

DOWN

Nate Southard DOWN



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For Greta. Sleep tight.

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JUNE 10, 1993

ONE

A shudder travels the length of the airplane like a frightened chill along a spine. A metallic groan follows, and everyone wonders if something might be wrong as their eyes scan the plane's interior. Some look out the window and see only night. Slowly, a sigh wavers through the air, and a frightened little chuckle follows.

The pilot's voice appears on the intercom, soothing as he apologizes. Bumpy skies ahead. He assures them they'll be through the worst of it in a moment, and then his voice disappears, replaced by the whir of engines.

Another sigh. Somebody says something sarcastic, and everybody laughs a little.

Then the plane lurches, drops, and something booms like the roar of a cannon.



Potter checked his watch and almost grinned. Instead, he heaved a sigh and decided to hope for the best. Just over twenty minutes until curtain left him plenty of time. Barring a catastrophe, he'd have The Frequency Brothers hitting the stage right on time, and that meant they'd leave the stage right on time, and he'd have his butt planted firmly in a seat on the plane right on time. If he worked it right, he could even get them to the airport early. The thought almost made him laugh, but it was a nice one to have.

Wandering the Frank Erwin Center's concrete corridors, he eyed a pay phone and kept moving. The call was on his list, but it sat near the bottom, a fact that kept his face in a tight scowl. With each step, he told himself that he'd get to it as soon as he could, that knocking out the other items only meant making the call sooner. Easy to say and easy to think, but damn tough to believe when the phone was right there.

So, he checked his To-Do List, the one he always kept in his head. With his mind's eye, he saw a crumpled piece of lined notebook paper, one that was faded and worn. Across the top, he saw *TO-DO LIST* in thick, handwritten letters. Below, he read off the items.

- 1. Contact front of the house for check*
- 2. Twenty minute call*
- 3. Check in with Rolling Stone reporter*

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4. *Ginny's amp*
5. *Ten minute call*
6. *Personal call, Marie*
7. *Five minute call*
8. *Curtain*

Not a bad list. He'd seen worse over the years. The Frequency Brothers usually had their shit together, though. Even Conner stayed in performing shape most of the time. Only after and on days off did he become a real problem.

Still moving, Potter snatched the walkie off his belt and thumbed the button.

"Front of house, this is Potter. Over."

He released the button and a voice crackled back at him. "Yeah. Front of House. Over."

"We good, lights and sound? Over."

"Check. Over."

"Strike? Over."

"Last of the road cases are off, and we're good. Pre-game loop is playing. Over."

"Excellent. Call with any problems. Over and out."

A quick motion snapped the walkie back onto his belt. In the space of a blink, he checked his list.

- ~~1. *Contact front of the house for check*~~
2. *Twenty minute call*
3. *Check in with Rolling Stone reporter*
4. *Ginny's amp*
5. *Ten minute call*
6. *Personal call, Marie*
7. *Five minute call*
8. *Curtain*

Good start. Now, to start rounding up the talent.



The screams die slowly, replaced by nervous murmurs. The plane rattles now, the air appearing to vibrate inside the cabin. Hands grab at hands, and eyes search the windows for some sign that this will get better.

Instead, they see fire. One of the engines burns, a ball of orange and blue flame that threatens to swallow the wing.

The screams return.



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“Look, we were never cool kids. Maybe we wanted to think so, but c’mon.”

Curtis laughed at his own statement and then rolled the die in his hand. It was red and had twenty sides, each marked with a white number. Skittering across the table, it finally came to a stop, the number four facing upward. Curtis winced. When he smiled after, he lifted a hand to hide his crooked teeth.

“And my ranger isn’t that hot, either.”

“Should’ve made him dual-wielding instead of a bow guy,” Greg answered. The guitarist wore a smirk as he pulled a sip off a tallboy. It made him look a little cooler, but only a little.

“Maybe that’s because I don’t want to make the same character you make every single time.”

“That cuts, dude. Ow.”

