



You Can't Win For Losin'

by **Natasha Laurence**

It took them three quarters of an hour to walk the ten blocks to the hotel. Every half a block they stopped, drank from their Colt 45, and shoved each other around a little, laughing with an insane sense of power and purpose. It was well after midnight, the darkness ahead of them broken at regular intervals by circles of streetlight.

They had a plan, beautiful in its simplicity, and as Joe said, so many times that Albert was tempted to shut him up once and for all, "so crazy it just might work." They would challenge security to a fair fight, one on one. They couldn't turn down a fair fight, could they? Everything equal, man against man? Joe would do the talking. Albert would do the fighting. Joe could see it in his mind. The punch landed, the head snapping back, the body falling in slow motion to the ground. Then he and Albert would take their prize. They would walk into the hotel with no hassles and just sit for a while in the lobby.

In it, Joe could sense his destiny; Albert, his young nephew, could only sense his fear. He practised his moves, striking out at the night air, every so often landing a punch on Joe's unsuspecting back. That would start the wrestling, the drunken laughter, another drink, until Joe set them back on course again.

If he wasn't careful, the next thing he knew they would be sitting on the grass with the night city revolving around them. Sitting until they slept, peaceful and oblivious. Sleeping until they woke, pale as morning, sick with thirst, the opportunity gone. Joe could not allow that. He had a hard core of certainty, a sense of mission he knew was for this night only.

He could see the Westin, windows of light, through the office towers that surrounded it. How many times had he stood outside that building, panhandling from the drivers of the luxury cars that drove up regularly, catching a glimpse of the inside of the hotel when he came too close to the front doors?

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE KERR

That was how his relationship with the security guards started. He would come too close. They would chase him off; he would come too close again. It was like a game he played with them, but it was a game he could not afford to lose. He knew, in the same way that he knew his name was Joe and his blood was Cree, that if they succeeded in chasing him off forever, he would cease to exist. He would become like so many of his brothers, shadows even in their own minds.

Joe could stand the presence of wealth. In fact, he counted on it. Like a mystic caught up in a vision of heaven, he gazed at it from the outside. All that beauty and light comforted his sad, cold self. He did not dream of being there, but he needed to know that it existed, that he could walk up from the river valley at any time and look through the hotel windows at another, better world.

What he could not stand was the security. He could not believe that they were that much better than he was. He could see himself in that uniform, respectable, decent, opening doors—"Can I help you with your things?"—driving the beautiful cars off to parking. He could do that. He knew it.

Yet they treated him like garbage to be swept away. Once, when he was panhandling, a lady asked him to carry her bags into the hotel, but before he could do it, security told her he wasn't allowed inside. He had to watch a twenty dollar tip walk away in a trail of perfume, into the light, guided by those pricks in uniform.

That bothered him. That ate away at him, like a worm gnawing at his heart. It ate away at everything that made him a man, everything that kept him going when the night fell on his homelessness, when all he could see in the eyes of strangers was his invisibility, when the beer was gone.

Tonight he would take that worm and crush it, stop the gnawing forever. He would make his stand, balance the scales, prove once and for all that he was Joe Cardinal, that he lived in this world, as free and equal as everyone else and Albert was going to help him do that.

Joe was proud of Albert, young, strong, cocky Albert. He was a boxer, trained in Hobbema, in a club built by oil money. Fast and strong, he had practised hard and won every championship there was. In the ring he was powerful. Nothing and no one could stand in his way. But Albert wore his confidence like a bulletproof vest to hide his fear. Because he was afraid of hundreds of things he couldn't even name. When he woke in the morning fear gripped his stomach, twisting it inside out. He walked the city streets alert and cautious as a hunter, or one of the hunted. Out of the ring and off the reserve he felt small, surrounded, one small native in a big white world.

Albert lived with his mother in a small apartment on the edge of downtown. He was going to school. That kept his mother happy, but as much as his mother believed in him, Albert just wasn't sure. He and Joe had met six months before, when Joe came to Edmonton after his release from

prison. Joe would visit his sister and talk to Albert, telling him stories about his life. How he had run off from the foster home and never gone back. How he had been everywhere in the States and Canada, lived with a woman on a reserve near Calgary. How he had almost killed a man who threatened his life in a bar near Canmore, and done seven years for it. How he had learned to drink when he was 13 and on his own, camping out in the Calgary river valley. How he had been drinking ever since.

As Albert listened, his championship medals shrank before his uncle's courage. He felt pampered, spoiled, soft as a kitten. He couldn't tell his uncle that, so he drank with him. When they wandered the streets, Albert imagined he was Joe, alone against the world, and when Joe told him about the plan, Albert said yes before he had a chance to think.

Propped up by Joe's words and enthusiasm, it had almost seemed possible, but as the afternoon turned to evening and the evening into night it began to dawn on Albert that the plan was crazy. The security would never go for it. There would be trouble. But Joe would not be swayed. "I'll go on my own then," he said and Albert felt ashamed.

They started drinking in the late afternoon. They stopped talking about it. Joe played Albert's guitar. Albert and his mom sang along to every country song they knew, once and then again. As the evening wore on, Albert developed a small hope that Joe had forgotten. But at one in the morning, Joe put down the guitar, picked up the half-empty bottle of Colt 45 and said, "It's time to go." Albert didn't argue.

As they approached the Westin, the laughter stopped. They felt almost sober.

