

Unplugged

GORDON KORMAN

Cover art by David Miles

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JETT BARANOV

Matt says I could see the majestic beauty of the American Southeast if I'd bother to glance out the window.

So I glance. "Clouds," I report. "Whoop-de-do."

I've got all the majestic beauty I need right here. I've got a private plane, cruising at 28,000 feet. I've got two flight attendants who bring me snacks and sodas every time they think I look hungry or thirsty. I've got superfast internet, even though we're flying

way above any cell network. My phone connects to a system of satellites, thanks to a tiny chip designed by Fuego, the tech company started by my father.

Right now, the screen shows the selfie I just took, slightly enhanced using Fuego's state-of-the-art editing software. I add a caption—*Jett on a jet*. If that's not meme-worthy, I don't know what is. With a swipe, I upload it to the Fuego app.

Matt rolls his eyes when the image appears on his screen. He follows all my social media, but he's not a buddy. *Warden* might be a better word—or at least *babysitter*. My father—Matt's boss—put him in charge of keeping me out of trouble. That might be the hardest job in Silicon Valley right now. Quantum computing is patty-cake compared with trying to make me do something I don't want to. That's kind of a point of pride with me.

“Jett on a jet?” he challenges. “Really? Sixty grand a year for the finest schools and that's the best you can come up with?”

“It's insightful commentary on my life,” I insist. “Dad loves this plane more than he loves me. He even named me after it.”

“And the extra *T* stands for *trouble*,” Matt adds, quoting my father's often-repeated comment. Yes,

the famous Vladimir Baranov, billionaire founder of Fuego, cracks dumb dad jokes like all the other fathers.

The plane's official name is the *Del Fuego*. Our forty-acre compound in Silicon Valley is known as Casa del Fuego. You get the picture. I've named my toilet the Fuego Bowl. Back in December, I set off a bunch of cherry bombs in it to see if I could trigger the Fuego Detector in the hall. Verdict: success. I also found out that our whole house is outfitted with emergency sprinklers. Vlad was pretty ticked off about that. How was I supposed to know? My family's all about Fuego, not Agua.

Come to think of it, that was just about when Matt began spending a lot more time in the company of his boss's son. Matt Louganis started out as a high-flying young programmer at Fuego. Lately, though, his job seems to be keeper.

I feel a little bad about that. Matt signed on with Fuego to change the world, not to ride with me in the limo to school to make sure I actually get there. Or to be an extra chaperone at the Halloween dance to prevent a repeat of the *last* Halloween dance, when I hired a local motorcycle gang to ride their Harleys into the gym. There were a lot of tall eighth graders last year, so it took a couple of minutes for the teachers to realize

that the newcomers weren't actually students.

Hey, I'm just having fun. Sometimes, you have to work at it. It's harder than it looks, you know. I have a saying: "Fertilizer, meet fan . . ." I originally had another word for the first part, but it already got me kicked out of my private school—my third in three years, by the way. My mother flew all the way back from Ulaanbaatar to straighten things out—starting with me.

Vlad says what I really need is to find some friends. That's also harder than it looks. People expect me to be a stuck-up rich kid, so they stay away. Whatever. I've gotten pretty good at lone-wolfing it. Too good, some people think. *Bay Area Weekly* just named me Silicon Valley's Number One Spoiled Brat. Remember, we're talking about California. Think of all the other spoiled brats I had to beat out for that title. Vlad always says I should aim for the best.

Besides, I've always got Matt. He's twenty-seven, but he still counts as a friend. I mean, I think he'd still hang out with me even if his boss didn't tell him to. Yeah, right. I'm sure he can think of a million things he'd rather do.

The pilot makes an announcement to fasten our seat belts and turn off all electronics.

As usual, I ignore both messages.

Matt's exasperated. "Your name may be Baranov, but your head can split open the same as anybody else's."

So I sigh and fasten my seat belt, but I pull a blanket over my lap so Matt won't see.

When we're on the tarmac and they open the door to let us out, the blast of heat and humidity nearly knocks me back into the galley.

"What is this place—the Amazon jungle?"

Matt grins right in my face. "Welcome to Arkansas."

"No, seriously," I tell him.

He's solemn. "This is Little Rock, Arkansas. We've still got a three-hour drive ahead of us from here."

"To where—the moon?"

He reaches back and pulls me down the stairs to the tarmac. "Listen, Jett. The sprinkler thing was bad enough. When the floors warped, your poor father had to get the replacement wood imported from special cedars in Lebanon."

"My science teacher says a cherry bomb has more than a gram of flash powder," I explain. "Sue me for being *curious*."

Matt's not done yet. "Was it curiosity that made you drive that go-kart off Fisherman's Wharf? Lucky for you I was able to kill the story before it went viral on Twitter. But when you pulled that little stunt with the drone—"

Well, you can't blame me for that. I was just trying to get a few aerial shots of Emma Loudermilk's pool party. The problem was that sitting between my house and hers is San Francisco Airport. Fertilizer, meet fan.

"That wasn't my fault," I defend myself. "How was I supposed to know the air force was going to scramble fighter planes to shoot down one little drone? Or that the pieces were going to break so many windshields in that parking lot?"

"Don't act so surprised," Matt tells me firmly, steering me toward the terminal building. "This isn't the first time your antics got you a little too much attention and you had to lie low for a while."

"Yeah," I agree. "But lying low is a couple of weeks on the Riviera or maybe Bali. Not Arizona."

"Arkansas," he corrects me.

"So who's going to know if the two of us get back on the plane, fuel up, and fly someplace decent? Remember that private surf island off Australia where everybody gets their own chef?"

He cuts me off. "Forget it, Jett. Your dad's right on top of this. The place we're going has a waiting list—he had to pull a lot of strings to get us in this summer."

"Waiting list, huh? I like the sound of that." In Silicon Valley, if you don't have to pull strings to get into

something, it probably isn't worth getting into. "What is it—some sick new resort? And they put it in Arkansas to scare away the uncool people?"

He smiles. "Something like that. Come on, the Range Rover's waiting for us."

I'm encouraged. But something about his cake-eating grin makes me uneasy. Especially when I see the car, which is splashed with mud and pockmarked in a dozen places. This isn't the kind of Range Rover from the rap songs. It's the kind you ship to Africa to drive over the elephant poop.

It's ten times hotter inside the car than outside it. The air-conditioning isn't broken; it just doesn't exist.

The driver is either named Buddy or wants us to consider him *our* buddy—I'm not sure which. He assures us we don't need air-conditioning. "A certain amount of sweating is good for you," he calls over the engine's roar. "It's part of the program—keeps your skin pores open. You're cooler in the long run."

"Program?" I ask Matt suspiciously.

He just shrugs.

The breeze feels like it's coming from a hair dryer set on fricassee. But after an hour on the road, I don't even care that I'm sweat-drenched from head to toe.