelling and chanting and pumping their fists as someone struck a tom-tom over and over. Signs being shaken to the beat read,

NO JUSTICE! NO PEACE!
RACIST SEGREGATION!!!!
DOWN WITH THE KKKOPS!

Having become quite rudely acquainted with the LA gang culture in my time here searching for Perrine, I knew the blue-and-white do-rags meant MS-13. I also knew that MS-13 was an LA-based ally of the Tepito cartel scum I was about to help get sentenced.

It made me sit up straight, seeing fired-up gang members amassed in some sort of halfhearted political protest. I knew full well that some of these gangsters weren't exactly your peaceful protester types. In fact, the cartel affiliates didn't have qualm one when it came to incredibly bloody violence. Perrine's people had actually killed a federal judge in New York *at the courthouse in the middle of Perrine's trial!*

Remembering that, I felt my stomach drop as I watched shaved heads on the sidewalk turn toward our SUV. Some of the tattooed young bangers were elbowing each other, pointing our way as we slowed.

Oh, boy. Here we go. Though I hadn't advertised that I was going to make an appearance at the courthouse today, my face had been in the media before. There was the odd chance that one of these guys might recognize me and want to collect on the multimillion-dollar contract that was currently hovering over my head.

It can't be helped, I thought, bracing myself as we finally came to a halt by the court entrance on North Spring Street. Nothing—no gangbangers, no fake protest or anything else—was going to stop me from standing up for Tara today.

"You know, we still have some time, Mike," Big Joe Kelly, the US Marshal team captain, said beside me as the crowd shifted and approached the SUV. "We could go for some Starbucks or something. Come back when it looks a little calmer."

"Nah, Joe," I said with a casualness that was all show. "Let's just do this quick before I ruin the nice clean underwear I wore for the courthouse security strip search."

Doors opened and Joe and the other big marshals got out. Bob went over and spoke to one of the cops, who quickly came over with two other uniformed riot cops, and then my door opened.

Stepping out from the sealed vault of the bulletproof SUV into the loud whooshing buzz of the jeering crowd was like coming out of a pool. A pool I felt like diving back into when more and more people in the crowd started rushing over.

"I smell pork!" some girl kept saying as the muscle head in the Guy Fawkes mask suddenly rushed up and snapped a picture of me with his cell phone.

“Got your picture, pig!” he yelled from behind his mask. “I’m gonna find out who you are and where you live and pay you a visit! Pay your pig family a visit!”

I was doing pretty well up to that point, but at the mention of my family, I lost my composure a little. In fact, I lunged at the stupid son of a bitch. Unfortunately, Joe stiff-armed him away before I could get my hands around his throat.

Then the marshals half-led, half-shoved me forward in a tight phalanx toward a break in the metal barrier. I was just through it and had set foot on the first marble step when it happened.

Pop-pop-pop-pop!

A string of explosions suddenly ripped the air all around us, and Bob was turning and shoving me back as the crowd churned.

In the mad rush, my ankle caught the edge of one of the metal barricades and the next thing I knew, I was knocked off my feet facedown on the cement sidewalk. Smelling gunpowder, I looked down at myself, my jacket and slacks, scanning for holes. Peeking up through a forest of legs, I saw some LAPD uniforms rush into the swaying, screaming crowd, throwing people out of the way. A K-9 unit German shepherd started barking to wake the dead, sending people running.

“It’s OK! It’s OK! It’s firecrackers!” came a loud, tinny voice out of Bob’s radio. “No gun! I repeat, no gun! Some ass in the crowd just tossed a pack of lit firecrackers.”

The crowd started laughing their collective faces off. Sarcastic clapping began and about fifty people gave me

the finger as Bob helped me to my feet. Unbelievable. And they called this the *Civic Center*?

“You OK, Mike?” Bob yelled, grabbing my arm.

“Well, about that clean underwear,” I said as I peeled myself off the concrete.

FOUR

THE WITNESS WAITING ROOM adjacent to the second-floor federal courtroom where I was going to give my statement was a happy surprise after the fireworks show and my unexpected sidewalk rugby match. It had leather furniture and piped-in slow-dance Muzak and a rack of magazines next to the coffee machine.

For twenty minutes, I sat in it alone, humming to Michael Bolton as Bob and his guys stood vigilantly in the hallway outside the locked door. The little stunt downstairs had fired them up beyond belief. Even with the tight courthouse security, they weren't taking any chances.