“We should really have more people than this,” Curtis said. He turned to face Shannon, the reporter from *Rolling Stone*. Elbows on his knees, he gave her a grin that looked a little more embarrassed than he would have liked. She was sitting there in jeans and a black blouse, legs crossed, and he was very aware of her shoes, which had some of the most dangerous heels he’d ever seen. He loved shoes on women, the taller the better. They ranked up there with redheads, tattoos, and push-up bras. His face felt hot, and he wished he was the guitar player instead of Greg. Drummers never had a chance. Then again, Greg played bass guitar, so he didn’t have the best chance, either.

“Really?” Shannon asked. Her smile was a pleasant one, even a little entertained.

“Yeah. You should have a party of at least four, plus a Dungeon Master. This one-on-one stuff is a little sad.”

“Screw you,” Greg said. “I’m having a blast.”

Curtis shook his head and wished he had that kind of confidence.

“So you two were into D&D before you were into music?”

Greg finished his beer and lit a Marlboro, leaned his head back on the couch and watched the ceiling a little. “I guess so. I mean, we always liked music and had those rock dreams, right? Who doesn’t? We met around a card table with my cousins and all the other dorks, though.”

“Not that we dressed up or anything,” Curtis said. His face flushed again. “Sorry. A part of me wanted to make that clear, and the rest felt kinda pissed that I needed to make it clear. Does that make sense?”

“Sure,” Shannon said. “We all have our stuff. Any other stuff I should know?”

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“We’re flying out first thing, so you won’t get to see me hit on girls with glasses. What’s yours?” Greg asked. His grin looked like it promised fun.

“We can maybe get into that later. What steps lead you from the card table to backstage in Austin? How do two rangers become a rhythm section?”

“Hey,” Curtis said, “I usually played a thief.”

Greg chuckled past his smoke. “Don’t think it matters, dude.”

“Okay, fine. I guess it starts with self-confidence issues, right? Had my share of those.”

“As your average adolescent D&D fan might.”

“So my parents got me a drum set. No other presents for Christmas or my birthday that year. Just the drums.”

“And he starts playing.”

“Yep. Took me a year or so to get any good. Then I convinced Greg he needed a guitar.”

“Got a bass because I like low end.”

“And soon it was all Husker Du and Fugazi covers in the garage.”

“I think we played ‘The Waiting Room’ for close to five hours once.”

A knock sounded at the door, and then it swung open before anyone could answer, Potter waiting behind.

“Twenty minutes, guys.”

“Rock,” Curtis said. “Let’s clean up.”

“Leave it,” Greg replied. “To be continued.”

“Plane, dude.”

“Right. Okay, fuck it. Let’s pack up and warm up.”



They stare in horror, necks craning to get better angles on the roaring fire that’s engulfed one engine. The cabin lights flicker and die. A shriek peels out of the darkness, and a sob clucks somewhere beneath it. From a distance that can’t be real, can only be imagined through terror, a voice shouts, “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” like a pagan chant.

The flames spread, flare, and then disappear as though killed by a switch. Everyone falls silent, a collective breath caught in one frightened throat. No one knows exactly what they’re hoping or what questions they’re afraid to ask. They realize the engine has fallen silent, and now the only sounds they hear are the rattling of the fuselage, the whistle of wind past the dead engine, and the pattering whine of the remaining engine, which sounds like a pig running for its life.



“You coming?” Dani asked from the doorway. She gripped the doorframe a little harder than she wanted, her other hand brushing long, blond hair back behind her ear. Everybody thought she was silly, but she still got excited for warm

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ups. The five of them in a circle, Jen crunching hard on her guitar so everybody could hear as they sang. Two short songs or one long, if they had the feeling. Potter had started enforcing rules after they'd left Dayton sitting on their hands an extra twenty minutes.

"Talk to your hubby, chica."

"Almost there."

Dani watched as Kevin worked a high E-string onto Jen's Telecaster and started tuning. He leaned the guitar's neck against his ear and had everything in place in a matter of moments. A smile broke out on her face. Maybe her hubby wasn't in the band, but she couldn't imagine them getting through a show without him.

"There ya go, kiddo," he said as he handed the Tele to Jen, who clapped eagerly before accepting it.

