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LOW
CHICAGO



WILD
CARDS

EDITED BY

GEORGE R.R.
MARTIN

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A

George Raymond Richard Martin

Wild Cards

Аннотация

The return of the famous shared-world superhero books created and edited by George R.R. Martin, author of A Song of Ice and Fire. For decades, George R.R. Martin – bestselling author of A Song of Ice and Fire – has collaborated with an ever-shifting ensemble of science fiction and fantasy icons to create the amazing Wild Cards universe. In the aftermath of World War II, the Earth's population was devastated by a terrifying alien virus. Those who survived were changed for ever. Some, known as Jokers, were cursed with bizarre mental and physical deformities; others, granted superhuman abilities, are known as Aces. Wild Cards tells the stories of this world.

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LOW CHICAGO



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Dedication

To Lezli Robyn

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Low Chicago

a variant of seven-card stud poker
wherein the high hand splits the pot
with the low spade in the hole

A Long Night at the Palmer House

by John Jos. Miller

Part 1

IT HAD BEEN ONE hundred and forty-two years since John Nighthawk had been inside the Palmer House, and then it had been the earlier incarnation of the luxurious Chicago hotel, known simply as the Palmer.

Nighthawk's age was not apparent in his appearance. He was a smallish black man in a dark pin-striped suit with a discreet kidskin glove on his left hand. He looked to be in his thirties. He sighed as he gazed at the entrance to the hotel. *Perhaps*, he thought, *it's finally time to lay old ghosts*. He hurried across the street, dodging early morning traffic with the ease of the longtime urbanite, and entered the hotel's lobby.

Inside he paused momentarily, suddenly almost overwhelmed as one of his visions washed over him. They were part of the powers he'd gained on that first Wild Card Day in 1946 and usually came as warnings of great danger lurking in the near future. This one was more incoherent than usual, chaotic scenes of fire and ice, of great beasts and shifting landscapes, of quick flashes of the past he'd once seen and an even vaster past he'd never imagined.

He stood for a moment catching his breath, then went on to

the elevator bank and up to the seventh floor, wondering what was in store for him this time around.



The door to room 777 opened at Nighthawk's light knock, and he found himself looking down into the large, expressive eyes of a man even shorter and slighter than himself, no more than five four and maybe a hundred and ten pounds. The crown of his head was totally bald and there were baggy wrinkles under his soulful eyes. He looked as if he were in his fifties.

It took Nighthawk a moment to place his face. He was the spitting image of the actor Donald Meek. Nighthawk had loved him in *Stagecoach*, the original version with John Wayne. He'd seen it at the Theatre back in 1939 when it'd first come out.

"You must be John Nighthawk." The man's voice was high and flighty, fussy sounding.

"I am."

"Come in, come in, and meet the client."

Nighthawk entered the suite's sitting room. It was luxuriously appointed, as one would expect in the Palmer House, with period furniture that was a little too heavy and ornate for Nighthawk's taste. Death himself stood in the doorway between the sitting room and one of the two bedrooms.

Death was tall, well over six feet, and cadaverously lean. He

wore a black suit of old-fashioned cut and fabric. Rubies the size of walnuts gleamed in his silver cuff links. His face and head were skeletal, fleshless, mere yellowish skin stretched tightly over bone. His teeth, white and perfect, were exposed by a lipless grin.

“Perhaps you know Mr. Charles Dutton?” the man who looked like Donald Meek said. “The client.”

“We’ve never met,” Nighthawk said, “but of course I’ve heard much about you, sir.”

Dutton inclined his head. “And I of you, sir. I would like to engage you to help Mr. Meek take care of me for the next few days.”

Dutton’s voice was as cadaverous as Nighthawk expected it would be.

“You’re here for the game.” Nighthawk was so sure that he made it a statement rather than a question.

Dutton’s rictus of a smile may have widened a millimeter. “Quite so. You know of the game, Mr. Nighthawk?”

He did. “Poker. Dealer’s choice. Seven players. Hosted by Giovanni Galante, a high-ranking member of Chicago’s most prominent crime family. A million-dollar cash buy-in. Each player is allowed two attendants.”

“Some bring whores,” Dutton said dismissively.

“Some bring bodyguards,” Meek added.

