

PLAY AT THE PLATE

There's absolutely nothing like it. A play at the plate. Ultimate baseball drama condensed into a few scant seconds, often with the entire game on the line. If you're the catcher....once that runner breaks from third base, every nerve in your body stands to attention. You rip your face mask off, throwing it well clear of the action, step over home plate and look for an angle to block the base runner from touching it.

You *know* that if the throw is good and online, if you catch and hold that ball firmly in your catcher's mitt (two hands!) when the runner reaches home plate...you just might be in for the collision of your life. Realizing you're about to tag him out, your opponent has only two choices. One, try to slide and evade your tag, or two, run into you head on at full speed in a desperate attempt to separate you and the ball, and thus be safe.

And if you're the base runner...

Well, it's your play, isn't it? You're forcing the action, trying to score, and forcing the reaction too. What a rush. As you motor down that baseline, you're dimly aware of other things. The roar of the crowd, instinctively rising to their feet as the adrenaline courses through them as well. Guys are yelling, opposing players shouting instructions, warnings and encouragement to each other. Positions are being shifted defensively. If there are other runners on base behind you, you'll see the pitcher cross your line of vision, hurrying to set up well behind the catcher and back up an errant throw.

You'll see and hear lots of things...but within a few seconds, your entire universe narrows into a tiny tunnel of concentration, and you'll hear only two things. The thud of your own footsteps running, and the pounding of your heart. Beating so hard that you feel it in your *ears*, thumping like your chest will explode. And then the outcome; the play at the plate. Safe...or out? That's like life and death, right? Push all the chips to the middle of the table. Bet on yourself. Everything on the line.

That's exactly what it feels like now. All I can hear is my heart pounding, the roar of my own blood in my ears. I've got my head down, chin tucked into my chest. My ball cap is pulled low so the security cameras won't get a good image of my face. The bank teller's eyes look like they're about to pop right out of her pretty face. I know she feels the rush too, and not in a good way. Gun in my hand, I've just told her to give me all the money, and that I've memorized her name tag. If she gives me the cash along with the exploding dye packs, when I get out of prison I'll come back here, kill her *and* her entire family. No matter HOW long it takes.

And I meant that too. Absolutely. Never say anything you don't really mean. If you don't have your word, what do you have, right?

Shaking like a leaf in November, she pushes the cash across the counter in a bank satchel. I grab it and head for the bank's door. I'm the focus of the crowd, the center of attention. I'm the base runner. It's my play, isn't it?

As my hand reaches for the door, I'm thinking. Safe...or out?