**Snowbirds**

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**137,027 Words**

1

Dave DeSoto was sitting in the third row, center ice, watching the ice melt. It was a moment of reflection. Something of a personal tradition. Within minutes of the Snobirds hoisting the Cup, the Aud's chillers and ice-making equipment was turned off. With the elephant doors open, the melting ice met the humid Florida air. The result was a sort of fog inside the arena. Mist condensed on nearly every surface. Glass, handrails, floors all became slick and wet. The melting ice, loaded with the coloring agent that creates the clean, white appearance of hockey rinks world-wide, looked like skim milk as it swirled and puddled near drainage grates. On the main ice surface, where just hours ago, 12 men skated and fought, danced and dodged, the red circles and lines smeared and drifted towards the open Zamboni doors. Suddenly, the melancholy silence of the rink melting away was broken by the shrill yelling of a half-dozen leaf blowers. The clean-up team had arrived. Thirteen Mexicans and Haitians in faded orange t-shirts marched around the bowl of the arena. Armed with trash bags and sticks topped with a sharp nail, they picked up any trash too large to be blown away by the leaf blowers. The Auditorium would undergo the transformation once again, from championship ice rink to trade show and concert venue. Summer was coming, and the hockey season was gone.

Bill Fox had played his professional hockey in the IHL and NHL. A graduate of Clarkson University, where he had played his college hockey, Fox was picked in the third round of the NHL amateur draft by the Quebec Nordiques. Originally assigned to a Central League affiliate, Fox had opted to go to the “I” and play for Milwaukee Admirals. A 6'4”, 220 lb. defensemen, Fox gained a reputation around the clubhouse as a serious man. He always stayed close to coaches, originally to improve his game, but as his career progressed, he was intent on learning coaching strategies. When he finally made the move from the IHL to the NHL's Nordiques, he was regarded by many as a virtual coach on the ice.

Never a superstar, Fox managed to play for a solid eight years in Quebec. Clarkson University's reputation as a strong engineering school was not lost on Bill, who had a good mind for mathematics and money. He wasn't earning much more than the NHL average when he played, but he turned a six-figure salary during the eighties into a tidy, little sum of money and assets. By the time he retired from playing in 1993, Bill had enough money to live well for many years. He took a chunk of it and invested on himself, entering Seton Hall University Law School with hopes of becoming a sports agent. He never dreamed he would one day own his own sports franchise at any level.

Dave DeSoto came to the Snobirds after a brief stint in minor league baseball as a mascot and Promotions Director. A two-season long career in single “A” baseball gave DeSoto the tools he would ultimately need to run the team for Fox. His official title was, Assistant General Manager, but the only reason Fox didn't relinquish the General Manager title to Dave was his age. At twenty-three when he joined the Snobirds' front office, league officials had a hard time taking this kid from South Carolina seriously. What did he know about hockey, anyway? Sure, he was a creative promoter and seemingly tireless, as nearly everything the Snobirds did came from DeSoto's desk. But by now, his fourth year in the organization, he was a rising star, sought after by many teams to take control of their fortunes.

DeSoto's loyalty was unparalleled. Recognizing that his mentor, Bill Fox, had set him up to be a tremendous success, Dave was hesitant to leave. He had passed on a handful of offers to lead expansion franchises in the Sunbelt League, and a couple of other hockey leagues. Even the league offices in Charleston, had offered him a position. The prospect of moving back to South Carolina was incredibly tempting, but he politely considered the offer and then returned to Fox.

After winning the 2016 Cup, Fox and DeSoto spent the next two weeks closing out the 2015-16 season. Bookkeeping tasks were handled. The accounts were reconciled, the books closed. Inventory of all the souvenir merchandise taken. Equipment was inspected, and accounted for. Advertisers and sponsors were sent hand-written letters of appreciation with a copy of the official Championship team photo, autographed by Bill. Cleaning and reorganizing the office would be left to Dave to be completed during the summer months.

