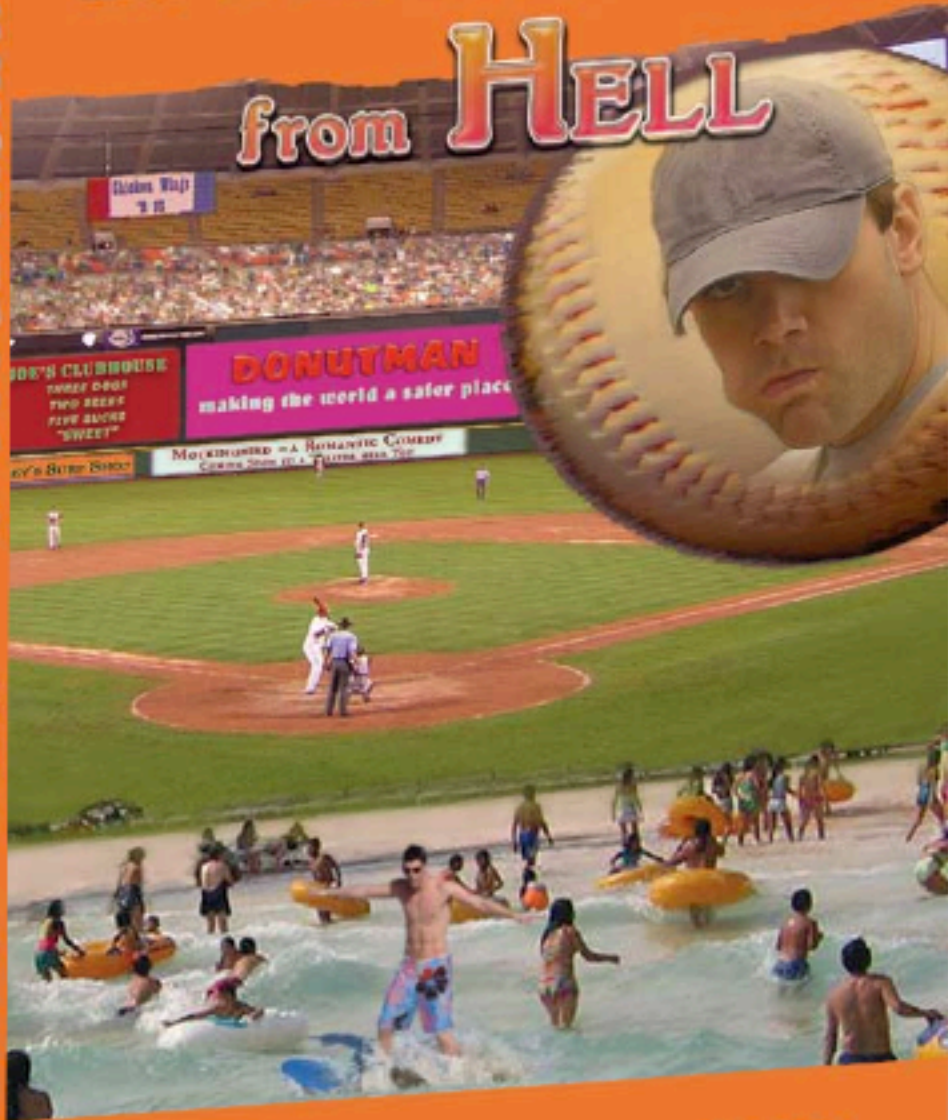


the **KNUCKLEBALL** from **HELL**
MICHAEL WAYNE

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**the Knuckleball
from Hell**

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iThink Books

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CHAPTER TEN

John Roland stood in the conference room adjoining his office, in front of a bank of microphones. On the other side of the microphones were members of the press, with the still and video cameras to the right to capture his movie-star profile. The purpose of the press conference was to introduce the new owner of the Mets, who was standing to the Commissioner's left. Members of the press gave him the once over, wondering who was this man dressed in a blazer, print shirt, jeans, sandals, with unkempt long hair and a gold earring in his left ear? Had the Commissioner sold the team to a gypsy? And whom was that motley crew standing behind him? One of them wore a turban, a number of them wore shorts and the woman was dressed like she was ready to go surfing.