"Yay! My hero! Other stuff!" She threw the strap over one shoulder and jumped off the couch, jogging to the door. With her blond hair in a pixie cut and the green sweater, she looked like a grunge Peter Pan.

Dani brayed laughter as obnoxiously as she could and started down the hallway. She gave her sister a quick glance as she fell alongside.

"How's my husband?"

"Boring."

"You lie!"

"I don't. I tell the truth. Truth is what I tell."

"He doesn't bore me."

"You're lame."

"Nah. I have sex with him!"

"Shut up."

"All the time!"

"Shut up!"

"He has a penis!"

The sisters roared with laughter as they continued to the green room.



For a moment that feels far too long, they wait in silence. Deep down, they hope the pilot's voice will appear, that he'll tell them everything's fine. They can fly with one engine. They're making an emergency landing, but it will be on an actual runway. Just a few more minutes of crackling nerves, and it will all be over. They'll be safe, and this will become a story.

Only the pilot's voice doesn't come. There are no reassuring words or promises. All they receive is the sound of the rattling plane and slicing wind and an engine that sounds a little too taxed.

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In the darkness, a large figure stumbles toward the cockpit, pulling himself forward one seat at a time, wrestling the entire world for each step. The others recognize their road manager, and they decide he's amazing. He'll figure out what's happening. He'll tell them everything is all right.

Then the plane lurches downward, and their hero slams into the cabin floor.



“Hey! Excuse me?”

The kid tried to act like he hadn't heard. Or maybe that he was too important to bother paying attention. Potter knew every last trick. This kid wasn't about to get one over on him, he didn't give a damn how many other problems waited in the wings.

“I'm sorry. Sir? Excuse me just a minute, please.”

The kid stopped, and something inside Potter grinned. Please and sir really did work when you used them the right way. When the kid turned, he guessed the boy to be maybe seventeen. Of course, the kid looked nervous. They always did. As he closed the remaining distance to the trespasser, he wondered if this one wanted to play guitar with Greg, beg Dani to marry him, or beg Jen to make out with him. As long as he wasn't there to give Conner some smack, things didn't have to get ugly.

“Yes. Hi,” the kid said.

“Can I help you with anything?”

“What? No, I'm fine. Thanks, man.”

“You sure?” He breathed deep and squared his shoulders, set his jaw. His rainbarrel torso and beard did the rest.

“Huh?” Nervous. Good.

“Sure. You're positive I can't help you with anything?”

“Yeah, I'm sure.”

“Great. So, can I just see your laminate, please?”

“My...?”

“Your laminate,” Potter said. He lifted his tour badge from his chest and held it out, waggled it. The cord jumped against his thick neck. “Backstage pass. This thing.”

For a second, the kid stared at him like he was a calculus professor. Potter loved that look. Confusion and terror really made the fans' faces pop. When the kid turned and tried to bolt, he sighed a little as he reached out and clamped a meaty paw over the back of the kid's neck. He heard a small yelp, but then he jerked the kid right up to his side and got him walking.

“I applaud your efforts, kid. Terrible character work, but you got this far. That takes guts.”

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“Uh...?”

“Say no more. So, we’ll just keep walking until we find an exit or one of the fine security folks. Bound to run into one or the other before too long. Sound like a plan?”

“Are...are you kicking me out?”

“Of the concert? No. Backstage? Bet your ass. So, who were you hoping to meet?”

“Um...Curtis.”

“Oh, kid.”



The pilot’s voice finally comes, but it’s not the soothing thing everyone hoped. From the intercom, they hear something that’s hot with stress, that could be barely-controlled panic.

“I need everybody strapped in their seats. Now!”

It’s a command that jabs everybody in the spine and heart at once. Hands fumble for belts. Those out of their seats make mad, clumsy dashes for the nearest chair. In the darkness, the moaning form of Potter appears to move in slow motion as it climbs first to all fours and then onto wobbling legs. The road manager finds a seat and collapses into it, barely fastening his belt before going limp again.

The remaining engine sputters.



Connor watched the notes he created as they drifted through the air. He coaxed them from the strings, birthing them into the world with fingers thin as a spider’s legs. They climbed upward and tickled his chin, slid past his jaw and over his ears before crawling through the rat’s nest of black hair that topped his head and then tumbling toward the ceiling.

