

SHORE & REYNOLDS CODE OF THE UNWRITTEN RULE



BY CHARLES JARRELL

Shore & Reynolds: Code of the Unwritten Rule

By Charles Jarrell

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Dedication

To Iryn, my love and inspiration.
To Orange County and the City of Brea — where this journey took root.
To Major League Baseball, and to the Angels and Dodgers organizations.
To my baseball friends — Chuck Carey, Jim Dunkerley, Kevin Guttman, Tim Mead,
many baseball fans on social media, and any others not mentioned by name —
thank you for the memories and the encouragement.
To the mystery stories and space adventures that sparked my imagination —
especially Columbo (just one more thing: thank you) and the enduring legacy of
Star Trek, which reminded us to boldly go beyond the ordinary.
And a special thank you to Bryan Duncan, for lending your voice — literally — to
this story.

And to God be all the glory.

About the Author

Not a traditional storyteller, Charles Jarrell has always been drawn to puzzles—whether on a chessboard, in a mystery story, or buried within a trail of clues. Shore & Reynolds series reflects a lifelong fascination with logic, codes, and the quiet satisfaction of solving what others overlook. Writing became a natural extension of the desire to solve—and share—the puzzle.

Jim Shore, one of the lead characters in this series, lives in the city of Brea, California. This fictional portrayal highlights the charm, community, and creativity that make Brea a unique part of Orange County.

Chapter 1: Setting Up the Game

The sound of the television was the only sound in the living room, save for the occasional clink of ice in Jim's glass. Jim, the father, was comfortably settled in his favorite chair, eyes fixed on the screen as the Orange County Orcas battled the Texas Outriders.

Lisa, his wife, popped her head into the living room with a grin. "We'll be back in a bit. Don't wait up."

Jim waved them off with a smile. "Go have fun, you two."

Lisa rolled her eyes good-naturedly and followed their daughter, Leigh, out the door. Jim and their son, Tim, were left to watch the final stretch of what was shaping up to be a memorable game.

The Orcas pitcher had been perfect so far, throwing strikes and keeping the Outriders hitless through eight innings. Jim's pulse quickened. A no-hitter in the ninth—this was a big deal. But with Gunner Rawls, the Outriders' volatile center fielder, up to bat in the ninth, Jim knew this game wasn't going to finish without drama.

The announcers began discussing the tension. "We're heading into the ninth inning now, folks, and the Orcas pitcher is still holding strong. But Rawls? He's a player with an attitude problem."

Jim nodded, already anticipating what was to come. Rawls was arrogant, brash, and unpredictable. If anyone was going to break up a no-hitter, it was him. And then, like clockwork, Rawls stepped into the batter's box. The camera zoomed in on him as he adjusted his gloves, an impassive look on his face.

The announcers were still talking about the unwritten rules of baseball—how no one should ever break up a no-hitter with a cheap play like a bunt. "In baseball," one of them explained, "there's an unwritten rule: you don't bunt when a no-hitter is on the line. It's considered disrespectful to the pitcher and the game. It's one of those rules you don't break."

"Unless you're Gunner Rawls," the other announcer quipped.

Jim's eyes narrowed as Rawls took his stance. With two outs in the ninth, it was his last chance to make an impact on the game. The crowd was already on edge. Then, in a move that shocked everyone, Rawls laid down a bunt. It was weak, barely rolling past the pitcher, but it was enough to break up the no-hitter.

"Unbelievable," one of the announcers muttered. "That's a bunt with two outs in the ninth to break up a no-hitter. That's a direct challenge to the pitcher and to the integrity of the game."

But Rawls wasn't done. Standing at first base, he turned toward the Orcas' dugout and shouted, "Orcs!"

The insult wasn't lost on anyone. "Orcs?" one of the announcers said incredulously. "That's a jab at the Orcas' team name. 'Orcs'—it's not just an insult to their identity; it's a way of calling them brutish, savage, without respect for the game. Rawls knew exactly what he was doing."

The Orcas dugout erupted in fury. Players jumped to their feet, shouting at Rawls, and within moments, the field was engulfed in a full-blown brawl. The camera caught glimpses of angry faces and players trying to restrain each other as the tension boiled over.

Jim could feel the energy shift in the room as he and Tim watched the chaos unfold. It wasn't just about the game anymore—it was about pride, and Rawls had poked the bear.