I'd just finished pouring myself a second cup of French vanilla coffee (which I probably didn't need, considering my already frazzled nerves) when the door unlocked and a middle-aged blond court officer poked her friendly face inside and said it was time.

All eyes were on me as I followed the officer's blond ponytail into the bleached-wood-paneled courtroom. The line of orange-jumpsuited convicts sitting at the two defendants' tables peered at me curiously with "haven't I seen you someplace before" expressions as I made my way to a podium set up beside the witness box.

Alejandro Soto, the highest-ranking of the Tepito cartel members in attendance, seemed especially curious from where he sat closest to the witness box. I recognized his gaunt, ugly features from the video of the Bronx motel where he had brought my friend Tara to rape and kill her.

I stared directly at Soto as the court clerk asked me to state my name for the record.

"My name is Bennett," I said, smiling at Soto. "*Detective Michael Bennett.*"

"Bennett!" Soto yelled as he stood and started banging his shackled wrists on the table. "What is this? What is this?"

No wonder he was shocked. His organization was out to get me and suddenly, presto, here I was. *Be careful what you wish for*; I thought as two court officers shoved the skinny middle-aged scumbag back down into his seat.

The violent crack of Judge Kenneth Barnett's gavel at the commotion was a little painful in the low-ceilinged courtroom. Our side could set off some firecrackers, too, apparently. Tall and wide, Barnett had the build of a football player, bright-blue eyes, and a shock of gray hair slicked straight back.

"Detective Bennett," he said as I was about to take my prepared statement from my jacket pocket. "Before you begin, I would just like to gently remind you that the vic-

tim impact statement is not an occasion for you to address the defendants directly. It is a way for me, the sentencing judge, to understand what impact the crimes in this case have had on you and society and thereby determine what appropriate punishment to mete out to these convicted men. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly, Your Honor,” I said.

Especially the punishment part, I thought, glancing at Soto again.

I took my written statement out of my pocket and flattened it against the podium as I brought the microphone closer to my mouth.

FIVE

“MY NAME IS MICHAEL BENNETT,” I said. “I am a twenty-year veteran of the NYPD, the last nine working as a first-grade detective. Tara McLellan, who these men have been convicted of killing, was a colleague of mine and a very close family friend. I was asked to come here today by her devastated family in order to address the court.”

Someone in the crowded courtroom coughed in the silence as I paused to take a deep breath.

“Tara was an extremely beautiful and bright young woman who loved life more than almost anyone I’ve ever met,” I started.

But as I said those words, I did what I’d sworn I would not. I locked up, choked up as I pictured her. Her raven-black hair and bright-blue eyes. Her smile. A tear rolled off my cheek and landed on the page with a tiny splat. I

clenched my jaw as I wiped my face and then, with an out-rush of breath, forced myself to continue.

“Tara loved gardening at her small house in Westchester, loved to travel. Her numerous nieces and nephews looked forward to every birthday for the moment when Aunt Tara would arrive with the ridiculously elaborate character cakes she would bake them, charting the landmarks of their childhood from Elmo to Justin Bieber with food coloring and frosting and love.”

I took another breath in the now-dead silence.

“But what she loved most of all in this world was delivering justice as an assistant United States attorney of the Southern District of New York. Tara stood in courtrooms just like this one. Stood before the worst that humanity has to offer—killers and mobsters and con men. She stood before these predators of the innocent, looked them in the eye, and with a conviction and courage few will ever know, she said simply, ‘No. You will not get away with what you have done. You will not get away with the pain you have inflicted.’”

“Tara’s loss in that dim Bronx motel where she was inhumanly violated before being beheaded isn’t felt just by her grieving parents, Camille and James, or her two sisters, Annette and Jeanie. Nor just by all her nephews and nieces and cousins and friends.

“No, Judge Barnett. Tara’s loss is your loss as well. It is everyone’s loss. There are very few people on this planet who never back down from evil. Tara was one of them. The light of this world has been dimmed without Tara McLellan in it anymore. Thank you.”

I’d folded my paper and was about to leave, when Judge Barnett motioned me to stay.

“Detective Bennett, wait,” he said. “Thank you so much for those words. I myself had gleaned most of your impression of Ms. McLellan from these proceedings, but to hear you put the tragedy of her loss in so personal and poignant a way has helped clarify this court’s decision.”