The Commissioner himself was a bit perplexed by the crew of people who had come with Bill Tike. Tike said they were his advisers, and Roland let it go at that. Once everything was in place, the Commissioner addressed the crowd and gave some background information on Bill Tike, stressing his successful business career, his deep pockets and his commitment to returning the New York Mets to their glory days. Once he was done with the introductory comments, he turned the podium over to Bill.

The main thing the press wanted to know was what his plans for the Mets were. Bill said he would ask for patience from the public as he set about the monumental task of rebuilding a franchise that was in ruins. He would repair the stadium, or perhaps build another one, rebuild the minor league system and sign a few key free agents; all of this would be done with an eye on the long-term, to put together a successful franchise that New Yorkers could feel proud

of once again. Most importantly, Bill stressed, the fan base would have to be reestablished. Even if the team wasn't that good for the first few years, people should still want to come and see the Mets. In that regard, he planned to make an outing to Shea Stadium a fun and enjoyable experience. The last thing the media wanted to know was whom were the people standing behind the podium. Bill explained they were experts in the field and his closest advisers.

The Commissioner stepped to the podium and asked if there were any other questions, which was his cue that they were done. As the media contingent started packing up their gear, someone shouted out from the back of the room, "Yo Commissioner, we got a question." John Roland could tell the voices were coming from the back row but couldn't see the questioners until they stepped into the aisle. One was a black man and the other a white man. Both were dressed in uniforms of the New York City Transit Authority and looked vaguely familiar, but Roland couldn't place their faces.

"Yo Commissioner, we got a question," the black man said again, standing in the aisle in full view of the media.

"And sir, who are you?" Roland asked.

"My name is Jamal Abu-Mohammed," the black man said. "I was just here the other day. You remember?"

"And I'm Pete Levinsky," the white man said. "Me too."

The Commissioner looked at his watch. "I'm sorry gentlemen, but we've used up all our time today," the Commissioner said. "Please feel free to either talk to my assistant Mike Stephens," he said, pointing to Stephens, "or to write me a letter. As everyone knows, I read and answer all mail."

Before John Roland could take a step, Jamal yelled out, "Commissioner, we got a problem. Me and my buddy Pete here attended the Mets final game of the year and we won a trip to the Cayman Islands." Jamal held up their winning tickets and continued speaking. "These are our winning tickets Mr. Commissioner. We wanna know when we're going. I talked to your man the other day and he ain't done shit. I ain't gonna be dissed by nobody."

Pete chimed in. "Yeah we want to know when we're going."

"That's between you and the New York Mets organization," the Commissioner replied as he walked out of the room.

As members of the media filed out, Jamal and Pete hurried to the front of the room to confront the new Mets owner before he could dodge them and flee. They didn't want to make trouble, but they wanted justice. They walked right up to Bill Tike and were ready to give him a piece of their mind when Bill

caught them by surprise by saying, "You guys really got screwed by that Harry Bloom, didn't you."

"You're damn right," Jamal said.

"Damn right," Pete said.

"He screwed a lot of people, including all the Mets fans in the world," Bill said.

"Damn right," Jamal said.

"Yeah we've been going to games all year. They suck," Pete said.

"You guys must be diehard fans," Bill said.

"You could say that," Jamal said proudly.

"There aren't too many of you left," Bill said.

"I don't think there's any of us left," Pete said.

"What do you think we need to do to fix them?" Bill asked.

"Shit," Jamal said, "you really wanna know?"

"Absolutely," Bill said.

"Brother, how much time you got?" Jamal asked.

"Yeah how much time you got?" Pete repeated.

"I'm not going anywhere," Bill said.

"Damn," Jamal said, "then let's go sit down, get some food and I'll start telling you. And when I'm done you'll be in business brother."

"Right on dude," Bill said.

"None of that dude stuff, that's creepy," Jamal said.

"No problem," Bill said.

"Hey why should I help you? We've been screwed out of our trip," Jamal said.