He shouldn’t have used before a show. A part of him knew this, but the rest didn’t care. The rest of him cheered as he snorted up the tiniest bit of powder and then just a little more. One more to get things really moving, and then he curled his legs beneath him and began to play, the SG remarkably light in his hands, strings like silk under the callused pads of his fingers. When he stopped playing, he rubbed his palms over the brown corduroys he wore, loving the feel of the rough fabric against his palms.

“Yo, Conner. You got ten...aw, shit.”

He looked up, thinking he might have a dope smile on his face, and met Potter’s look of disapproval. The big man glared from behind his beard. When he breathed deep, Conner could hear the man’s chest creak.

“Is it going to be one of those nights?”

“What nights, Potter?”

“I don’t have time for this. Can you perform?”

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“What? Shit, yeah.”

“Prove it.”

Without a thought, he ripped off the solo for “Annabelle,” followed it with the intro to “Static Blast.” Both, he played perfectly, and Potter nodded in a way that said he accepted it, even if he didn’t like it.

“And how much time you got?”

“Ten minutes. Well, probably nine now.”

“So shouldn’t you be at warm up?”

“Shit, yeah.”

“Up and at ’em, Conner.”

“Right. On it.” He climbed to his feet and started walking.



Time disappears. For those waiting in the dark—praying, holding hands—the seconds have stretched into hours. Their muscles ache from the tension that’s turned them into horrified rock. How much longer can this go on?

Some look out the windows. They don’t look at the charred husk of the engine this time, but instead search the ground for some sign they might land soon. If they can’t see runway lights, they hope to see the lights from some town, maybe a subdivision. Instead, they find only blackness.

The plane climbs and falls, moving through the air like a drunk. Each drop brings a gasp or a scream.

With each passing moment, the remaining engine sounds weaker, the quiet spaces between that labored whine growing longer and longer.



Standing at that lonely pay phone, Potter checked his To-Do List as he gave his watch a glance.

- 1. Contact front of the house for check*
- 2. Twenty minute call*
- 3. Check in with Rolling Stone reporter*
- 4. Ginny’s amp*
- 5. Ten minute call*
- 6. Personal call, Marie*
- 7. Five minute call*
- 8. Curtain*

With eight minutes left before curtain, he wished for more time. Or none at all. Thinking about the call sunk a black pit into the center of his stomach. It wasn’t a phone call he wanted to make, but he knew he had to, that it was expected of him. Releasing a sigh that sounded more like a grumble, he grabbed his wallet and removed the long distance calling card with numb fingers.

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He punched the numbers and waited for the call to connect. When the receiver started ringing against his ear, he wondered what he'd do if she didn't answer. The question disappeared when she said, "Hello?"

"Marie, hi. It's Jake."

"Jake. I thought it was about time."

"I'm sorry. Busy as hell here."

"Life in the circus, right?"

"Something like that." He heard the annoyance in her voice like wire bristles, and he wanted to shrink into the wall and vanish. Even if he'd done his best, he wanted to do more, to have been there from the beginning. Maybe his sister understood, and maybe she didn't. He felt like crap about it, either way. "How's he doing?"

"The doctor just left; he was a little late on his rounds. Dad's still on the respirator, and he's not showing any good signs. Right now, he's stable, but he's not improving."

"So what does that mean?"

"The doctor said it means we have forty-eight hours. Then, we'll need to make some difficult decisions."

Potter leaned a little harder against the wall as some of his strength evaporated. He checked his watch again and hated that he was down to a minute or so.

"You mean, like, plug decisions?"

"Yes, Jake. Plug decisions, as you so eloquently put it. Are you going to be able to make it?"

At least this he could answer well. "Yeah. We've got a show in Austin starting in five. Right after, we rush to the airport and catch a chartered jet to New York so they can spend a few days shooting a video and then rest a few more. I'll grab a rental and be there by morning."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, Marie. With any luck, I'll be there by the time he wakes up."

"Jake..."

"I know. Look, I gotta get this show off. I'll call from New York, and I'll see you in the morning. Take care."

