

Playlist:

Dark Beyond the Blue

David K. Hulegaard

Copyright 2015 by David K. Hulegaard. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. No reference to any real person, living or dead, should be inferred.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior consent of the publisher.

Edited by Jessica Guzman

All song titles by [Hammock](#), and used by permission. © Hammock Music 2004 - 2014

Cover Design by [Tony Healey](#)

Tape Recorder

As long as he didn't see the casket, it wasn't there. Cal sat on a pew near the back of the chapel, wishing he could stop time. He stared down at his clasped hands, hoping to avoid eye contact with anyone as the room filled up. Blurred glimpses of dark, leather shoes and three-inch heels caught his peripheral vision as attendees shuffled down the aisle. He focused on the loud, creaking floorboards and overpowering scent of lilac perfume; anything to stave off reality a while longer.

Cal knew the time would eventually come to say goodbye to his parents—that was just the natural order of things—but at twenty-seven years of age, he wasn't prepared to lose his mother. He'd thought there would always be more time. She'd looked so healthy at her birthday party a few weeks before, laughing and joking around as she always did. He hadn't observed so much as a cough or a sneeze.

"Cal?" a man's voice said.

The familiar tone jarred Cal from his near-meditative state. He only glanced for a moment, but it was long enough to recognize his father's curly, gray sideburns and tweed Irish walking cap several rows ahead.

Why didn't you warn me she was sick, you son of a bitch? How could you have kept that from me?

White knuckles protruded through the pinkish skin of Cal's clenched fists. The deep resentment he felt toward his father went back to adolescence. Work kept his father away from home for substantial periods of time, and Cal never forgot the look of sadness behind his mother's eyes. Unlike her, however, Cal never missed his father growing up. His mother was all he ever needed, and now she was gone.

Why couldn't it be you in that box?

~ * * * ~

After the service concluded, Cal wanted nothing more than to head straight for the airport and never step foot in Seattle again. He never understood why his mother loved a place where it rained nine months out of the year. Although some cherished memories had been created there, he'd never regretted leaving Washington behind.

"Cal?" his father called out.

Cal ground his teeth. He had hoped to avoid a confrontation, especially in public, but feared it was imminent unless he could put some distance between them. Cal set his sights on the exit, forcing his way through the crowded aisle of geriatric mourners. Hot tears ran down his cheeks. The wrist buckle of his wool car coat snagged on a woman's purse, ripping it from her shoulder to the floor.

"I'm so sorry." Cal knelt down and collected the woman's bag. "Here you go."

The elderly woman grunted as she jerked her purse back.

"Sorry again," Cal said.

A heavy hand clasped Cal's shoulder. He swallowed hard and turned around with resignation.

"Honestly, Cal." His father let go and straightened his glasses. "I understand you're angry, but you could at least acknowledge me when I'm trying to speak to you instead of acting like a petulant child."

"You know, it's bad enough that I have to see your face when I look in the mirror. I can't change that." Cal rubbed his cheek. "But at least I don't have to listen to you."

"As much as you might not want to, we need to talk," Cal's father said in hushed tone. "There's a lot you don't understand."

"Oh, I understand perfectly, *Dad*." Cal spat the word out as though painful to say aloud. "You couldn't be bothered to pick up a phone and tell your own son that his mother was dying. Heaven forbid anything pull you from your utopian existence away. You know, the one where you get to pretend that you don't have a family."

Cal's father grinned and nodded at a passerby. "Thanks for coming, Mary."

Cal rolled his eyes and walked toward the exit.

"God dammit, Cal!" his father said. "We're not done yet."

"Yeah? Well, I'm done with you," Cal said with his back turned. "Oh, and when it's your turn to be put in the ground, no need to have me notified. Have a nice life, Paul."

A silent alarm triggered above the exit. Curved mirrors spun around an encased bulb, bathing the room in baby blue light. Two hulking men clad in black Italian suits and Bluetooth headsets walked in. The first man blocked Cal's path, while the second helped usher the remaining guests out with a calm, pleasant voice.

"What the ...?" Cal said.

With a nod from Paul, the two men exited the room, shutting the double doors behind them. The blue light switched off, leaving Cal alone with his father. Cal jiggled the door's brass handle, but found it locked from the other side.

"What in the actual fuck just happened?" Cal scanned the room from corner to corner. "What *is* this?"

"Just calm down," Paul said. "If you'd only listen, these excessive theatrics wouldn't be necessary."

"Here we go, ladies and gentlemen. He's busting out his famous formal vocabulary normally reserved for crossword puzzle day." Cal slow clapped. "And just so we're clear, this is a few freeway exits past 'excessive theatrics.'"

Paul sighed.

"Look, I don't understand what kind of weird shit is going on here, and I don't want to," Cal said. "What I *do* understand is that whatever ... *this* is, you've picked an absurdly inappropriate venue for it. Mom's funeral? You really are the same heartless bastard I always thought you were."