"Tell you what," Bill said. "As soon as we're done talking, I'll drive you to the airport and book you a flight to the Caymans."

"Yeah but we ain't got no money on us," Jamal said.

"Yeah we ain't got no money on us," Pete said.

"Don't you worry about it. It's on me dude," Bill said.

Jamal and Pete's eyes lit up. "Damn!" Jamal exclaimed. "You're one righteous brother! Just don't use that dude shit."

"You got our vote!" Pete said.

"Man all this excitement is making me hungry," Jamal said, patting his stomach.

"Me too," Pete said.

"Ready Mr. Mets owner?" Jamal asked.

"It's Bill. Let's go," Bill said.

"What about your posse?" Jamal asked, pointing to Bill's advisers, who were still standing behind the podium.

"Good idea," Bill said. Turning to his friends, Bill said, "Posse, let's go get some lunch. Turning back to Pete and Jamal he asked, "Where to?"

"We know the best," Jamal said.

Pete chimed in, "The cream of the cream."

They all piled into the van Bill had just bought and made the drive over to Flushing to Joe's Clubhouse. It was the middle of the day when they got there and the only patrons in the establishment were two grizzled drunks who sat at opposite ends of the bar. They were holding a conversation, but it was hard to know if it was dialogue, monologue or soliloquy.

The group numbered twelve—Bill, Jamal, Pete and the nine members of Bill's posse—and it was the biggest crowd to come into Joe's Clubhouse in two years. For the last year, Joe had the place on the market—a big "This Business For Sale" sign was nailed on the front door, but in that span of time there were no inquiries. The group sat down at the best rickety table they could find, and the waitress put a fresh tablecloth on. Pete knew it was fresh because it only had food stains on one side.

Joe came over to say hello, his greasy-stained apron sitting over his big belly, when he saw it was Jamal and Pete, his favorite and only customers. When Bill saw Joe, he recalled being in the place as a kid, when Joe's Clubhouse was a happening place and Joe wasn't a threat to public health. Joe wiped his hand on his apron, slapped Jamal on the back and said, "You guys want the special?"

"All around man," Jamal answered. He turned to the table and said, "You can't beat it, five bucks for three dogs and two beers."

"Wow, at that price you should be packed," Bill said.

"Nobody comes to the games no more so we ain't got nobody to pack," Joe said.

"Hey Joe," Pete said, pointing to Bill. "This is the new Mets owner. And posse."

Joe wiped his hand on his apron and extended it to Bill. "Hey good to meet you. Good luck. You're starting from way beyond left field."

"That's alright Joe," said Jamal. "We're gonna set him straight."

"These guys are on the ball," Bill said.

Joe pulled a chair up and sat next to Bill, draping his arm on Bill's shoulder. "You know," he said, "you need prices like mine, you know five bucks for three dogs and two beers. Not those ridiculous prices at the park. Then you'll get 'em coming again." Joe was about to make another suggestion when the waitress yelled at him because one of the grizzled drunks had passed out in the kitchen.

Joe hurried away and Jamal, after watching him waddle into the kitchen, turned to the posse and said, "Yo, so I'm Jamal. I didn't catch your names."

"Whitey."

"Cyclops."

"K.C."

"The Swami."

"Duke."

"Gadget Man."

"Willie."

"Mick."

"Ruby."

"Damn," Jamal said, "you got some weird-ass names. What the hell you all do?"

"We're surfer dudes," Whitey said.

"Shit, you come to my hole and say that, the homeys will die," Jamal said.

"Same in Flatbush," Pete added.

"Hey we'll do a clinic and teach them how to surf," K.C. said.

"That'll be hilarious," Jamal said.

"We'll bring them the vision of enlightenment," the Swami said.

"Excuse me?" Jamal asked.

"We will render their souls within the grace of God," the Swami added.

"Brother, you ain't coming in my hood," Jamal said. "They'll never let me live it down."

"The Swami believes he is the reincarnation of an eighth-century high lama of Tibet," Ruby explained.

"That's some weird-ass shit," Jamal said.

"Tibet is a monodrome," Pete said.