Dutton’s eyes were dark and unreadable in the skin and bone of his face. “It begins tonight in a suite on an upper floor of the Palmer House and continues until one player has acquired all of

the chips. I intend to be that player.”

Nighthawk nodded. He frowned at Meek. The man was not physically impressive. It was hard to imagine him guarding anyone. But of course he was not the real Donald Meek. The actor had been dead for decades. But there was a certain shadowy ace from New York City who called himself Mr. Nobody who could change his appearance at will and often liked to mimic film stars from the past. And Charles Dutton had been associated with Mr. Nobody, as he recalled.

“And your ace is?” Nighthawk asked Meek.

Meek giggled. “I make problems ... disappear.”

“Okay.” If Nobody wanted to keep things close to his vest, that was all right with Nighthawk.

Dutton nodded to Meek. “Mr. Nighthawk will make a satisfactory addition to our little team.”

“Oh my, yes,” Meek said. “I told you he was the man for the job, Mr. Dutton.”

“Galante is hosting,” Dutton said, “but the names of the other players are supposedly secret until game time. I know that I have the ultimate poker face ... but it might be helpful if we knew ahead of time who else will be attending.”

“And,” Meek added, “if we knew if they were bringing hookers or guns. Or both.”

“You being a local man, with contacts ...” Dutton added.

“I’ll get right on it,” Nighthawk said.

“An inestimable choice,” Dutton said to Meek. Death sounded

pleased.



The game was set for a suite on the Palmer House's penultimate floor. Most of the regular furniture had been removed from the sitting room, though a couple of small sofas and overstuffed chairs were scattered around for the attendants, bodyguards, and other onlookers. A bar stood before one wall with rows of liquor bottles behind it. Doors to three bedrooms opened off the sitting room and a bathroom was located in the short hallway that led from the entrance to the sitting room.

A large purpose-built poker table covered with green felt filled the center of the room, with a lavish chandelier hanging over it. Seven comfortable leather chairs for the players were spaced around the table, with a number of other chairs a few feet back for the players' attendants. Most of those chairs were already occupied when Nighthawk, Meek, and Dutton entered the room.

Nighthawk knew all of the players already present and several of their attendants. He would have recognized most of them even if he hadn't spent the morning and afternoon hitting up his sources for information.

Foremost was their host, Giovanni Galante, presumptive heir to the Galante crime family. He was a familiar figure around Chicago. Mid-twenties, handsome in a sleazy way, he wore

expensive, tasteless suits and potent cologne that failed to hide the smell of hard liquor that accompanied him everywhere he went. He was already at it, drinking whiskey out of a cut-glass tumbler, straight with only a couple of ice cubes.

One of Galante's companions sat in a chair close to the table ... though "sat" was an inadequate word to describe the way she held herself. "Posed" was perhaps more accurate, in a tight white designer gown that plunged low down the front and was cut high up her left hip, leaving an expanse of shapely thigh exposed. The ruby earrings and necklace were no more spectacular than her lush red hair. Her skin was flawless cream, her eyes a brilliant blue. An onlooker would be forgiven for assuming she was just arm candy, but Nighthawk knew better. Her name was Cynder and she was an ace with a potent flame-wielding ability. She worked full-time for the Galante family as a bodyguard and enforcer.

There could be no doubt about the nature of the man who stood stolidly behind Galante's chair, hands clasped, eyes alive with suspicion. Nighthawk had never crossed paths with him before, but he knew of him. His name was Khan. Compared to Nighthawk, he was a relative newcomer to the Chicago scene, making his bones in the last decade or so as a freelance bodyguard. At six three and three hundred pounds, his physical prowess was evident, but the wild card virus had given him more than muscles. Half of his body was an anthropomorphic version of a Bengal tiger. His left side, including his face, was covered

in black-striped orange and white fur, and he had fangs, a green feline eye, and cat whiskers. His left hand and foot were thicker and bigger than normal and had, now retracted, razorsharp claws on all digits. To match the tiger fur on the left side of his face, Khan had grown a dark beard on the right and braided little bells into it, his own little cat joke. He mimicked the natural eyeliner of his tiger eye with cosmetics around his human eye.

As Nighthawk entered the room, followed closely by Meek, Khan's gaze swept over them both. He seemed puzzled by Meek, but when his eyes met Nighthawk's they widened a little. He nodded at Nighthawk. Nighthawk nodded back.