"Would you shut up?" Paul took a deep breath. "No one died, Cal. Your mother isn't in that casket."

Cal took a step back. "What are you talking about?"

The thought of taking a swing at his father tempted Cal, but he resisted. For better or worse, his mother had loved her husband, and Cal chose to honor that. He held his breath and glanced at her casket for the first time. With his bottom lip quivering, Cal shut his eyes and turned away.

"Look, there's not enough time to explain everything." Paul walked toward his son with his palms up. "I've gone to great lengths to keep you and your mother safe all these years, but now that's been compromised."

“Compromised?” Cal said. “You’re an insurance salesman, for fuck’s sake. Why are you talking like you’re James Bond?”

“I’m not an insurance salesman, son. That much should be obvious by now.”

“If you say so, dude.” Cal made a fart noise out the side of his mouth. “Maybe get yourself a convertible and some little blue pills, and deal with this midlife crisis like a normal guy.”

“Please listen to me.” Paul reached into his pocket. “The details are classified, but what you need to know is that you’re not in any immediate danger. At least, I don’t think you are, but we’ll need to take the necessary precautions.”

Paul handed him a white card. An international telephone number had been written in sharpie on the back with the word ZEST below it.

“Cal, I’m so sorry that you thought your mother was dead, but for your safety I had to let you believe that.” Paul took another few steps toward him. “I know all this must have been painful for you, but please understand that I couldn’t risk putting you in harm’s way. They can’t know about you. I won’t be able to live with the consequences if they find out you exist.”

“You’re sick, you know that?” Cal crumpled the card and stuffed it in his jacket. “You need help.”

“I know I’m asking for a lot on faith here, Cal, and someday I hope we can discuss it all over Mai Tais somewhere tropical, but for now ... I just need you to trust me.”

“Go to hell.” Cal tried the door handle again, but it still wouldn’t budge. “You’re insane. Let me out of here!”

“Dammit, Cal. Now is not the time to be stubborn,” Paul said. “Once they discovered I had a wife, your mother became number nine on their blacklist. Staging her death was the only way to get her out of the country safely.”

“Mom is number nine, huh?” Cal said. “So, you’re what? Number eight?”

“No, Cal. I’m number one.”

“Oh, of course. How stupid of me.” Cal pounded on the double doors. “Now, let me the fuck out of here before I call the police!”

Paul rapped his fingers on the door twice, followed by two taps. A loud clank reverberated through the room, and the left door cracked ajar. Cal pushed it open and was met by one of his father’s towering companions.

“Wait, son,” Paul said. “That card I gave you ... please keep it close. If anything ... *strange* should happen, pick up a phone and call that number.”

“Strange, huh?” Cal touched his forehead. “Hmm ... guess I’ll have to be on the lookout for that.”

“Must you always be a smart ass? I’m trying to help you,” Paul said. “Call that number. You’ll be asked a question. Say only the word on that card—nothing else. Within four hours, my men will arrive and escort you to safety.”

“Whatever, Double-0 Douchebag.”

Cal stormed out, refusing to be intimidated by his father’s guards any longer.

“You want him back, boss?” the giant man said.

“No.” Paul pinched the bridge of his nose. “Maybe it’s better this way.”

“Should I bring the car around?” the second man said.

“Yeah, I suppose there’s no point hanging around any longer.” Paul stepped outside the room and watched the image of his son fade into the distance. “Goodbye, my son. For your sake, I hope we never see each other again.”

~ * * * ~

Cal checked in for his flight at the self-help kiosk. He scooped up his boarding pass and dropped off his suitcase before heading for the TSA screening area.

Fucking middle seat again. Fantastic.

Cal passed a man in a feathered fedora taking a photo of a petite woman with bobbed, raven hair. She leaned her elbow on top of a lit sign promoting the upcoming season of *Portlandia*. Both appeared to be within a few years of his age. The woman smiled and waved at Cal. The man turned and darted ahead to cut him off.

“Hello, my friend!” the man said, shoving his iPhone into Cal’s hand. “So sorry for not so good English, but would like photograph with beautiful girlfriend for soo-ving-neer. Will you take?”

“Sure. Just over there then?” Cal pointed toward the sign.

“Yes! That make perfect.”

The man posed on the opposite side of the sign from his girlfriend, flashing a peace sign to the camera. The woman shaped her mouth to form duck lips, and flexed her bicep.

“All right, guys.” Cal framed the shot through the camera’s view finder. “Ready?”

“Cheeeeeeeeese,” they replied.

Cal snapped the picture and handed the phone back to its jubilant owner.

“Oh, tank you, nice man!”

The woman winked and blew Cal a kiss. Her boyfriend frowned and pulled her away by the wrist. Cal shook his head and took his place in the TSA screening line.

Nice short line. This shouldn’t take long, thank God.