"You, too."

He dropped the phone into the cradle and thought it sounded like a hammer striking a nail. For a short moment, he leaned his forehead against the cool concrete wall and got his thoughts working in the right order. Then, he straightened himself out and went to make the five minute call.



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The noise is almost complete, a violent rumble that fills their heads and shakes their spines. Beneath it, most hear a high-pitched voice scream, "Please! Please!" None of them recognize the voice, though. It could be any one of them. Terror has robbed them of their identities, made them a frightened mass. Teeth grind and hands squeeze. Somebody moans.

The plane rocks to one side and then rights itself. The engine coughs, sputters. Those listening to its whine wonder how much longer it can last. They suspect it won't be long.



"It's okay if I stand at the side of the stage, right?"

"Sure," Potter said. He wondered why the reporter would ask such a question. Had somebody really told the folks from *Rolling Stone* to buy a ticket like everybody else, once? He ponders what kind of asshole would do that, and then he remembers that he knows plenty of those very assholes. "I'll be stage right. We'll find a spot for you there."

"Thanks."

Dani stood nearby, her fingers intertwined behind her back. "Hey, Potter?"

"Yeah?"

"Are we gonna hit New York in time to hit Gray's Papaya?"

"They're open 'round the clock."

"Shit, that's right. Guess we don't have to cut the set short tonight!"

"That's a comfort."

Potter spoke into his walkie, got a clear signal in return. One more command, and the house lights went black. A cheer rose up as the recorded overture flowed through the arena's sound system. Smiling, he turned to face The Frequency Brothers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the good times."

Potter watched the group as they left the safety of the arena's catacombs and entered the backstage area. They had a decent walk before they reached the stage, and he liked to get a good look at them before they struck their first note. Dani and Jen skipped arm-in-arm at the front of the pack. Kevin hung off to the side, hands in his pockets. His eyes ticked back and forth between his wife and her sister, and then he chuckled at their show. Behind them, Curtis stretched his arms as he talked to Greg, who dangled a smoke from the corner of his mouth. Conner brought up the rear, hands behind his back, looking at his shoes as he shuffled forward. The SG slung over his shoulder looked all but forgotten. His eyes hung half-shut, and Potter wondered if the guitarist could still pull off a solo. He'd have to keep an eye on the little jackass, maybe see if he could be straightened out.

The overture began to crescendo as they made their way up the stairs to the stage, Potter playing a flashlight's beam over the steps so no one would trip

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or fall. Looking up, he saw crew members waiting with Jen's guitar and Greg's bass. He'd thought Jen would be working her Tele tonight, but it appeared she'd changed her mind. Instead, she gave a cheery, "Thanks, homie!" as she plucked a Stratocaster wrapped in newspaper from the roadie. She gave her sister an exaggerated rock face as she slung it over her shoulder, and Dani answered with a pair of devil horns.

Twenty seconds left in the overture, Potter knew. Rhythmic bleats of feedback twisted with throbbing African drums. Conner began to bounce on the balls of his feet, finally showing life, and Curtis and Greg shared a quick hug.

"Who's the best band in the world?" Curtis shouted.

"Zeppelin!" the others answered.

"Who's second?"

"The Beatles!"

"What are we?"

"Sixth!"

"And there is *no fucking shame in that!*"

A cheer went up, and the band took the stage to the crowd's deafening approval.



The plane's last engine lets out a harsh clanking sound. Something like an old man's rib-splintering cough rattles through the cabin, loud enough to be heard over the screams, and then the engine dies. The remaining screams die with it, crumbling into whimpers and silent prayers. Everything falls quiet, and the whistling sound of wings slicing through angry winds becomes the predominant sound. All through the chartered jet, eyes clamp shut and hands squeeze tight enough to send knuckles flaring white.

Then the new sound comes, a sharp crackling as the tops of trees shear against the bottom of the plane. It's just one at first. Then another. Soon it grows into a harsh chorus of splintering wood, and then the screams return. Something shudders, a metallic groan travelling up the aircraft's length.

Then, something roars louder than any crowd they've ever heard, and the world rises up to strike them.