Though Dave felt a great deal of pride in the team's accomplishments of another season and self-satisfaction in doing his job well for another year, he couldn't help but feel sad to see the ice melt. He'd actually stay in his seat another couple of hours and watch as the event crew dismantled everything that made this arena home to a hockey team. Once the ice had melted completely and the water brushed to the drains, the dasher boards would be taken down. The movable rows of seats in the lower bowl would be pushed back and neatly stacked along the east and west sides of the squat, conical building. The freshly cleared floor revealed a smooth concrete surface that hid the miles of plumbing that carries the glycol fluid that chilled the water to create the ice.

It was the first week of April, and in West Palm Beach, it was already in the high 80's on a consistent basis. It cost thousands of dollars a month to keep the ice cold in South Florida. A cost that ate most of the rent for the Snobirds. The city of West Palm Beach enjoyed the prestige of having a winning hockey team in town, but the reality is that like everything else, there is a cost and in that cost, there is a number that citizens are comfortable with. The Aud was a city building, not owned by Palm Beach County, which meant there was a much smaller, much poorer base from which to draw funds. Prudence required that the expense of operating the Auditorium be kept to a minimum. With winter over and the tourist season, as well; and summer well on its way to South Florida, the offices of both the hockey team and the Auditorium staff would remain open, but just barely.

Come Tuesday morning, April 5th, the Aud was no longer a hockey arena. It was in the process of becoming a convention center that would host a gun show by the weekend. After that, visits by the circus, various bands and other convention events would occupy the venue.

Dave would work the remainder of the week and into the next, tying loose ends and attending to any publicity needs that might arise immediately after the season. But come one week from Saturday, his much-deserved vacation would begin. He worked seven days a week during the season. Bone-weary and mentally exhausted, this year he went decidedly extravagant for his vacation. In years past, he went home to Irmo, SC to visit his parents. This year, he was taking his girlfriend to an all-inclusive resort in the Riviera Maya. He had been planning the trip since the all-star break. He had been with Taylor for ten months and was convinced she was the woman he wanted to spend all free time. So, it was his plan to ask her to marry him, three days into the trip. He had an excursion to the Mayan ruins set up and he would ask her to marry him on the top of one of the pyramids.

Bill would be away from the office for the entire off-season. Most of the time would be spent with his family. First at the family home in New Jersey, then once school let out, the family would take a vacation. After traveling with his wife and kids, Bill would travel to Canada and Europe to look for free agent talent. His law practice was basically left in the hands of his partners and associates. He never did represent any athletes. His practice was primarily tax and bankruptcy law. Not glamorous, not exciting, but fiscally responsible. He would occasionally find himself on the phone during the hockey season, working with an associate on a point of law. On a very rare occasion, he might be video conferencing with an important client. But generally, Bill was an absentee lawyer. A figurehead. A portrait on the conference room wall. The first name on the gold embossed letterhead.

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Dave and Taylor had planned to take this vacation together. It was her understanding that they’d be going up to Carolina to visit his family. Then, the Saturday morning of the trip he told her to bring her passport. He had sprung a whopper of a surprise. She was effervescent as they drove down to Hollywood - Ft. Lauderdale International Airport. She still didn't know where they were going, all she knew was it was some place that she’d need her passport.

Dave wasn't so ridiculous that he put her in a blindfold. He figured TSA agents weren't romantics, and probably wouldn't appreciate such an effort. When they arrived at the airport and checked in at the kiosk, she'd know where they were heading, they were Cancun bound. Phase one was successfully completed. It was the first time in years that Dave took a real vacation, and this time, he was taking it with the woman he loved. She’d just have to wait a few more months for a trip up to Irmo. Maybe next football season, he could take her up to a Gamecocks game.