Cal handed his I.D. and boarding pass to an agent at the back of the line. The man checked back-and-forth between the photo and Cal’s face several times before writing a check mark on the pass with an orange highlighter.

“Go ahead,” the man said, and handed Cal’s effects back.

Cal took an empty bin off the top of the stack and set it down near the conveyer belt. He emptied his pockets, removed his jacket and shoes, and placed it all in the container. He fixated on the wadded up card for a moment, recalling the unusual encounter with his father.

Maybe he’s taking mom’s death harder than I thought. Still ... what the hell happened back there?

A female TSA agent waved him over to a black rubber mat with yellow footprints.

“Wait.” The agent held her hand in front of Cal as she observed a passenger receiving a pat down on the other side of the scanner. “All right, go on in. Put your arms up, and hold still.”

Cal did as instructed, arcing his arms above his head to match the cartoon drawing inside the booth.

“Step out, please,” the middle-aged male agent outside the exit said.

A series of loud beeps sounded as Cal passed through the doorway.

“Sir, I’m going to need you to stand over here, please.” The agent backed up and motioned Cal to follow. “Do you have anything metal in your pockets that you forgot to remove?”

“No, nothing.”

“Okay, I’m going to need you to come with me for additional screening, sir.”

“Wait. What seems to be the problem?” Cal scratched his head. “All of my belongings are in that bin coming out through the x-ray machine now.”

“I understand, sir. We registered an unusual reading with your scan, and just need to do a follow-up.” The agent placed his hand on Cal’s back. “Collect your things, and follow me. This will only take a few moments.”

Cal sighed and gathered his items from the bin. He slipped his shoes back on, pocketed his wallet, and draped his coat over his forearm.

“This way, sir.”

Cal followed the agent to a solid white door off to the side of the screening area. The man opened the door and gestured for Cal to enter.

“Grab a seat, and someone will be right with you,” he said.

“Can you please tell me what this is about?” Cal entered the room. “I’ve been flying my whole life, and I’ve never had a problem.”

“Please remain calm, sir. This is just a precautionary measure to ensure the safety of everyone on the flight.”

“Precautionary measure?” Cal said. “What did you find during my screening?”

The agent shut the door.

Cal grumbled and sat down at a rectangular table with a dark faux wood grain finish. He leaned forward and folded his arms on its surface. The hustle and bustle of the airport couldn’t be heard from inside the room, only the syncopated tick of a clock mounted on the wall. Above Cal, a moth bashed its head repeatedly against the fluorescent lights.

This place feels like a friggin’ classroom or doctor’s office.

A door opened up on the opposite side of the room. A uniformed agent wearing rubber gloves entered, keeping one hand on the door to prop it open.

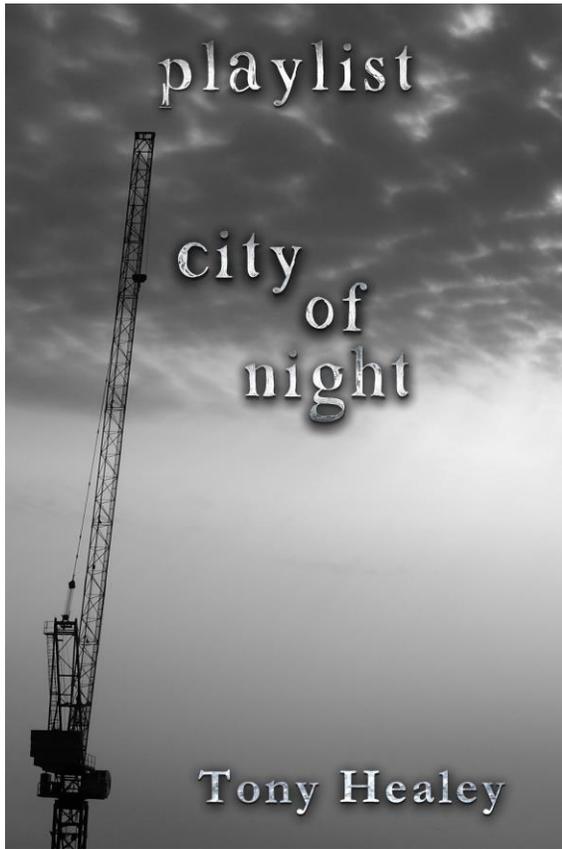
“Oh, come on!” Cal said. “We’re not seriously talking cavity search here, are we? This is ridiculous.”

The man wearing a feathered fedora and a petite woman with bobbed, raven hair stepped into the room.

“Wait a minute ...” Cal furrowed his brow. “What the hell is going on here?”

“I am so pleased to meet your acquaintance again.” The man pulled out a chair and sat beside Cal. “You truly have a gift for photography ... number ten.”

Don't miss *Playlist, Volume 1: City of Night* by Tony Healey!



Enjoy the story? Check out the full version on [Amazon](#).