When the dust finally settled, the game continued. The Orcas' pitcher regained his composure, finishing out the game and securing the win with a final out. Despite the fight, the Orcas had come out on top, 11-0. The no-hitter had been broken up, but the real victory was in the scoreboard, not the statistics.

Jim leaned back in his chair, still processing what had just happened. This game would be talked about for a long time—not for the final score, but for the moment Rawls had crossed the line, turning a clean victory into something far more complicated.

Chapter 2: The Fallout

The game had ended, the Orcas securing an 11-0 victory, but the real story was just beginning. Gunner Rawls had broken up the no-hitter with a bunt single in the ninth inning, a move that ignited a firestorm of controversy. As the final out was recorded, the stadium buzzed with disbelief and anger.

In the locker room, the Orcas were seething. Their manager, a seasoned veteran of the game, paced back and forth, trying to maintain some semblance of order. "That was a cheap shot," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. "We don't play like that."

The players nodded in agreement, their faces a mix of frustration and disbelief. Rawls had always been a thorn in their side, but this was different. This was a blatant disregard for the unwritten rules of the game.

Outside the locker room, reporters gathered, eager to get a statement from the team's manager. Lisa, Jim's wife, had already left with Leigh for their music practice, and Tim was sitting quietly, his eyes still fixed on the screen, waiting for more.

The press conference was tense. The manager stood at the podium, his jaw clenched, as he addressed the media. "We don't condone what Rawls did," he said firmly. "It's not how we play the game. It's not how baseball is meant to be played."

The reporters fired off questions, but the manager remained composed, refusing to let Rawls' actions overshadow the team's victory. "We won the game," he reiterated. "That's what matters."

As the press conference concluded, Jim sat back in his chair, his mind racing. Rawls had crossed a line, and the fallout was far from over.

Then came the news.

A breaking news alert flashed across the screen: "Gunner Rawls found dead in the locker room. Authorities investigating."

Jim's heart sank. Rawls had been a polarizing figure, but no one deserved this. The game, the rivalry, it all seemed so trivial now.

His phone buzzed, snapping him back to reality. It was Mark, an old friend from the police force.

"Hey, Jim," Mark's voice crackled through the line. "You hear about Rawls?"

"Yeah," Jim replied, his voice tight. "What happened?"

"We're still piecing things together," Mark said. "But there's something off about this. Stay tuned."

Jim hung up, the weight of Mark's words settling in. Rawls was dead. And somehow, Jim had a feeling this was just the beginning.

Chapter 3: Into the Unknown

Jim Shore was reviewing the game's final statistics when his phone rang. Recognizing the caller ID, he answered promptly.

"Jim, it's Mark. There's been a murder at the stadium. Gunner Rawls is dead. I need you here at the scene."

"Understood. I'm on my way," Jim replied, already grabbing his jacket.

He turned to his son, Tim, who was still engrossed in the post-game analysis.

"Tim, I have to head out. Something's come up at the stadium. Stay here, and don't open the door for anyone. I'll be back soon."

Tim looked up, concern flickering in his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"Just some post-game issues. Nothing for you to worry about," Jim assured him before stepping out.

The drive to the stadium was swift, the streets relatively empty at this hour. Upon arrival, the area was cordoned off with police tape, and the flashing lights of patrol cars illuminated the night.

Approaching the perimeter, Jim was stopped by a uniformed officer.

"I'm Jim Shore, Consultant with the Orange County Sheriff's Department," he stated, presenting his credentials. "Detective Mark Reynolds is expecting me."

The officer nodded, lifting the tape to allow Jim entry.

Inside, the atmosphere was tense. Officers moved purposefully, gathering evidence and documenting the scene. Jim spotted Mark near the locker room entrance.

"Jim, glad you're here," Mark greeted him. "It's a mess. Rawls was found dead in the locker room. We're treating it as a homicide."

Jim nodded, his expression serious. "Let's get to work."

Chapter 4: Shadows and Reflections

The locker room buzzed with activity—flashing cameras, murmured conversations, and the rustle of evidence bags. Jim Shore stood at the threshold, taking in the scene with a practiced eye.