"A what?" Jamal said.

"You know, one of those words that spells the same whether you spell it forward or backward," Pete said.

"No you mean a metro-dome," Jamal said.

"Actually it's a palindrome," Ruby said. "Although Tibet isn't."

"Well if it ain't a palin...whatever, then what is it?" Jamal asked.

"Tibet is my homeland," the Swami said, "it is where I was born and where they will carry my ashes when I pass on to the next phase of my heavenly existence."

"Brother, I don't know what you been smoking, but you better cut down," Jamal said.

The waitress brought the food and beer, interrupting the conversation as talk ceased and everyone satiated their appetites. After wolfing the food and guzzling the beers, Jamal spoke up. "Bill, let me be honest. It's gonna take some work to bring New York back to the Mets."

"I know, but I'm committed," Bill said.

"Nobody cares about them anymore. Everybody's into the Yankees, nobody's into the Mets. The glory days are so far gone that you gotta strain every part of your body to remember them."

"I remember them," Bill said.

"Me too," Pete said.

"Yeah but the common man," Jamal said, "you know, Joe Q. Public, he don't know shit about nothing but today. And when people think of New York's glory days, all they think about is the Yankees, going back from the Babe, to Joltin' Joe, Whitey Ford, the Mick, Casey Stengel, Yogi...Holy shit! That's it!"

"What?" Bill asked.

Everyone perked up at Jamal's exclamation and all heads came close to hear what Jamal had to say. "Look, you ain't gonna make the team good overnight," Jamal said, "but you can connect the fans back to the glory days of New York, including even the Dodgers and Giants. So it's mainly the Yankees, so what, who gives a flying fuck? You got all these weird-ass named people, and they got Yankee names, get it."

"I don't have a Yankee name," K.C. said.

"Yeah but you do man," Jamal said. "You, K.C., that's Casey, you know Casey Stengel. And you Whitey, like Whitey Ford. And you Mick, yeah, the Mick. And you Swami..."

"I am a beacon of light for all New York," the Swami said.

"Whatever brother," Jamal said. "Look, Yogi, he played for the Yankees and the Mets. Yogi was like a guru-type, he was always saying funky things. So now you got this cat the Swami."

Bill slapped Jamal's knee and laughed. "You're good, I like this," he said. He looked at his friends and addressed them. "K.C., from herein on, you're known as Casey, and you're the manager."

"Me?" Casey said, surprised and excited by Bill's proclamation.

"Hey you're a professional softball player," Bill said, "so you know all the strategy and how to manage, right?"

"For sure dude," K.C. said.

"Yo, not the dude thing," Jamal said.

"Yeah," Bill said, "even if the team isn't any good, we'll make it lively and irreverent and give people a good time. We're connecting New York fans to their roots. Casey, the manager. Whitey, you're a former minor league pitcher, we'll call you Whitey, um, Whitey Chevy, and you're the pitching coach."

"Right on dude," said Whitey.

"Cut out that dude shit, it's creepy," Jamal said.

"And Mick," said Bill, "we'll just call you the Mick. You'll have to be our hitting coach, who else could it be than the Mick. You're awesome at beach whiffleball, so that'll work."

"Cool," said Mick.

"And Swami," Bill said, "you're our Yogi, you'll be our third base coach, turban and all. Gadget Man, you'll appeal to all the techno-freaks out there, which opens up our fan base, so we'll make you first base coach."

"And Willie and Duke, you guys connect New York to the Giants and Dodgers. You know, Willie Mays and Duke Snider. Willie you'll be bench coach and Duke, you'll be assistant bench coach."

"What about me?" Cyclops asked.

"Yeah you," Bill said. "Cyclops, hmm, I know, we'll call you Cy, like Cy Young. Yeah, Cy Young. Not New York, but he's classic baseball. You can be bullpen coach."

"And me?" Ruby asked.

"How could I forget my Ruby?" Bill smiled. "You'll be coach of the cheerleaders, the Surfettes."

