

Unplugged

GORDON KORMAN

Cover art by David Miles

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*For Alessandra,
Queen of the wellness retreat*

1

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.

“Where *are* we?” I hiss. “How much worse is this going to get?”

“We’re on our way,” he insists, “to the—uh—resort.” But he doesn’t look too happy either. Maybe the bumpy two-lane road is messing with his stomach. No resort I ever went to had an approach like this.

“Couldn’t we have gone by helicopter? Or float plane?”

He shakes his head. “This place is really remote.”

Tell me about it. We haven’t seen a solitary soul in twenty miles that didn’t have feathers or four legs. This resort has a waiting list? I’d hate to see the one nobody wants to go to.

Another hour goes by. The scenery doesn’t change. Standing by the side of the road, a deer looks at me as we pass by. I swear there’s pity in its eyes.

There are signs that talk about towns, but we never see any. By this time, I’m not just physically miserable and bored out of my mind; I’m also starving. I’d give a thousand preferred shares of Fuego stock for a bag of Doritos. The luxury of the Gulfstream feels like it happened in another lifetime—a way better one.

Finally, three hours in, we get there. I look around for the trappings of a vacation hot spot. Palm trees, towering waterslides, gleaming hotel buildings. Nothing. There’s a small sign by the main entrance:

THE OASIS OF MIND & BODY WELLNESS

I turn to Matt. “Wellness?”

“This is the place,” he confirms. “Your dad set the whole thing up.”

How do I even describe it? A lot of words come to mind, none of them *resort*. It’s decently large, surrounded by woods, with small neat cottages dotted all over the property. There are a few bigger buildings too, but none higher than a single storey. It isn’t a dump. Nothing is falling apart, and it’s all freshly painted and well maintained. It isn’t totally un-fun. There’s a pool at least—the kind any crummy motel would have. No waterslides or anything cool like that. There are people on bikes and, in the distance, kayaking and pedal boating on a lake. What can I say? It’s sort of okay, but it’s definitely not the kind of high-end destination where you get your own chef. My father picked this place? No way!

The driver takes us to the welcome centre so we can check in.

I tug on Matt’s arm. “I don’t get it. Why would Vlad send me clear across the country and hours into the

wilderness to a place that doesn't have anything half as good as the stuff at our own house?"

"Take it easy—"

"And what's this whole 'wellness' thing? I'm not sick!"

"We're all sick," comes a rich female voice, smooth as melted caramel, from behind the counter. "In fact, the moment we're born, we immediately begin dying."

Picture the most intimidating woman you've ever seen—like a supermodel on the body of one of those female wrestlers in WWE. The figure who stands up from her chair must be six foot four, yet she carries herself with a catlike ease and grace. She has huge pale grey eyes that are closer to silver. Her hair is almost silver too—what there is of it. It's close cropped—I swear it's shorter than mine. I'm so tempted to stare at her that I have to look away.

"Uh—hi," Matt says, clearly thrown. "I'm Matt Louganis and this is Jett Baranov. Checking in."

"I envy you," the lady informs us in that almost musical tone. "No part of the journey is ever quite so eye-opening as the first step. I'm Ivory Novis. I'm in charge of meditation here."

"Meditation?" I echo.

"This is the Oasis of Mind and Body Wellness. We heal the body through diet and exercise. The mind,

on the other hand, is a more complicated instrument. The valves of a trumpet can be oiled. Only meditation can tune the mind.”

Huh? “I’ve heard of math teachers and English teachers,” I tell her. “But meditation teachers? That’s a new one.”

“Here at the Oasis we say ‘pathfinder,’ not ‘teacher.’ I cannot plant information inside your head. I can merely show you the path to understanding.”

Every time Ivory Novis opens her mouth, a lot of serious weirdness comes out. I blurt, “You know that waiting list? Is it to get in, or get out?”

Ivory laughs and then holds out her hand. Matt moves to shake it, but that’s not what she has in mind.

“Your phones, gentlemen,” she tells us.

A great fear clutches at my heart. “What about them?”

“You have to turn them in,” Ivory explains like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s the one strict rule of the Oasis—no electronics. On the path to wellness, the only screen you need is the vast blank slate of your imagination.”

I’m psyched. Finally we come to the part where Matt tells this Wonder Woman on steroids where she can stick her Oasis. So it’s a blow when I see him hand over his beloved F-phone like it’s nothing.

“You *knew* about this?” I accuse him.

He nods grimly. “And so did your father.”

That’s when it dawns on me. “Vlad didn’t send me here to lie low. He sent me here for *revenge*! Just because he had to pay back the air force for scrambling those fighter planes.”