Standing at six feet and weighing around 200 pounds, Jim's athletic build hinted at a past steeped in physical rigor. His sandy blonde hair was neatly combed back, revealing piercing blue eyes that missed little. Clean-shaven and dressed in jeans, a button-up shirt, and a windbreaker, his demeanor exuded both authority and approachability.

Detective Mark Reynolds approached, his presence commanding attention. Slightly taller than Jim, Mark's dark brown hair was neatly styled, complementing his deep-set hazel eyes that seemed to analyze everything they observed. Clad in a charcoal gray suit, his tie slightly loosened, Mark embodied the seasoned detective—methodical, relentless, and deeply intuitive.

"Jim," Mark greeted, extending a firm handshake.

"Mark," Jim replied, his gaze shifting to the covered body in the center of the room.

Mark led him closer, lifting the edge of the sheet to reveal Gunner Rawls' lifeless face. The once-vibrant athlete now lay still, his expression frozen in surprise.

"Time of death is estimated between 10:00 and 10:30 PM," Mark stated. "No signs of forced entry. Preliminary cause appears to be blunt force trauma to the back of the head."

Jim nodded, scanning the room. "Any witnesses?"

"Not yet. Custodial staff found him during their routine cleaning. We're reviewing security footage and interviewing team members."

Jim's eyes settled on a nearby locker, its door slightly ajar. Inside, a baseball bat rested at an odd angle, its handle smeared with what appeared to be blood.

"Has this been processed?" he inquired, pointing to the bat.

"Just about to. Could be our murder weapon."

Jim stepped back, his mind piecing together the fragments. The stadium, the timing, the victim—each element a thread in a complex tapestry.

"We'll need to delve into Rawls' relationships—teammates, rivals, anyone with a motive," Jim mused.

Mark nodded in agreement. "Agreed. Let's start compiling a list."

As they moved to a quieter corner to strategize, the weight of the investigation settled over them. The game was over, but the real challenge had just begun.

Chapter 5: Echoes in the Hallway

The stadium, once filled with cheers and conflict, now echoed with the sterile sounds of a crime scene. The locker room had been sealed off, but the hallway just beyond remained a flurry of quiet tension. Officers spoke in low tones, clipboards in hand, their shadows stretching long under the fluorescent lights.

Jim stood outside the locker room, letting the atmosphere settle in his bones. Mark joined him, holding two Styrofoam cups of burnt coffee. “Not exactly gourmet,” he said, offering one to Jim, “but it’s hot.”

Jim took it with a nod, sipping cautiously. “I assume the footage is on its way?”

Mark gestured to the hallway monitors. “Already being reviewed. There are gaps, though. Cameras inside the locker rooms? Still off-limits, union rules. Closest we’ve got is from the tunnel entrance.”

Jim raised an eyebrow. “Convenient.”

Mark gave a half-smile. “Yeah. And a PR nightmare waiting to happen.”

They walked slowly down the hallway, glancing at locker doors, security panels, and scuff marks on the concrete floor. Jim paused near a bench.

“This area,” he said, pointing to a cluster of vending machines across from the visitor locker room. “Wide view. Could’ve been a good vantage point. Anyone loitering here would’ve seen who came and went.”

Mark took a note. “We’ll pull logs from nearby security card readers too. Though so far, nothing unusual’s popped.”

They continued their sweep. At the end of the hallway, a janitor was giving a statement to a patrol officer, gesturing nervously toward the locker room.

Jim approached gently. “Mind if we ask a few follow-ups?”

The janitor—late 40s, weary-eyed—nodded. “Sure. I just do maintenance here.

Wasn't expecting any of this."

"What time did you find the body?" Jim asked.

"A little after ten-fifteen. I'd just finished up the west corridor. I opened the door and saw him on the ground. I thought he'd passed out or something."

"Did you see anyone else nearby?"

The man hesitated. "There was someone leaving right before I got there. Maybe a player. Hoodie pulled up. Couldn't see much."

Jim and Mark exchanged a look.

"Did they say anything?"

The janitor shook his head. "Just walked past fast. No eye contact. Looked tense. But that could just be post-game stuff."

Mark scribbled in his notepad. "Thanks. That helps."

As the janitor moved on, Jim stared back toward the locker room door.

"One shadow," he murmured. "Could be nothing. Could be everything."

Mark nodded. "Either way, we're not in the dugout anymore."