"Remember, let me do the talking," Joe said, "They know me."

The hotel was quiet. The driveway that curved up to the front door was empty. In Joe's eyes the building glittered. He could see the lights in the lobby beckoning, the plush wine carpet spread out under the chandelier. There were no security guards in sight, but he knew as soon as he and Albert left the public sidewalk and headed up to the front doors, they would appear.

He wasn't disappointed. They were ten feet away from the building when out from the side they came, two of them, both young fellows looking half bored, half hopeful that the long night held something interesting.

"You two going somewhere?" the blond one asked, hooking his thumb in his belt, his feet set solidly on the concrete.

"We thought maybe we would sit down for a while, have a smoke. You got some nice chairs in there." Joe motioned to the lobby and kept walking. Albert followed.

"I don't think so, Joe. Don't give yourself more trouble than you need." The two of them closed together in front

of them, forming a smooth white wall. Joe stopped. He could smell the alcohol, stale and old, wafting up from his pores. He could feel the gnawing in his heart.

"I've always wondered if there was any guts under those uniforms," he said.

"Have you been drinking again, Joe? You stink." They looked at each other and laughed. "Why don't you go home and sleep it off? Or find a park somewhere. Those chairs are for better people than you." They laughed again.

Joe looked at them. He took off his ball cap and ran his hand through his hair.

"This is my nephew, Albert. Albert, these are the guys I was telling you about. What do you think?" Albert said nothing. "Albert and I were wondering if you were interested in a fair fight, one on one. If you win, we'll leave. If Albert wins, we're going to sit inside for a while, get some rest."

They looked at Albert. He drew himself up and set his shoulders to meet their stare. They looked away.

"Now Joe, why would we want to do that? Seems like a waste of time to me."

"I thought maybe you'd want to come out from behind that uniform, just once. Fight like a man." They said nothing. Joe looked at Albert and winked.

"Looks like we win," he said. "Let's go in and sit down." Albert winced, but when Joe went one way around them, he went the other. He hadn't gone two steps when a hand grabbed his shoulder and shoved him backward. He felt the blood rush to his face. "Get your fuckin' hands off me," he said, and felt like a fool. He wanted to turn around and go home. But looking across at Joe, standing face to face with the other guard, he could see that that wasn't going to happen. He rubbed his forehead. Shit, why had he gotten himself into this?

"You're not going anywhere, Joe. Why don't you do us all a favour and leave now?"

"If you were a man," Joe said slowly, motioning to the alley beside the hotel, "you would come with us now, right over there, and fight Albert here, fair and square."

"There's no way in hell we're going to do that, Joe. Go home before we call the police."

The police. Joe turned his head and spat on the ground. If the police came it was all over. He could not stand against the police. Too much time on the street had taught him that. He had memories of being beaten senseless by one of them while five others watched, of listening, helpless, as one after another they lied on the stand.

"You can't even fight for yourself. You gotta call the police?" He looked at Albert and laughed. "They want to call the police."

Albert's stomach turned. He laughed a little too loudly, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe it. "The police," he said.

Joe turned back to the guards.

"It wouldn't take more than five minutes. You must have

a coffee break sometime. If you win we're outta here. Don't want to keep the women waiting, eh, Albert?"

"I didn't know you could get a hooker for spare change, Joe." They killed themselves over that one.

Joe motioned to Albert. As they started for the door again all the laughter turned to anger. They found themselves being shoved hard down the sidewalk. Albert slipped and almost fell. "You fuckin' coward," he said, and he would have hit him right then, but Joe stopped him.

"That's not in the plan," he said. "Remember the plan." But the guards had had enough. "Last warning. Leave now or it's the police."

Joe and Albert didn't move. One of the guards glanced back over his shoulder through the glass doors to where the desk clerk sat watching. When he nodded, she picked up the phone and started to dial.

Joe saw it all, and with a sinking certainty the beautiful possibility of justice faded. Still, he couldn't bring himself to leave. Over the shoulder of the guard he saw the lobby and the chair he was going to sit in, just once, tonight. So they would not fight. He would not fight. But he wouldn't stop either.

Albert could see Joe thinking, his chin set, his eyes narrowed.

"Joe," he said, "I'm going home." Joe didn't answer, but Albert saw his jaw twitch, his hands clench. "Come with me."

"Yeah, Joe, go with him. Sleep it off."

Albert wished the stupid fucks would shut up. He turned to leave. "Joe?" he said one more time, hopelessly. Then he turned and walked away, out of the lobby light, into the darkness.

Joe started to walk, too, toward the front doors of the hotel. They grabbed at his arms, but he shook them off and kept walking. He reached the door, put out his hand to open it. The next thing he knew he was laid out flat on the sidewalk, his arm pulled up behind him, a knee pushing hard against his back. He felt the concrete cold against his face. Somewhere deep beneath the concrete he could sense the heartbeat of the earth. He saw the lights of the police car driving up into the entrance. He closed his eyes.

Albert, a block away, watched from the shadows as they handcuffed Joe, pulled him to his feet and put him in the back of the cruiser. They chatted awhile, laughing, leaning against the car. He watched as the police drove away. The two guards stood for a few minutes, looking out into the night, then turned and went back inside the hotel. Everything was quiet.

Albert felt the shadows around him grow and deepen. He took one swing, hard and fast, then another, into the emptiness of the air. It offered no resistance. He turned away from the hotel and started the long walk home.

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