He swiveled to the seated defendants.

“Will the convicted please rise.

“Alejandro Soto?” Judge Barnett said.

Soto’s defense lawyer tugged his sleeve.

“What?” Soto said, staring at his ankle shackles.

“This court and the federal government, representing the people of these United States of America, hereby sentence you to die by means of lethal injection.”

Judge Barnett cracked the gavel again at the audible gasp that rose in the courtroom.

“Tomás Maduro,” the judge said, turning immediately toward the next defendant. “This court and the federal government, representing the people of these United States of America, hereby sentence you, too, to die by means of lethal injection.”

And down the line Judge Barnett went, handing out death sentences. I couldn’t believe it. It was only under the rarest of circumstances when the federal courts handed out capital punishment. Only sixty-nine people had been sentenced with it since 1988, and only three, including the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, had actually been executed.

Now, not one, not two, but all five of these vicious, evil men were going to get the needle. The cartels meted out death like it was water, and apparently, Judge Barnett wasn’t going to take it anymore.

BURN

That was when I did it. What the judge had asked me not to.

I turned to the baffled, raging defendants and addressed them directly. As the drug-dealing murderers were surrounded by court officers, I gave each one a smile along with a happy little wave good-bye.

SIX

I WAS BACK IN the hallway outside the still-turbulent courtroom when Joe and the rest of my US Marshal bodyguards rushed over.

“Looks like the stooges outside on the plaza are going wild after the verdict, Mike,” Big Joe said with concern. “I already radioed down to Larry Burns. We’re going to take you out back through the prisoner paddock.”

“Sounds good, Joe,” I said, walking past him toward the corner of the hallway. “Just let me hit the boys’ room and I’ll be right with you.”

Actually, I didn’t need to use the restroom. I was still massively keyed up after sitting across from Tara’s killers and the last thing I needed was to get back into the coffin of the SUV, no matter how safe it was.

That was why I decided to do what I did next. It was

time to cut the apron strings and leave the prisoner entrances to the prisoners from here on out.

I passed right by the bathroom and found the stairwell door and used it and headed down.

Joe was right, I saw immediately when I approached the main entrance in the downstairs lobby. The quote unquote protesters seemed spitting mad where they milled around behind the aluminum sidewalk barricades at the bottom of the courthouse steps. I was just in time to see the action begin. One of the gangbangers knocked one of the barricades over and then there were several loud bangs as the LA riot cops broke out the tear gas. The crowd scattered like leaves on the business end of an air rake, running back out into North Spring Street and the corporate plaza on its opposite side.

“Hey, buddy, you know there’s a side entrance you can use,” one of the court officers manning the metal detectors said to me as I picked up my gun and headed for the front door. “Looks a little hairy out there.”

“That’s OK, friend,” I said, winking as I flashed my shield. “I’m a barber.”

Coming down the steps, I smiled as the LA cops pushed the punks back farther into the corporate park. You could see from the signs lying in the gutter that the protest was pretty much over. The crowd was already breaking up into little groups and going home.

Evildoers had been brought to justice upstairs, and now order had been restored down here. Score one for the good guys. It looked like we’d won. Well, today’s battle, at least.

I walked up Temple Street behind the courthouse. It

really was a nice day, temperate, not a hint of a breeze, the intense California light bright and unmoving on the bleached-looking white buildings. My native New Yorker's impression of LA was that it was beautiful, even perfect in some ways, yet slightly off-putting, like an austere, alluring blonde wearing a slightly strange expression that makes you suddenly wonder if maybe she might be completely out of her mind.

My cell phone went off as I made the corner. It was my US Marshal buddy Joe Kelly. I was about to pick it up, but then I decided to text him back instead.

I'm fine, Joe. I decided I'm going to get back home on my own. If I need you I'll call.

SEVEN

I FLAGGED DOWN A gypsy cab and headed home.

The whole way back up the 101 to Laurel Canyon, I listened to the Mexican driver behind the wheel play a type of music called *narcocorrido*. Having become familiar with it in my recent investigations into the cartels, I knew the traditional-sounding Mexican country music had gangster-rap-style lyrics about moving dope and taking out your enemies with AK-47s.

Though it had a nice, sad sort of rhythm, considering the fact that the story of my life had recently pretty much become a *narcocorrido*, I didn't think I'd be adding it to my iPod playlist anytime soon.