Boarding for the flight began exactly on time. The flight was completely booked and every seat filled. Dave and Taylor stowed their bags and took their seats amongst the coach masses. Giddiness filled their hearts as the ground crew conducted their business. The familiar sounds of an airliner preparing for departure filled the cabin. A whir here, a hum there. The hiss of the ground ventilation system. The thumps of baggage being placed in the underbelly of the plane. Finally, the flight attendant closed the cabin door. But, before the plane could be pushed back from the gate, the plane was rattled with a loud crumpling sound.

Dave and Taylor were sitting on the right side of the cabin, where the ground crew was moving the baggage conveyor back, away from the aircraft. Everything seemed normal. Perhaps the sound was just the luggage hatch being slammed shut. Looking out the window, all they could see were the perfectly normal workings of a busy airport. Meanwhile, on the left side of the plane, ground crew seemed to be scrambling about the plane. Nothing specifically happening that any passengers could see from their seats. It was about 5 minutes from the time there was the uncharacteristic thump until the pilot came out of the flight deck. It seemed odd to see him leave the cockpit and have the cabin door opened. He made his way down the gangplank to the tarmac to inspect his aircraft. To anyone that could see the captain, it was clearly evident that he did not like what he saw. A moment later, a flight attendant came on the PA system to announce that everyone was going to disembark the plane, please remember to collect all your belongings.

The dream vacation and proposal hit a speed bump. As the passengers entered the jet-way, everyone couldn't help but look to the left to see what had happened. There, plain as day, the catering truck was crumpled into the side of the plane. It looked like a sheet of paper crumpled up against a cigar tube. The Boeing 767 looked perfectly fine, but the aluminum box of the catering truck was caved in against the fuselage. Dave and Taylor joined the rest of the passengers in the seating area of gate 57, awaiting news about their flight.

As with any 'situation' at the airport, there were three kinds of passengers involved. The first, which is the vast majority of travelers, are patient and understanding. Like Dave and Taylor, they await an explanation and accept a reasonable resolution. Provide these people with good information at regular intervals, and they will go about their business- happy to have safety come first. The next is the nervous type. This is the person that is uncomfortable with flight in the first place. They pace, they feed the rumor mill, they speculate with a flair for the dramatic. They succeed in making many people around them extremely nervous. Finally, there is the asshole. This is the guy that thinks that he is somehow more important than everyone else. He is immediately at the counter, badgering the gate attendant for answers. He is loud, abusive and generally rude. He isn't just the squeaky wheel, he's the whole damn squeaky chair. He wants a new flight, an upgraded seat, a travel voucher, a hand-written letter of apology from the president of the airline and a meal voucher- all before anyone has a grasp of what the issue might be. He is god's gift to humanity, and deserves to be treated as such and consequently causes someone that could be spending their time effectively helping the situation to have to waste time helping him. Dave hated the type. He knew it well, working so closely with large crowds. It grated on his Southern sensibilities. He was always taught to treat people as you would hope to be treated. The idea that one’s mere existence meant entitlement was abhorrent to him.

Dave and Taylor watched with humor as a couple of these idiots tried to gain special treatment because of an accident. “This is ruining my vacation!” said one. “Do you know who I am?” said another. Meanwhile, the catering truck was pulled past the terminal windows by one of those baggage tractors. The gate attendant managed to break free of the idiots and got on the PA system to announce the situation.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I have an update for passengers on flight 3420 non-stop service to Cancun, Mexico.” boomed the gate attendant's voice. “As you have probably noted, there has been an incident involving the catering truck for this flight. There does not appear to be any significant damage to the aircraft, but the pilot feels it would be prudent for an engineer to inspect the aircraft before we proceed.” she explained. “Unfortunately, we do not have an engineer on site, here at this time, so we have to wait for one to drive up from Miami.”

The entire crowd let out a groan.