A pitcher of beer was on the table, and Bill poured everyone a glass and led a toast to the new New York Mets. Bill knew he may not put a competitive team on the field next year, or the year after that, but it was going to be one heck of an entertaining one and give all who showed up their money's worth. And since he already had decided no ticket would sell for more than five dollars, it wouldn't take much for people to get their money's worth.

After they all finished at Joe's Clubhouse, they left and piled into the van. As Jamal and Pete got in, Bill said to them, "You guys still wanna go to the Caymans?"

"Shit yeah," Jamal said. "You're serious?"

"Of course. Did you think I was bullshitting you?" Bill replied.

"You're one righteous brother," Jamal said.

"Yeah you're one righteous brother," Pete repeated as he sat down next to Jamal.

Just then Jamal remembered he had to be at work in an hour. "Oh shit," he said to Bill, "man you're gonna have to turn back. I gotta be at work."

Bill turned around and looked at Jamal. "Dude..."

"Don't call me that thing," Jamal said.

"What, dude?" Bill asked.

"Ooooh," Jamal cringed. "That's like weird California shit."

"Yeah and we don't dude in Flatbush either," Pete added.

"Well whatever," Bill said, driving as he talked. "You guys call up the New York City Transit Authority. Tell them you no longer work for them."

"Man what are you saying?" Jamal said. "I ain't gonna quit no job. It pays good and got good bennys."

"Me too," Pete added.

"When you guys come back from your vacation," Bill continued, "you'll be working for the New York Mets. I'll double your salary and make you senior vice-presidents or general managers or something like that. I like you guys, you got good ideas. I wanna keep you on. You guys can help bring the Mets back to glory. Is it a deal?"

"Yo!" Jamal shouted, extending his hand to Bill. "Brother you got a deal."

Bill shook Jamal's hand and then Pete's, who cried out, "Yeah dude."

"Cut that shit out," Jamal said to Pete.

Jamal and Pete high-fived each other and everyone else in the van. They were flying so high on cloud nine they could have made it to the Caymans without an airplane.

"Oh and another thing," Jamal said to Bill. "Joe. I think Joe's Clubhouse should be running all the concessions stands."

"I was thinking that myself," Bill said.

"He does have to clean up his hygiene," Ruby interjected.

"Yeah don't you worry, we'll clean Joe up," Jamal said. "We'll have Joe's special deal at every concession stand. No more of those bullshit prices, you know like twenty bucks for a dog. Five bucks, three dogs, two beers. Sweet."

"I think this is gonna be the start of a beautiful friendship," Bill said to Jamal and Pete as he pulled into the airport parking lot.

"*Casablanca*," Ruby said.

"Casa who?" Jamal asked.

"That's the famous last line from the movie *Casablanca*," Ruby said.

"No it ain't," Jamal said. "Hey Pete, we saw that film with that line, what was the name of it?"

"*Kung Fu Kickbox?*" Pete asked.

"Yeah that's it," Jamal said. "Who did that one?"

Pete, who was an action film buff, excitedly gave the answer. "Chuck Johnson."

"He is my special student," said the Swami, sitting in a contemplative pose in the back of the van.

"Chuck Johnson? No he ain't. He ain't into no weird tutti-fruity shit," Jamal said.

Bill parked the van in the lot and got out with Jamal and Pete and went with them into the terminal to buy tickets. He told them he'd book them hotel rooms and once they got there to call to find out where they were staying. He also gave them each a thousand dollars spending money.

As they walked into the terminal, Bill told them to keep their eyes out for potential baseball players. "We're gonna recruit players from all over the world and make this an international team, like a mini-United Nations."

"Ok boss," Jamal said.

"Me too," Pete said.

"As part of your job, when you come back, I'm gonna send you all over the globe to scout players," Bill added. "We wanna appeal to all New Yorkers."

Bill knew in his gut these guys would do him good, which was why he was taking care of them. He knew these guys may not be the ripest bananas in the bunch, but they had a lot to offer.

Jamal and Pete said goodbye and walked to the gate, pinching themselves to make sure they weren't dreaming. They had scored beyond their wildest dreams, and vowed to do everything in their power to make Bill Tike's faith in them pay the highest of dividends.