Chapter 6: The Interview Room

The interview room inside the stadium's administrative wing was quiet, save for the soft hum of the overhead light. Jim sat across from Cole Hastings, the Orcas' team captain and veteran first baseman. He had a reputation as a stand-up guy—respected by teammates, fans, even rivals. But tonight, respect wasn't enough to keep him off the list of potential suspects.

Mark leaned against the wall, arms crossed, while Jim did the talking.

Cole fidgeted in his seat, his hands clasped tightly in front of him. "You seriously think someone from our team did this?"

"We're not accusing anyone," Jim said calmly. "We're just trying to understand what happened. You were one of the last to see Rawls alive."

Cole looked up, his eyes a mix of anger and disbelief. "Yeah, I saw him. We all did. After that stunt he pulled, the whole team was heated. But murder? Come on."

Jim leaned forward slightly. "Walk us through what happened after the game. Start from the final out."

Cole sighed. "After we got the last guy out, the dugout exploded—half celebration, half fury. Rawls was smirking the whole time like he'd just pulled off the greatest prank of the century. A couple of guys shouted at him—nothing new. I went back to the locker room, changed, grabbed a protein shake, and headed out. Didn't even see Rawls again."

Mark spoke for the first time. "You left right after the game?"

"About fifteen, twenty minutes after. Security had started clearing out the fans. Look, I hated what he did, but I didn't hate him. He was a showboat. That's not a crime."

Mark scribbled a note. "Was anyone close to snapping?"

"Danny Vega maybe," Cole admitted. "He's young, emotional. He'd been working closely with our pitcher all season, helping him build toward this no-hitter. Rawls

humiliated him. Humiliated us. Danny stormed out before I did.”

“Where’d he go?” Jim asked.

“No clue. But if you’re looking for someone who took this personally... it’s probably him.”

Jim nodded, thanking Cole and standing up. “We’ll be in touch.”

As they stepped out into the hallway, Mark glanced over. “Danny Vega’s not on our cleared list. Want me to bring him in?”

“Yeah,” Jim said. “Let’s talk to the kid.”

Mark paused. “You think he did it?”

Jim didn’t answer right away. “I think Rawls made a career out of poking people in the chest and laughing. But sometimes... the wrong person pokes back.”

Chapter 7 – The Locker Room Lineup

Detective Mark Reynolds stood just outside the visitors' locker room, arms crossed as the forensic team worked the scene. Gunner Rawls had been found near the end of the row of lockers, slumped on the floor, a jagged wound on the side of his head. Blood pooled beneath him. The air still held that metallic scent.

The bat—standard issue, team-marked—had been retrieved just a few feet away. It sat now in an evidence bag on the bench outside the locker room, bloodstained but wiped clean of prints.

Jim Shore stepped up beside Mark, eyes scanning the room. “Same bat he used during the game?”

“No way to be sure yet,” Mark said. “But it’s from the team’s rack. Not brought in from outside.”

“Impulse or convenience,” Jim muttered. “Either way, someone snapped.”

Before Mark could reply, a deputy stepped in. “Detective, there’s someone here asking to speak with you. Jack Money. Said he’s Rawls’ agent.”

Mark sighed. “Send him in.”

Moments later, Jack Money strode in like he owned the building. Designer sunglasses still on. Suit too slick for a ballgame. He stopped just short of the locker room door, looked around like he was assessing property.

“Detective Reynolds?” he said. “I’m Jack Money—most folks in the business call me Jack ‘More’ Money.” He smiled like it was supposed to land better.

Jim gave him a polite nod. “That nickname says a lot.”

Money ignored the jab. “This is a tragedy. Rawls was a headcase, sure, but no one deserves this. I’m here to cooperate.”

Mark pulled out his notepad. “When did you last speak with Rawls?”

“Earlier this evening. After the game. We argued. He fired me.”

"Fired you?" Jim said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Told me I was holding him back. That he didn't care about brand value or endorsements. Said he was 'free.' Like he was trying to reinvent himself."

Jim glanced at Mark. "Was there bad blood before tonight?"

"Rawls was... difficult," Money said carefully. "But tonight was different. He embarrassed himself. That bunt? It was suicide for his image. I told him as much. He didn't care."

"Did you threaten him?" Mark asked.