Finally standing in the street out in front of the safe house thirty minutes later, paying the driver, I heard a sudden shriek of rubber. Just south down the curving

slope of Kirkwood, I stood and watched as a white Euro-style work van fishtailed off the shoulder and barreled straight toward me.

No, was my weary thought as I watched it come. This couldn't be happening. The van shrieked again as it came around the closest curve and hit its brakes.

Forgetting the cabdriver, I palmed the stippled grip of my Glock and drew as I hit the driveway, ducked my head, and ran up the steps of the house two at a time.

"Mary Catherine! Seamus!" I yelled as I pounded on the screen door with the pistol barrel.

My shocked-looking nanny, Mary Catherine, had just opened the front door when I heard the rattling metal roll of the van door opening at the bottom of the stairs.

"Mike, Mike! It's OK! Stand down! It's OK. It's me!" came a yell.

I turned. Down the stairs, a large bald guy with a gun was standing over my taxi driver, now lying facedown on the street. Also standing now in the open side doors of the white van was a woman. A very pretty woman in blue fatigues with copper-colored hair.

"Agent Parker. Long time no see. Are you out of your mind?" I screamed.

I should have known, I thought. It was a friend of mine. Emily Parker, special agent of the FBI. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. Emily and I had taken down Perrine together less than a month before, and I knew she was still working in LA. I just didn't know *I* was her work.

I racked my weapon to make it safe as I came back down the stairs.

“I mean, Emily, you of all people should understand how paranoid I am these days about things like, I don’t know, mysterious vans racing up on me. Is this some kind of practical joke? Why didn’t you tell me you and the FBI were watching my house?”

“It was just a precaution for your court appearance today,” she said as three drab-fatigue-clad FBI agents with large guns suddenly emerged from the foliage along the side of our house.

“Additional security was ordered,” she said. “I kept it low key because you guys have been through enough. I didn’t want to get you upset.”

“In that case, I guess I’m not having a heart attack,” I said.

“Listen, you should be the last one to talk about jokes, Mike,” Emily said. “You know how many people are looking for you? Ditching the marshals after that verdict was beyond childish. We thought the bad guys got you. We’ve been worried sick.”

“Ditched? I texted Joe. Besides, I’m a grown man, Parker,” I said. “A grown man who needed some fresh air.”

“During a gang riot?”

I shrugged.

“Taking my life back needs to start somewhere. I’m tired, Emily, of the death threats, all the worrying. I came out here because of Perrine, and now he’s in the ground, and I’m done hiding. You and I both know the cartels are too busy killing each other for Perrine’s turf to bother coming after me. Perrine was a monster. Monsters don’t get avenged, last time I checked. Judge Barnett has seen to

that. What was it that BP oil spill CEO guy said? ‘I want my life back.’”

I walked over and knelt down and finally paid my cab-driver, still facedown on the asphalt.

“What’s the quote, Emily? ‘Those who would sacrifice freedom for security deserve neither and will lose both?’”

“What’s that other quote about a well-balanced Irishman?” Emily said, hopping from the van. “‘They have a chip on both shoulders?’”

Then she surprised me for the second time in two minutes. She walked up and wrapped her arms around me and pressed her face hard against my neck.

“I going to miss you, Mike . . . working with you. Just working. Don’t get the wrong idea,” she whispered in my ear.

“Good-bye yourself, Parker. It was fun strictly and platonically working with you as well,” I whispered back as she broke it up.

She hopped back into the fed van with the rest of the agents. As they pulled away, I looked up to see Mary Catherine standing at the top of the stairs by the iron railing of the porch.

I immediately gave her my brightest smile. The on-again, off-again relationship I had with Mary Catherine had most definitely become on-again during our close-quarters California exile. She’d actually had to kill a cartel hit woman to protect the kids. We’d talked about it, cried about it. I don’t think I’d ever been closer to this incredible young woman. Or more attracted.

I thought her dander might be up a little at seeing me share a hug with Parker, who I’d once or twice almost had

a romantic relationship with, but to my happy surprise, Mary Catherine's slim hand slid easily into mine as I got to the top of the stairs.

"Time to go home, Detective Bennett," Mary Catherine said in her musical brogue as she suddenly broke my grip and playfully pushed me toward the door.

EIGHT

IT SEEMED LIKE EVERYBODY in LA had decided to come to see us off at LAX that evening.