“We apologize for any inconvenience and will try to keep you updated as information becomes available.” And with that, a new line of assholes queued at the gate counter. Dave was by this time in his career, well-traveled. He knew that even if the engineer from Miami was standing around with nothing to do, it would be at least an hour before he would reach Ft. Lauderdale. There would be no new news for at least that long. Maybe longer. And with that, he suggested to Taylor that they make their way to the lounge and beat the rush that would soon follow.

Keeping in the spirit of the tropical vacation they were now looking forward to, Taylor ordered a Piña Colada and Dave followed suit. Three coladas later, neither was feeling overly concerned about their delay. Their trip had begun, and the flight would simply accelerate the good times. Eventually, they wandered back to the gate to catch up on any news. There seemed to be quite a few people milling around. A fair number of people had taken to occupying the Naugahyde airport seats that seemed to fill every airport in North America. Just comfortable enough for you not to notice your level of discomfort. Impossible to stretch in any direction, armrests low enough to make leaning on an elbow utterly impossible. A precious few seemed to be napping in these miserable seats. Dave scanned the gallery for a pair of seats together. Having found none, Taylor pointed out a couple of seats across from one another. It would have to do.

Another thirty, maybe forty minutes went by before the PA system crackled for their flight. “Attention passengers bound for Cancun on flight 3420, we have an update. Our engineer has inspected the damage to our aircraft and is now conducting a pressure-test to make sure the aircraft can maintain cabin pressure in flight. Since this could take some time, we have decided to bring around another piece of equipment to service this flight.” Explained the gate attendant. “Since it is a different type of airplane, your original seat assignments will not match this craft's configuration. We will call out passengers in alphabetical order to board the plane. You can then take any available seats as you board.”

There was a half-hearted groan from the crowd. Clearly, half the crowd was not pleased with the current situation. But, if they thought they were unhappy before, their day was about to take another turn towards crappy. In the next gate over, a shiny, empty, fueled-up MD-80 was rolling into place. It didn't take a degree in aeronautic engineering to see that the MD-80 was a good deal smaller than the original 767.

“Attention passengers for flight 3420, service to Cancun, Mexico. The ground crew has alerted me that our new equipment is in place in the next gate- Gate 59. If you will all be patient for a few moments more, we will soon begin boarding. Remember, we will be calling names in alphabetical order.” announced the gate agent.

Dave looked out the window and saw the two airplanes sitting next to one another. “There's going to be a lot of angry people in a few minutes.” Dave whispered to Taylor. “There's no freakin' way we are all getting on that second plane.”

Boarding began, and after only a few minutes, Dave's name was called. Taylor wouldn't hear her name called if she sat around to wait. Miller was right, smack in the middle of the passenger manifest- and chances were 50-50 at best, that she would make the cut-off. Dave grabbed her hand and pulled her up to the line with him. “We're traveling together. They'll let you on with me.” And they did with minimal cajoling. Forty minutes later, the cabin door was closed once again. This time, the plane was loaded and equipped without incident, though in their relief, no passengers bothered to ask about their baggage. In fact, no one even noticed that no baggage was loaded onto the plane.

The 130 passengers from the original flight that did make it onto the MD-80 would find out that their baggage, like the 147 other passengers, did not make the trip with them. The gate agents made it into the K's before running out of room on the MD-80. The remainder of the passengers would have to wait for a second flight crew to pilot the original plane. From their position at Gate 59, the passengers could see that the 767 had what looked to be some Bondo slapped on, below the service hatch, but otherwise looked none the worse for wear. Having been given a clean bill of health by the airline engineer and an FAA inspector, she was loaded with all the passengers' baggage and 147 passengers. The airline rewarded their inconvenience by providing everyone free beverages and free headsets for the in-flight entertainment.

The 767 had left Ft. Lauderdale about 3 hours after the MD-80. Cancun airport simply did not have the capacity to let a small plane-load of travelers linger around for 3 hours or more. Never mind the fact that there would be a serious logistic challenge to the customs and immigration staff at the airport. So, the airline advised the MD-80 passengers to go to their hotels or final destinations and the airline would arrange for the delivery of their baggage. Since the baggage was not considered “lost” and there was a predictable, foreseeable arrival for all the baggage, no one would receive any compensation at this time. At best, Dave and Taylor could count on their bags arriving sometime after dinner and before bed. That was if the bags went directly from the flight to a cab and then to their hotel. It was safe to assume that would not be the case.