Money gave a slow blink. "No. I told him I was out. And I left. If you check the parking lot cams, you'll see my car pulling out. I made a call. Time-stamped. You'll get it."

Mark didn't say anything for a moment. Then: "We will. Thanks for your time."

As Money turned and strutted off, Jim shook his head. "That guy's got snake oil in his veins."

Mark didn't argue. "Rawls fires his agent after a public meltdown... and winds up dead in a locked room minutes later."

"Fits the 'bad day turned worse' profile."

Mark looked back toward the locker room. "Or someone had enough."

Chapter 8: Swing for the Fences

Jim stood just inside the Orcas' locker room, letting the cool air and heavy silence settle around him. A strip of yellow tape still cordoned off the row of lockers where Rawls had been found, slumped awkwardly on the floor. His duffel bag sat untouched nearby, zipper half-pulled, like he'd been in mid-motion before everything stopped.

Detective Mark Reynolds crouched next to the outline the forensics team had chalked hours earlier. "Blunt force. No defensive wounds. No sign of forced entry."

"Bat?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. Based on the bruising pattern and the angle of impact. One clean shot to the back of the head. Ballistics is checking which bat did it."

"Any cameras in here?"

Reynolds shook his head. "Of course not. Team policy. No cameras in the players' locker room. Privacy, contracts, egos."

Jim looked over at the empty bench where Rawls once sat. "So the murderer had time. No panic. No rush. Someone he trusted, maybe."

Mark stood up, brushing his hands on his slacks. "We're checking everyone who entered and exited the locker room post-game. But you know how chaotic these games get—press, friends, even family sometimes."

Jim glanced around. "Where's Jack Money?"

"Already gone. His assistant says Rawls fired him in the parking lot after the game. They argued, then Money peeled off in a rental car."

"Anyone get a plate number?"

"Of course," Mark said. "Rental was traced. Already flagged."

Jim nodded. "Let's bring him in."

Reynolds hesitated. "You think Money did it?"

"I think he had motive, timing, and a reason to disappear," Jim said. "And if Rawls really fired him minutes before he ended up dead, that's not just a red flag—that's a red carpet."

Chapter 9: The Agent in the Spotlight

Jack “More” Money wore mirrored sunglasses indoors and a silver blazer that practically reflected the interrogation room walls. His legs were crossed like he was lounging poolside, not sitting under fluorescent lights with two detectives eyeing him like a rattlesnake in a sandbox.

Jim and Mark had let the silence stretch past comfortable. Eventually, Money cracked first.

“If this is about Gunner,” he said, “I already told your boys at the front desk—I didn’t kill him.”

“Why don’t you tell us again?” Mark said, flipping open his notepad.

Jack sighed. “We argued. Yeah. We’ve argued before. Rawls was... how do I say this nicely... a flaming ego wrapped in cleats. He embarrassed me out there.”

“By bunting?” Jim asked.

“By bunting,” Jack repeated, as if the word tasted bad. “That kid had a shot at history. Millions in future earnings. Endorsements. And he throws it away on a bunt just to make some weird statement? I built his brand for five years. And in five seconds, he made it look like a joke.”

Jim leaned forward. “So you lost money. Your reputation took a hit. Rawls fires you in front of everyone—then he ends up dead.”

Jack took off his sunglasses slowly. “You think I killed him with a bat? I wouldn’t even hold a bat. Might smudge the watch.”

Mark spoke up. “Where’d you go after he fired you?”

“Straight to the airport. I was on the 11:55 pm. to Vegas. I’ve got the boarding pass.”

“We’ll verify it,” Jim said, but his tone didn’t promise anything.

Money gave a smug shrug. “Look, I had motive, sure. But murder? That’s career suicide. And I like my career.”

Jim looked at Mark, then back at Jack. “You ever swing a bat in your life, Mr. Money?”

“Only in T-ball,” Jack said with a grin. “And I quit after one game. Got my shoes dirty.”

Chapter 10: Batting Practice

The forensics report came in late morning. Jim and Mark stood in the OCSD bullpen, sifting through the summary while the hum of ringing phones and clacking keyboards filled the background.

“Blunt force trauma to the back of the head,” Mark read aloud. “Based on contusions, the weapon was round, wooden, and consistent with the diameter of a standard baseball bat.”