There were people just about everywhere, packing the garish fluorescent-lit corridors, riding in humming golf carts, escalating up and down escalators, floating along on those George Jetson moving sidewalk thingies. Undeterred, our Bennett troupe trekked onward—under, over, and around the billboards and luggage carts and mobs of distressed-looking travelers.

I was a little distressed myself as I watched a tatted-up young street hoodlum in a flat-brim Dodgers cap saunter up from the opposite direction. I know it's not polite to stare, but I did so anyway, keeping my eyes on the illustrated young gentleman's hands until he was well past us.

Even in the airport on the opposite side of the TSA security checkpoint, I guess I still wasn't completely over my

fear of our being attacked by some gang fools looking to get in good with the cartels.

We kept rolling. Somewhere ahead in the crowd, Mary Catherine was on point, trying to get us to Terminal 4 and our American Airlines flight home. Seamus and I were taking up the rear to keep track of the laggards.

Public Lollygaggers One and Two, respectively, were Eddie and Trent, who, when they weren't screaming and chasing each other around the banks of pleather seats, wanted to stop to get something from every Wendy's and Starbucks and gimcrack souvenir stand we passed.

I knew the box of Mike and Ike movie candy I'd let them purchase at the gas station on the van ride over would come back to haunt me.

"Dad, can we get Lakers caps?" Trent said.

"No," I said.

"Dad, can we at least get a Kobe bobblehead?" said Eddie.

"No, there are enough bobbleheads in the Bennett family, thank you. I'm talking to two of them right now, in fact."

"Dad, can we at the very least use the bathroom?" Trent cried.

"No, no, no," I said.

"Well, actually, that might be a good idea," Seamus said, smiling sheepishly beside me.

"Lollygagger Number Three, I presume," I said, rolling my eyes.

I pinched two fingers together and put them in my mouth and whistled up ahead to halt our rolling army.

"Pit stop!" I yelled.

I stayed by the massive mound of our carry-ons as the

sexes split up into the restrooms. As I nervously checked and rechecked the time on my phone, I heard some excited yelling that at first I thought might be a flash mob or something. Then I saw some teenage Asian guy walk by on the concourse with an entourage, followed by a gaggle of screaming girls trying to snap cell phone pictures of him.

Was it the Chinese Justin Bieber? I wondered with a shrug. I had no clue. This LA Asian stuff was way beyond my Bronx Irish Catholic sense and sensibilities. The good news was I wouldn't have to worry about all things Hollywood once we made our flight.

That is, *if* we made our flight, I thought, frowning at my phone again. American Airlines had bent over backward to accommodate all thirteen of us on the red-eye on short notice. If we missed our plane, I feared we'd never escape from LA.

I took a quick head count as my family spilled back out onto the concourse.

Eleven, twelve, and lucky number thirteen.

"OK, boys and girls and um . . . priests, is everybody, um, unhydrated now? Excellent. OK, let's move, people. Forward march."

We were all on the plane and somewhere in the night sky, probably over Colorado, an hour and a half later when I finally was able to calm down. Socky, our now-tranquilized cat, was purring peacefully in his travel box between my feet. Mary Catherine, who probably could have used a tranquilizer or two herself after getting everyone ready for our coast-to-coast trip, was sleeping beside me in the window seat.

It felt good when she shifted toward the aisle and rested her head on my shoulder. It felt *very* good there, just right, in fact. We'd had our ups and downs, but it felt like we were settling in now, finally. At least I hoped so.

Just as I closed my weary eyes and was about to follow Mary Catherine's lead, we hit the turbulence. The two-footed kind.

As if on cue, I heard some commotion behind me. There was a sweet-voiced yell of "No!" followed by the distinctive loud and wet sound of a child tossing his or her cookies. The retching sound fired three times in quick succession, and then Fiona and Bridget were standing in the aisle beside me.

"Daddy, Bridget threw up in the seat pouch! Bridget threw up all over the magazines!" Fiona called out excitedly.

I sat up and hugged the poor kid as Mary Catherine shot awake and quickly thrust some napkins into my hand.

From somewhere up ahead in the wall-to-wall-crowded cabin, I heard a male voice moan, "Oh, the stench! Oh, for the love of Pete!"

My sentiments exactly, fella, I thought as I sopped up the mess with one hand and rapidly hit the button for the flight attendant with the other.

For the love of Peter and Paul and the rest of the apostles, may we get back to New York in one piece, I prayed.