He and Meek stepped aside and Dutton, who liked to make a dramatic entrance, followed them into the room. Silence fell as everyone turned to look.

Dutton wore a black tuxedo of old-fashioned cut, complete with a top hat and opera cape. He was a symphony of black and white, except for the rubies that burned red at his wrists and the red rose pinned to his jacket. A black mask completely covered his face.

Galante called out affably, "Ah, you must be Charles Dutton, our guest from New York! Come in, come in! Grab a seat. Here—take this one—" He gestured to the empty chair next to the man seated to his left. "You know Jack, right?"

"Yes." Dutton's voice couldn't have been colder. He moved around the table, to another empty chair.

Galante shrugged. "Or, hell, take that one. It don't matter.

Does it, Jack?”

“No,” Golden Boy said. He was a handsome, apparently young man, blond, an athletic six two, maybe a hundred and ninety pounds. He looked incredibly healthy. He was Jack Braun, the infamous strongman of the Four Aces, the first group of public aces. He’d gained his powers the same day that Nighthawk had, on that first Wild Card Day back in 1946, but later he had testified against his friends before HUAC. That had earned him the nickname of the Judas Ace. Nighthawk figured that Dutton, who also dated back to that era, was not one to forgive and forget. Braun, still apparently ageless, had been out of the public view for many decades now. A mediocre acting career followed by a rather more successful run in California real estate had earned him millions.

One of his two companions was sitting on his lap, the other hanging over his chair, her arms entwined around his neck. They were twins, statuesque, voluptuous, with long, braided silver-blond hair and vivid blue eyes. They wore identical very tight, very short skirts that clung to their curves like Saran Wrap on a serving bowl.

The face of the one sitting on his lap took on an expression of concern. “What’s the matter, Honey Boy?”

“Nothing,” Braun murmured, “nothing at all, Hildy.”

“I’m Dagmar.”

“Whatever.”

Dutton turned his masked features to the man sitting next to

the empty chair. “Do you mind, sir?” he asked politely.

“No, not all,” he replied. “Sit down. I’m Will Monroe.”

Nighthawk pulled the chair out for Dutton, since Meek was carrying the briefcase that held a million dollars in thousand-dollar bills. Dutton nodded to Monroe and his companions.

Monroe was blond, mid-fifties, clearly tall though now sitting down, with an epicanthal fold to his eyes. He was slim and he wore his expensive though casual clothes quite well. His watch was a high-end Rolex, which made it expensive indeed, and he wore a gold-and-diamond ring on his left hand. The bastard son of Marilyn Monroe, he had made his own mark on Hollywood as a very successful movie producer.

Two innocuous-looking young people accompanied him. One was Gary “Pug” Peterman, Monroe’s personal assistant and yes-man. A former child star, Pug had gotten his nickname from either his upturned nose, his soulful brown eyes, or his overall demeanor of a puppy who’d just been paddled for piddling on the rug. Nighthawk knew little of his acting career. He hadn’t liked the first of his movies, so he’d never seen another.

Monroe’s second attendant was a young woman with black hair. Her short-sleeved blouse revealed Asian ideograms tattooed on both her forearms, as well as a variety of hearts and skulls. Nighthawk thought they ruined her rather bright demeanor. His sources told him that she was Abigail Baker, an aspiring young British actress.

Nighthawk studied Monroe for a moment. He disliked

predators of all types and he wondered if Monroe fit the typical Hollywood stereotype. Monroe felt the pressure of his glance and looked up at him. That almost made Nighthawk miss the bit of byplay where Meek winked at Baker and the actress looked at him quizzically. Will Monroe looked as if he were going to say something, but then the door to the suite opened and more newcomers barged in.

In the lead was a stocky, plug-like man in his fifties, who seemed as if he'd once been slim but had gained weight over the years. His shock of coarse dark hair had streaks of gray in it and was cut in Buster Brown bangs that covered his forehead almost to his eyebrows. He strutted confidently into the room, accompanied by the usual two attendants.