Jim nodded. “So we’re back to the obvious.”

“No fingerprints on the bat,” Mark added. “But get this—it was Rawls’ own bat. The one he used in the game.”

Jim raised an eyebrow. “The same bat he bunted with?”

“Yup. It was returned to his locker. Killer used what was right there.”

Jim looked down the hallway toward the evidence room. “It’s personal. No gloves. No cleanup. Just rage.”

Mark tapped the file. “And Rawls was still in his uniform. This happened fast. Someone followed him into the locker room after the game, argued, and struck him. No time for premeditation.”

They headed toward the stadium to retrace the steps.

Back inside the visiting locker room, the air was still heavy with the sterile scent of bleach. The bloodstained floor had been scrubbed, but the ghost of what happened lingered.

Jim stood by Rawls’ locker. “You know what gets me? He was arrogant. Cocky. He makes this big gesture on the field—then just sits here, like nothing’s going to happen.”

Mark leaned against a bench. “Maybe he thought no one would dare confront him. Or maybe he knew someone would—and he welcomed it.”

Jim turned slowly. “We need to re-interview the staff. Trainers, equipment guys,

media reps—anyone who had access after the game.”

“Security footage only shows five people in or out between final pitch and the body discovery. And three of them were already cleared.”

“Let’s get the list.”

As they walked out, Mark muttered, “You think it was rage?”

Jim looked ahead. “Yeah. But not just rage. Something more.”

Mark didn’t press.

Chapter 11: The Thirty-Four Minute Window

Jim stood over the workstation while COMPUTER replayed the surveillance footage in precise, calculated loops. Mark Reynolds leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching with a detective's narrowed eyes.

COMPUTER's interface displayed a timestamp overlay. Locker room hallway. 9:43 PM. Rawls entered, alone. No one came out until 10:17 PM, when a stadium staffer discovered the body.

Jim nodded. "That's a thirty-four minute gap. Long enough for anything."

"Plenty of time for a heated argument to turn violent," Mark said. "Especially if the guy was already in there."

"Or slipped in unnoticed," Jim added.

COMPUTER chimed with a calm prompt:

Note: Rawls entered locker room at 9:43 PM. No other entries or exits recorded until 10:17 PM.

Mark exhaled. "So unless he was talking to himself in there, someone else was present."

Jim tapped the keyboard.

Search: Jack Money. Wi-Fi connectivity logs. Geo-location scan.

Seconds passed.

Result: Jack Money's phone connected to stadium guest Wi-Fi at 9:35 PM. Disconnected at 9:48 PM.

"That's not long after Rawls got inside," Mark muttered. "Enough time for a confrontation."

Jim nodded. "Especially if Rawls had just fired him. Money's reputation wouldn't survive being dumped by a player like Rawls."

Mark frowned. "And the bat—how symbolic is that? An agent known for chasing

money takes a swing with the very thing that made Rawls valuable.”

Jim cracked his knuckles. “Motivation, opportunity, and now a digital trail. We’re getting close.”

“We just need something to tie him to the locker room itself,” Mark said.

Jim paused the footage again. “Let’s talk to the janitor. He may not realize what he saw.”

Mark nodded. “People notice more than they think. They just don’t always know it matters.”

The two men turned toward the exit, one step closer to finishing a puzzle built out of ego, betrayal, and a broken contract.

Chapter 12: The Janitor's Memory

Luis Mendoza had been working at the stadium for fourteen years. He didn't care much for baseball, but he liked the quiet hours after the game ended—the hum of machines, the smell of bleach, the stillness that came once the crowd had cleared.

Jim and Mark met him in a utility hallway behind the locker rooms. Luis stood beside a cleaning cart, wiping his hands on a towel. He looked nervous but curious.

"You said you remembered something?" Jim asked gently.

Luis nodded slowly. "Yeah. I didn't think it was anything. But when I saw the news—what happened to that player—I figured maybe I should talk."

Mark flipped open a small notebook. "Go on."

"I was sweeping by the south corridor, maybe 9:50 or so. That's when I saw him—Rawls' agent. The guy with the slicked-back hair."

"Jack Money," Jim confirmed.

Luis nodded. "Yeah. He was heading toward the locker room. Fast. Like he was mad about something."

Jim glanced at Mark.