Matt shakes his head solemnly. “Your father loves you. He sent you here because you *need* this. Silicon Valley’s Number One Spoiled Brat—that looks cute in a magazine. But these stunts of yours are getting out of hand. What if a piece of that drone had gone through somebody’s skull instead of just their windshield? One of these days, you’re going to do something that your father can’t buy you out of. He’s trying to save your life, Jett. And so am I.” And he plucks my phone out of my pocket and hands it to Ms. Meditation.

I fold my arms across my chest. “I’m not staying.”

In answer, he reaches into my bag and pulls out my F-pad and my laptop and surrenders those too. Then he takes the smartwatch right off my wrist and tosses it across the counter.

“You’re fired,” I snarl.

He’s patient. “Remember Liam Reardon?”

A kid in my school. His dad owns, like, half of Google. “What about him?”

“He was a zombie. He never looked away from a screen long enough to make eye contact with a real human. He was hostile. Antisocial. He’d gone through every therapist in the Bay Area and half of the ones in LA. Then his parents sent him here.”

Ms. Meditation nods. “Liam. Wonderful boy. The Oasis made such a difference for him. As it will for you.” The silver eyes bore into me at high intensity until I have to study my sneakers to avoid the onslaught. “The coming weeks will be the turning point of your spiritual life.”

“I don’t have a spiritual life,” I reply stubbornly. “Some crazy lady stole it along with my phone.”

If Ivory is offended by that, she doesn’t let on. “Hostility is the byproduct of a mind out of balance,” she says understandingly.

“At least I have a mind,” I mumble under my breath.

“Don’t be rude.” Matt puts an arm around my shoulders in an attempt to calm me down. “Take it easy, kid. You’re not in California anymore.”

I shrug him off violently. “Yeah, really? What tipped you off? The swamp gas? The possum BO? The fact that we haven’t seen an In-N-Out Burger for two hundred miles?”

“You must be starving,” Ivory says smoothly. “I’ve

got some good news for you there. Early dinner is being served right now. You have to try our burgers. They're world renowned."

I struggle to get my whirling mind under control. If this was San Francisco, I'd tell everybody to stick it and Uber home. But I don't know if Uber comes way out to the sticks. And even if they do, I no longer have a phone to order one on. It goes without saying that I'm not spending the next six weeks of my life in this freak-show wellness camp. But for right now, I accept the fact that I'm stuck. The Range Rover belongs to the Oasis, not me, so there's no way back to Little Rock and the Gulfstream if Ms. Meditation doesn't approve. For all I know, the plane isn't there anymore. Vlad probably had them fly it back to California, so he can go all over the place. I can tell you where he *won't* go, that's for sure. To a wellness oasis.

First thing tomorrow, I'm out of here if I have to walk. But right now, if I don't get some food, I'm going to face-plant in the pine needles. I might as well check out these famous burgers Ivory's hyping.

She points through the double doors. "The dining hall is the larger building at the centre of the cluster of cottages. Leave your bags—I'll have them brought to your cottage. Bon appétit. And be whole."

“*Hole?*” What now?

“Whole,” she amends, emphasizing the *wh* sound. “As in *entire*. Your mind, body, and spirit. Be your whole self.”

Like I could be anybody else. The only *hole* I want is a place to crawl into until this nightmare is over.

So Matt and I go to the dining hall. The sign over the entrance reads NOURISHMENT FOR THE BODY. There’s another building close by with a NOURISHMENT FOR THE SOUL sign. That must be where Ivory and her meditation hang out. I’m definitely history before anybody makes me go there.

The dining hall is nicer than a school cafeteria, but it’s basically a school cafeteria. They give you a tray; you pick out what you want; you go find a seat at one of the long communal tables. The private chefs from the good resort would probably drop dead if they had to work here.

They won’t let me take two burgers. The server explains—like she’s talking to a five-year-old—that if I’m still hungry after I finish the first one, I can come back for seconds.

“Oh, I’ll be hungry enough,” I assure her. I’m so hungry I can barely focus on what a downer it is to be here.

Because it’s still early, there are only a few diners scattered around the big room. I wonder how long it took

them to get to the top of the waiting list. No offence, but I have zero respect for anybody who comes here on purpose instead of being tricked into it by their dad.

Matt waves me over to a spot by a big picture window. It has a view of the lake, which I can now see is a side pool of a long river.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” he offers.

I don’t answer. On an empty stomach, I can’t muster enough sarcasm to come up with the vicious reply he deserves.

I plop myself in the chair, grab my burger with both hands, take a gigantic bite . . .

. . . and spit it out so hard that it decorates the picture window.

“That’s not a burger!” I choke.

“Sure it is,” Matt replies airily. “A veggie burger.”

“A *what?*”

“The Oasis is one hundred percent vegetarian,” he informs me like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

I reach for my pocket, determined to call Vlad and demand to be taken out of this backwoods torture chamber or else.

That’s when I remember: my phone and all my electronics are locked away at the welcome centre.

All this wellness is going to kill me.