It was easy to pick out the bodyguard. He was tall, grizzled, and his dark hair was a bit gray, though he was maybe only pushing forty. His hands were stretched and warped out of all human proportion. They looked like slabs of meat the size of car batteries and were definitely more suited to smashing things than fine manipulation. His name was Ali Hussein, an ex-con with a rep for violence. Nighthawk knew that he'd found Allah during his last term in prison. He was better known by his ace name of Meathooks; the report on him said that metal hooks protruded from his body when he became angry. The other newcomer was just a kid, struggling with a valise that Nighthawk guessed contained the buy-in. He hardly looked to be in his teens, if that. He was nerdish, short, a little chubby.

The one with the Buster Brown haircut strolled confidently up to the table, smiling when he caught sight of Jack Braun. “Hey! Golden Boy!” He plopped down into the open seat next to him, beaming. “We met back at a card show in Peoria, what was it, ’06, ’08?”

“Um—” Braun was clearly bewildered.

“Charlie Flowers!” Flowers didn’t seem to mind Braun’s faulty memory. “Signing autographs? Remember?”

“Oh, ah, sure.” Braun nodded.

Flowers leered at Dagmar. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to the talent?”

Braun glanced away, looking at Giovanni Galante. “Our host—Mr. Galante—”

“Oh, sure.” Flowers half stood up, reaching out. Dagmar squirmed more tightly against Braun as Flowers’s arm more than brushed her breasts. “Pleased to meet you.”

Flowers had meaty hands. He wore diamond rings on both pinkies as well as a huge, multi-jeweled gold ring on each ring finger. Nighthawk shook his head, half in disbelief, half in admiration, for the size of Flowers’s balls. It took immense—something—to wear your World Series rings in public after being banned from professional baseball for gambling on games.

Galante took his hand with an insincere smile. “Likewise.”

Flowers held on, his arm still firmly pressed against Dagmar’s breasts. He gestured backwards with his chin. “That’s my bodyguard, Meathooks. I know we’re all friends here, but,

why take chances, amirite? Oh, and that's my nephew Timmy. He's an ace, too, so watch out ...” Flowers leaned forward conspiratorially, bringing his face almost as close to Dagmar's breasts as his arm.

“Charlie,” Braun said in a voice with a hint of warning in it.

“What?” He turned, bringing his nose perilously close to lodging in Dagmar's cleavage.

“Back off.”

Flowers turned back, grinned at Galante, released his hand. “Hey, no harm done.” He turned the grin onto Dagmar. “Sorry to wrinkle your dress, sweetie. Hey, Timmy. Show the folks what you can do.” Flowers sat back in his seat with a smile on his face.

“Sure, Uncle Charlie.”

Timmy went around the table to the wall with a set of three windows opening up to the street below. It was night already, and dark outside. He climbed up on one of the sofas that was set against the wall, fumbling for the window latch, but couldn't reach it. The kid looked back at his watching uncle almost helplessly until one of the attendants rose to his feet to help.

Nighthawk didn't know the player, exactly, though he recognized him. Once, he'd almost had to kill him, to save the world from his Black Queen, which was raging out of control.

His name was John Fortune. He'd been a teenager when they'd first crossed paths. Now, twelve years later, he was a mature man of almost thirty, a man who'd once been prominent as leader of the Committee, the ace arm of the United Nations, but had

dropped from public view. He'd been in the war to save the joker community of Egypt, and the experience had hardened him, Nighthawk saw, turning him from the inexperienced young boy Nighthawk had once known to someone who'd witnessed the horrors of battle.

One of his attendants was an immense man, larger than even Khan or Meathooks, bald as an egg, and fat. "Let me help, little boy," he said in a breathy, weirdly accented voice.

Nighthawk frowned, focusing on him for the first time. He was the spitting image of Tor Johnson, the professional wrestler turned actor—if you wanted to be kind about his thespian abilities. Nighthawk recalled memories of the adventure he'd shared with Fortune all those years ago. Fortune's companion at the time had been Mr. Nobody, who had a habit of taking on the appearance of old-time movie stars—like Tor Johnson. Or, Donald Meek.

But if Mr. Nobody was with John Fortune as Tor Johnson, then, who ...

Nighthawk glanced at Meek, who was standing by his side. The little man returned Nighthawk's gaze with bland innocence.