"Did you see him leave?" Mark asked.

Luis shook his head. "No. I took a break after that. Went upstairs to the break room for some water. Came back down about ten, and everything seemed normal. No yelling, no alarms."

Jim tilted his head. "What time do you usually finish that section?"

"I had just started the lower level when I saw him. I was running late. That's why I remember the time."

Jim tapped a note into his phone. "Did you hear anything unusual after you came back down? Maybe something from the locker room?"

Luis hesitated. "Actually, yeah. A loud thump. Like something heavy falling. But I figured it was gear or someone throwing a tantrum. Happens more than you'd think after a loss."

"How loud?" Mark asked.

Luis thought for a second. "Loud enough I stopped and listened. But then... nothing. So I kept working."

Jim smiled faintly. "Luis, you just helped us narrow the timeline even further."

Mark flipped his notebook closed. "And place Jack Money at the scene."

Luis rubbed the back of his neck. "I just hope it helps. I liked that Rawls kid. He had attitude, yeah, but he talked to me once. Asked about my night. That doesn't happen much."

"It helps," Jim said. "A lot."

As they walked away, Jim whispered, "I think we just found the missing piece."

Chapter 13: The Brand Break

The team reconvened at the Santa Ana substation conference room, a whiteboard now filled with a tangled timeline of scribbles, player photos, and red arrows.

Jim drew a circle around one name: Jack “More” Money.

“Let’s go over what we know,” he said, stepping back. “Rawls lays down the bunt, gets booed, and torpedoes the narrative of a perfect game. Agent is furious—brand value plummets. Rawls fires him. Then two hours later, he ends up dead in the locker room.”

Detective Reynolds added, “And Jack Money is the last person seen heading toward that locker room before the body is discovered.”

“And he has motive,” Jim added. “That bunt didn’t just wreck a game—it wrecked a marketing pipeline. Endorsements. Future contracts. A payday for both of them.”

Mark nodded. “It’s not just business—it’s personal. Money wasn’t in it for Rawls. He was in it for the cut.”

“And Rawls cutting ties meant no more cut,” Jim said. “No more Rawls, no more relevance.”

COMPUTER’s voice chimed in from the speaker. “Additional data confirms Rawls recently terminated Jack Money’s representation via email. Timestamp: 7:34 PM. Subject line: ‘Effective Immediately.’”

Jim looked over at Mark. “So he didn’t even wait until after the game.”

Mark whistled. “Cold.”

Jim pointed at the board. “Money loses his biggest client during the fifth inning. By the time the game ends, he’s steaming. He heads into the locker room before the press can get in, finds Rawls alone, and makes a choice.”

“Impulsive?” Mark asked.

“Possibly. But not unplanned. Money always thought two steps ahead—when it

benefited him. Rawls cut him off before he could stage-manage the brand recovery. That was a fatal mistake.”

Mark circled the bat in a photo pinned to the wall.

“Only thing left,” he said, “is tying Money to the bat.”

Jim smirked. “I’ve got a feeling he left fingerprints. Guys like that always think they’re untouchable.”

Chapter 14: The Break in the Ninth

The late afternoon sun painted long shadows across the quiet Santa Ana station as Jim and Mark settled into the small, secure interview room. Jack “More” Money sat across from them, the glint in his eyes no longer cocky, but cornered. The tension in the room was thick—like the final innings of a game with everything on the line.

Jim placed the hand-held COMPUTER device gently on the table, its subtle blue glow a sharp contrast to the bland gray of the walls.

“Let’s walk through it again,” Jim said evenly. “From the top.”

Money leaned back in the chair, fingers drumming a nervous rhythm against the table. “I already told you everything I know.”

Jim didn’t flinch. “You told us what happened after Rawls fired you. But not why you were still in the locker room that late.”

Mark folded his arms. “You knew where the security blind spots were. You were familiar with the timing of stadium staff shifts. This wasn’t a confrontation that got out of hand. It was planned.”

Money’s jaw tightened. “Planned? You think I planned to beat a guy to death with his own bat? You’re outta your mind.”

Jim leaned forward. “No. We think you snapped. Rawls humiliated you. Fired you in front of other players. And worse—he called you out. Said you were just another leech.”

Money’s nostrils flared.