Dave had booked them in a five-star resort. The resort was known for its high-end amenities and dinner was supposed to be attended in something more than shorts and t-shirts. The dining room was filled a hundred or so people in all manner of resort wear. Dave and Taylor had to endure the mild embarrassment of eating dinner in their casual, travel clothes. The resort generously provided them with a couple of t-shirts to sleep in and assured them that they would hold their bags at the desk until they called in the morning. It wasn't the first time a guest arrived but their luggage had not. As expected, the airline delivered the bags to the resort in the wee hours, and a desk attendant locked them in the manager's office, to be delivered up to the couple's room upon request.

3

Bill was a T-totaler. Not preachy, mind you; but as a former athlete, he valued good health and healthy habits. These were traits he hoped to hand down to his kids. His two boys were already showing prowess in sports. His eldest son was also showing prowess in the class room. Will wasn't a hockey player, like his dad, he enjoyed football. An oversized high school Freshman, Will was already starting at tight end on the varsity squad. Heading into his Sophomore year, he was carrying straight A's in honors classes. He was moving towards AP classes and almost assured a football scholarship in two more years, if everything continued in this fashion.

Christopher was a bit more light-hearted than his brother. He loved hockey and focused his attention on the travel team he played goalie for. School wasn't quite as important for this energetic 7th grader as it was for his parents. Chris was the prankster of the family and generally liked by all he came in contact with. In addition to being a very solid goaltender, he was a leader in the locker room. His parents were mildly concerned with his schoolwork issues, but felt it was more a product of his age and lack of interest, than a clinical thing. The general consensus among his parents and teachers was that he would grow out of it as he matured. As long as his relationship with his older brother was healthy, he'd feel a little competition and seek to do as well as Will, if not better. That was the theory, at least.

Bill enjoyed the robust, outdoorsy lifestyle when he had the time for such things. Kathy, not so much. But, she loved her husband and the boys, so she endured the camping and cycling trips. Besides, what she really enjoyed was when all the boys were together. With Bill owning a hockey team in Florida, their time together was limited. But this wasn't necessarily new to Kathy. From the time they met, when Bill was a Junior at Clarkson and Kathy was a Freshman at SUNY Potsdam, his time was occupied primarily by hockey. At first, it left her quite self-conscious, but friends encouraged her to keep dating him beyond hockey season and she soon realized that out of season, he could be a very dashing gentleman. He was still very busy in the off season, but he made himself as available as training and studying would allow. And when he wasn't thinking about hockey 24/7, he enjoyed culture. Usually, it was local theater in Potsdam or some event on campus. Every so often, he would step up his game and make a weekend trip to Montreal or Ottawa for the two of them.

Once Bill had graduated and went off to play in Milwaukee, he maintained a keen interest in Kathy and fostered a long-distance relationship. He wrote letters. He called long-distance from the road. He stayed faithful. Like everything he did, he committed to it and did it well.

And Kathy was equally committed to the relationship. They had been together a little more than a year and a half before he left to play in Milwaukee, and there was an excitement about them. She was still getting butterflies in her stomach when she saw him. She missed him when he wasn't near. Her feelings were definitely stronger than a college fling.

When Bill was with his team in Florida, Kathy was a very strong mother figure. The typical sports mom, she was on the run from practice to practice, game to game. And once the boys were both out of season in the Spring, she would impose her will upon them and take them to cultural experiences. Living in New Jersey afforded them the convenience and opportunity to visit New York and Philadelphia. Art museums and theater were her favorites. The boys, to their credit, kept their bitching and moaning to a minimum. They typically didn't love going to museums and shows, but they were good boys and did occasionally find that they could tolerate a show or an art piece. Of course, they wouldn't tell their mom. That wouldn't be cool.