Tor Johnson or Mr. Nobody or whoever he was turned the latch on the window and pulled up the lower pane. The sound of the street many stories below wafted into room, as did a warm nighttime breeze. "Is that what you wanted, little boy?" the big bodyguard wheezed, and Timmy, looking out into the night, nodded.

Everyone waited expectantly, and a moment later a pigeon flew into the room. It circled Tor Johnson as if he were an atoll in the ocean and the bird was seeking refuge after a long flight, and then landed on the round crown of Johnson's bald head, cooing contentedly.

Dagmar—or was it Hildy?—broke into a giggle. “It looks like it's hatching an egg,” she said, as Johnson almost went cross-eyed trying to gaze up at the bird.

The bird flapped away after a moment and sought out Fortune's second bodyguard, landing on her shoulder. She—the bodyguard—craned her neck and looked uncertainly at it.

“Kiss the pretty lady,” Timmy said.

Nighthawk was a little worried about this one. All he was able to discover about the young Asian woman with the long braided hair was her name, Kavitha Kandiah. Nighthawk had been observing her as she'd been moving about the room, getting a drink for Fortune, placing a dish of candies by Johnson's elbow on the table. She moved with a fluid grace that spelled martial artist or dancer. As an unknown factor, Nighthawk thought, she'd bear watching. The problem was, so would almost everyone in the room.

The pigeon reached forward to peck at her cheek, and she leaned backwards in her seat.

“We call him Birdbrain,” Flowers chortled. “Because he can control the minds of birds—one at a time, that is.”

As a longtime baseball fan, Nighthawk had already detested

Charlie Flowers. Now, interacting with him personally for the first time, he really loathed him.

The bird flew up from Kandiah's shoulder, circled the table, and landed in front of Galante, where it proceeded to spread its wings and do sort of a bobbing and hopping dance in front of Galante's pile of chips.

Galante had a look of intense dislike on his face. "Disgusting thing," he said. "Rat with wings."

Next to Nighthawk, Meek made a gesture with his right hand. A spectrum of light, like a rainbow, arced from his palm, striking the bird in mid-hop. The pigeon vanished.

Nighthawk looked at Meek with new interest in his eyes, as did everyone else in the room.

"I told you," Meek said to him. "I make problems disappear." He glanced at Timmy, who was looking at him with somewhat like horror. "Don't worry, kid, he's okay. I just sent him to a better place."

Teleportation? Nighthawk thought. Interesting. An extremely potent power, and useful. There was more to Meek, he decided, than appearances would allow.

"All right," Flowers said briskly, unconcerned by his nephew's downcast expression. "Let's get to business. Or sport, eh?" He elbowed Dagmar in the ribs, rubbing his meaty hands together briskly.

"Yeah." Galante took his gaze from Meek and ostentatiously consulted the expensive Rolex on his wrist. "Well, we're

expecting one more player. He seems to be running late. It's past nine. Let's give him a couple more minutes—”

Even as Galante spoke there was a shimmering in the air, felt more by the brain than seen by the eye. Suddenly three newcomers stood in the room.

The woman in the center was the tallest. She was almost six feet and wore a robe of shining fabric that for some reason Nighthawk found difficult to focus his eyes on. Her skin was pale, her long black hair fell like a rippling cloak to her waist, but her silver eyes were her most arresting feature. Nighthawk felt that it might be unwise to look into them too deeply or for too long.

She embraced two others, one in the crook of each arm. The other woman was almost as tall as her, leggy, blond, with smoky-blue eyes and a bored expression on her exquisite face. She wore a black sheath dress that revealed the creamy skin of her upper breasts and displayed a lot of silky thigh. Around her long, graceful neck was a diamond choker with a single large sapphire shining like the tear of an angel.

Nighthawk was relieved—somewhat. The woman in the diamond choker was Margot Bellerose, internationally famous French actress. *Nothing to worry about there*. The ace who'd delivered her was another matter. Lilith. Teleporter and assassin. Mistress of the knife. The case that held the buy-in cash was slung around one of her shoulders.

As to the player himself—

“Siraj, Hashemite Prince of the Royal House of Jordan and

President of the Caliphate of Greater Arabia,” Lilith announced in a voice that managed to be haughty and languid at the same time.