“Then,” Jim continued, tapping the COMPUTER device, “he went and broke up a perfect game with a bunt. You knew exactly what that would do to his reputation. That you’d lose money—millions—because no one wanted to sign a guy who did that.”

Mark added, “You told him it was a bad idea. You warned him it would hurt his

brand. And when he didn't listen, you lost it."

Money stared at the floor, silent.

Jim activated a playback on COMPUTER. The room filled with the faint sound of stadium hallway chatter, then Rawls' unmistakable voice: "Jack's just mad he backed the wrong horse. Maybe now he can go find someone who actually plays to win."

The timestamp showed it was captured just an hour before Rawls was found dead.

Money's mouth twisted into a bitter line. "He never respected me. I built his brand from nothing. Got him endorsement deals when he was batting .220. He treated me like trash."

Jim nodded slowly. "And you were there. In the locker room. After the others had cleared out."

Silence.

Then, finally, Money looked up, eyes raw. "He called me 'More Money' like it was a joke. Said I'd be lucky to get a Little League player next."

Mark's voice softened just slightly. "And that's when you picked up the bat."

Money didn't deny it. "I didn't plan to kill him. I just wanted him to shut up for once."

COMPUTER let out a soft chime as the confession was logged and encrypted.

Jim stood, meeting Mark's eyes. "Let's get this filed."

As they stepped out, the hallway was quiet—eerily so. The case had broken like a bat over the knee. Not because of mystery or intrigue. But because of pride. Ego. And a man who couldn't handle losing control over his own narrative.

Just like the unwritten rule said: you don't bunt in the ninth to break up a perfect game.

But Rawls had.

And Jack Money had answered with one final swing.

Chapter 15: The Bottom of the Ninth

The sun dipped low over Orange County, casting a golden hue across the stadium. The stands were filled with fans dressed head-to-toe in the home team's colors—orange and white. Orcas jerseys and caps were everywhere. There was a feeling in the air that this wasn't just any game—it was a return, a restoration.

In Section 112, Row G, the Shore family was seated: Jim, then Tim, then Leigh, then Lisa.

Jim wore his white Orcas jersey with orange lettering and a matching cap, sitting with a quiet pride. Tim had the same number on his jersey—7—and was bouncing with anticipation. He leaned forward constantly, trying to catch a glimpse of the players warming up.

Leigh, nestled between her older brother and her mom, clutched her stuffed Orcas with both arms. Her orange cap slid a little too low over her forehead, but she refused to let anyone adjust it again. Lisa smiled, gently brushing Leigh's shoulder and soaking in the energy of the crowd.

The PA system crackled. "Ladies and gentlemen, please rise and remove your caps for the singing of our national anthem." Bryan Duncan stepped forward near home plate, microphone in hand. His smooth, soulful voice carried through the ballpark, wrapping the crowd in a reverent stillness as he sang "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Everyone stood. Jim rested a hand on Tim's shoulder. Lisa took Leigh's hand. The anthem began, the stadium hushed, and for a moment, it was as if the past few weeks had never happened.

As the final note rang out and the cheers surged back to life, the players took their positions on the field. The announcer's voice boomed over the speakers, introducing the Orcas one by one. The crowd roared with every name.

Detective Mark Reynolds stood quietly a few rows down, blending into the crowd in a plain polo and jeans. He turned as Jim made his way over to him in the

concourse.

"Didn't think I'd see you here," Jim said.

Mark smirked. "Had to see the result of all that work. You were right. It wasn't about stats. It was about people."

Jim gave a small nod. "Truth always wins. Even in the ninth."

Mark looked toward the field. "So... Monday morning?"

"Absolutely," Jim said. "But this time, donuts are on you."

Mark chuckled and disappeared into the crowd. Jim turned back toward Section 112.

Back in their row, the first batter stepped to the plate as Jim slid into his seat.

Leigh clutched her Orcas tighter and pointed. "There they are!"

Tim leaned toward his dad. "Do you think we'll win?"

Jim put an arm around his son and looked out at the field. "We already did."

Lisa smiled softly and rested her hand on Jim's. "Feels good, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "It feels right."

As the pitcher wound up and the ball sailed toward home plate, the family sat shoulder to shoulder, caps on and eyes forward.

The past was behind them.

The truth was out.

And the Orcas were back where they belonged.