What was cool was vacation time. Camping. Fishing. Hiking. Making fun of mom when she complained about murky lake water. Checking out beaver dams and animal tracks in the woods with dad. They were a family that truly enjoyed sitting around a campfire, toasting marshmallows and telling stories. For the past few years, the boys had gotten to travel with their parents to Europe when Bill would go scouting talent. They got to see places that their friends might only dream about. Moscow, Prague, Oslo. But given the choice, both would much rather hang out with their folks in the woods.

This year, they were camping in central Pennsylvania. A state park in Ricketts Glen. The park was loaded with beautiful waterfalls and lots of hiking trails. It was idyllic. They could have opted for a cabin, but the Foxes enjoyed camping in their own tents. They loved sleeping in the crisp, clean cool. Looking up at the deep night sky. The song of crickets and frogs in the sweet, green air.

Bill had developed a cough and a bit of heartburn that seemed to be lingering. The cough was just starting around the time of the camping trip. No one thought much about it. It was probably an allergy to some form of mold or fauna in the Pennsylvania woods. The heartburn was also hardly anything to take much notice of. It started a few weeks earlier than the cough. Bill had scarcely noticed that he was buying rolls of antacid every two days or so. A scouting trip followed, and by the time he was done going through Europe, looking for undiscovered talent, the cough had gotten bad enough for Kathy to start nagging him to see a doctor.

He had put it off long enough to travel down to West Palm Beach for a quick stop by the team office. It wasn't unusual for Bill to stop by the office briefly in late summer. He would show face at the Palm Beach County Sports Authority and by the mayor's office. He'd also sit down with Dave to go over some of the summer's activities and research. Dave had taken it upon himself a couple of summers ago to do a little recon on the other sports teams in the area. He would check out baseball games in the Florida State League, from Port St. Lucie down to Miami. He'd make a run up to Orlando for Arena Football. Any good idea was worth copying. Any promotions that worked were worth looking into. Dave would go with some friends or Taylor, when she was willing to, and take notes. Fortunately, baseball fans are geeks and will keep their own scorecards, so Dave's note-taking didn't look too out of place. He would compile the results and write up a nice little report with some suggestions for Bill.

Finally, Bill called the team doctor and set up to run into his office one afternoon. Dr. Greene was a podiatrist, but he was also the team doctor for the South Florida Snobirds. The vast majority of his team doctoring was for the sort of injuries that occur in the bedroom, rather than on the ice. Dr. Greene wrote a lot of scripts for antibiotics and antivirals. Despite having studied diseases of the foot, he was doctor enough to know what lungs should sound like. They shouldn't sound like Bill's. He recommended a colleague in general practice. It was probably just a bad case of walking pneumonia. Bill knew Kathy would have his ass if he didn’t, so headed right over.

Dr. Krantz was located down in Boca Raton. About a 30-40-minute drive down I-95, south of West Palm Beach. His office was just another generic doctor’s office in another generic medical office building next to another generic hospital. Despite its reputation, Boca Raton was just another generic city. There were no great buildings. No landmarks to speak of. The medians on all the roads were neatly trimmed. The strip malls all had bright, clean, well-maintained signage. The roads were paved and polished. The cars were all Lexus and Mercedes. The golf courses were all lined with lovely condominiums. It was the town that Long Islanders aspired to retire to. Dr. Krantz fit the town perfectly. A little overfed, crisp white coat, expensive shoes.

“Dr. Greene is a good friend of mine. I've known him for years. I've meant to get up to a game for a while, now. He's been asking me for years.” Dr. Krantz went on. “So, what's this about a cough?”

“Yeah, I guess it started a few weeks ago. We were on a camping trip in Pennsylvania.” answered Bill.

“OK, let's have a listen.”