Siraj bowed a precise millimeter in the general direction of the poker table and put out his hand. Bellerose took it with an air of pouty boredom and they approached the table together. Siraj was short, handsome, and dark, if more than a little plump. He was reputed to have a sharp mind and an almost bottomless bank account.

Prince Siraj took the last empty seat at the table and snapped a finger to one of the two barmaids, who hustled up another chair. Bellerose slipped into it with the air of a queen about to expire from ennui, playing with her choker as she glanced disinterestedly around the table.

“Let’s get this show on the road!” Flowers suggested.

“Agreed,” Galante said with a degree of oily unctuousness, “but first, the house rules. They are few, but important. Number one, gentlemen. The buy-in.”

Khan strolled around the table, collecting the various bags, valises, and briefcases offered by the players or their seconds.

“The cash will be counted,” Galante said, “just for propriety’s sake, and be put in the suite’s safe for safekeeping. Your chips are already in place before you. Rule number two. The game is over when one player holds all of those chips. Rule number three. The play is table stakes, dealer’s choice, no limit. Is that all agreeable?”

Murmurs went around the table.

“Good. Play will be continuous, but if someone wants to take a break for a snack, or, whatever, heh-heh, there are private rooms in the suite to eh, freshen up in.”

Flowers, eyeing one of the barmaids, a lissome joker model with bunny ears and a cute fluffy tail, asked, “All part of the service?”

“All part of the service,” Galante agreed.

“Great.”

“Finally, no telepathy.” Galante’s voice turned low with more than a hint of danger. “We have ways of detecting it and identifying whoever may be using it. The offender will lose their stake.” He paused a moment. “And probably more.” He looked around the table, his gaze resting momentarily on each player. “Understood?”

He got six answers in the affirmative. The last player he looked at was Dutton, and his eyes lingered.

“I know the world we live in, but this is a friendly game.” Galante’s smile was almost sincere. “Masks are not allowed at the table, Mr. Dutton, because of the unfair advantage that they give.”

Dutton may have smiled under his mask. At least, it moved a little bit on his face. “Far be it for me to take unfair advantage, Mr. Galante,” he said in his sepulchre voice.

He removed the mask and let it drop on the table before him. There were several audible gasps. Even Galante blanched a little.

Flowers murmured, “Eew.” Bellerose, seemingly entranced, whispered, “*Magnifique.*” Golden Boy looked on, unmoved.

“Shall we play?” Dutton asked, what might have been a smile twitching across his face.

Galante grinned in reply and broke open a pack of cards sitting near him on the table.

“Of course,” he said. “As host, I deal the first hand. The game starts, as always, with a hand of Low Chicago. Afterwards, winner deals and chooses the play. Ante up, gentlemen.”

Everyone took one of the red chips from the pile before him and tossed five thousand dollars into the pot.



There was, Nighthawk thought as the game began, an authentic rush of excitement in the air. He'd been involved in a few marathon poker games in his life, nothing approaching stakes like these, of course, and he knew that they had a rhythm, a kind of ebb and flow, depending largely on the personalities of those involved. And the seven players here, he realized, had about as wide a range of personalities as could be found. It didn't take too long to sort them out.

Galante was a bold, impulsive player. He also wore his emotions openly on his face. He took chances—it was gambling, after all—but more often than not he succeeded when he did. He

also drank steadily, but he seemed to hold his liquor well.

Jack Braun, to his left, was the most distracted player at the table. One and sometimes both of the twins were hanging on to him. He had a fair poker face—a reviewer had once said that as an actor his facial expressions ran the gamut from A to B—but was careless with the way he held his cards and in the way he played. He didn't drink as much as Galante, but then he didn't hold his drink as well, either.

Charlie Flowers was the most intense player at the table. He gripped his cards tightly, he stared around at everyone as the bets were made like he was trying to read their minds. Unfortunately, he was a bad reader.

Siraj's play was as smooth and deft as his manners. He was probably, in Nighthawk's judgment, one of the two best players at the table.

Dutton, with his ultimate poker face, was the other. He too was suave and mannered, but he had the advantage of looking like Death.

Will Monroe was affable and full of chitchat. Nighthawk couldn't tell if he was just a little scatterbrained, or was cunningly trying to distract the other players as he explained, sometimes in excruciating detail, the fine points of the game to his attendant, Abigail, who didn't seem all that interested. Nighthawk kept wondering why she was there. She seemed more bored than anyone else present, except possibly for Timmy, who soon lost interest in the proceedings, but thankfully didn't call in any more

birds to play with.

John Fortune was all business, as if this were work for him, not fun. He concentrated on the game, though as it started he acknowledged Nighthawk with a nod. Which Nighthawk returned. He wondered if his presence was conjuring bad memories for Fortune, since the last time he'd seen him he was being held by the Midnight Angel and sobbing over his father's death. It hadn't been a pleasant time for anyone.

Flowers got off to a bad start, Siraj to a fast one. Within the first hour Siraj had won three hands in a row, taking a lot of chips from Flowers.

“Motherfucking—” Flowers began after Siraj had called his bluff and raked in a big pot.

Prince Siraj looked at him, quirked an eyebrow. “What did you say?”

Flowers gestured impatiently. “Hey, nothing personal. Wasn't talking to you, directly.”

“There are ladies present,” Siraj said in his smooth English accent.

“Ladies,” Flowers snorted. “If by ladies you mean whor—”

“I mean ladies.” Siraj cut him off again, this time with iron in his tone. “And if you want to take a brief break and discuss this matter personally, I will be more than happy to indulge you.”

“Hey, Prince, it was just locker room talk—”

“We are not currently in a locker room, Mr. Flowers,” Siraj said, “and when you were you didn't know how to behave

decently. Your actions were beneath contempt.”

Next to him, Bellerose tittered.

Flowers flushed red for a moment. He turned and looked at Julie Cotton, the joker bar attendant, who was standing nearby, just having brought Galante another tumbler of whiskey, straight up. “Hey, girlie,” he said. “Bring me a bourbon.” He paused. “Does that tail come off with the costume, honey?”

Bellerose tittered again.

“No, sir,” Cotton said with as much dignity as she could muster.

“Enough,” Galante said impatiently. “Deal the cards. We’re playing poker here, right?”



By two A.M. Nighthawk was starting to think that all the bodyguards were a bit unnecessary. The game progressed with intensity, but without untoward incidents. Even though the fortunes of all players were shifting, no one was yet showing signs of worry.

Whether Dutton’s supreme poker face helped him or not, he and Prince Siraj were the big winners. They had piles of chips stacked before them, representing about half the total table. John Fortune was playing with stoic skill, but so far the cards weren’t favoring him. He was essentially even after the first five hours

of play. Jack Braun was drunk as a lord and losing steadily, but he seemed unconcerned and was paying more attention to Hildy and Dagmar than the cards. He'd left the table with them twice, taking them to one of the private rooms for two half-hour breaks, and returning each time if not more sober at least with a happy look on his face. He and Galante, who was drunk as a pissed-off mafioso, and Will Monroe, who was steadily sipping scotch and ginger ale, had about two million in chips among them. Charlie Flowers was moaning over his pile, which was about half as high as when they'd started.

The various bodyguards all mostly remained in a state of taciturn alertness. None of them had partaken of alcoholic beverages, although the one who looked like Tor Johnson had consumed an ungodly amount of bar snacks ranging from chips and salsa to caviarspread crackers to a dozen doughnuts of various types and fillings. Others had eaten more sparsely of the spread, which was dispensed efficiently and prettily by the bunny-eared joker and the dark-haired, dark-eyed girl, who'd also been kept busy serving single malt to Braun, bourbon to Flowers, whiskey to Galante, and other beverages to the rest of the players.

Abigail was the most attentive of the onlookers. She sat in a chair a little behind Will Monroe, following every turn of the cards. Pug the ex-child star was asleep on the far right sofa that lined the suite's outside wall. Flowers's nephew with the contemptuous nickname of Birdbrain was soundly asleep on the

middle sofa. One of Fortune's bodyguards, the dancer or martial artist, occupied the third one, but she at least was alert . . . though it seemed to Nighthawk that she was watching him and Meek more closely than the game. Nighthawk never looked at her directly, but he could feel her eyes upon him and Meek and he wondered why they were the center of her attention.

"Shit!" Flowers exclaimed crudely and loudly, throwing his cards down in disgust as John Fortune raked in the current pot. "I need something to change my luck!" He stood and grabbed the arm of the dark-haired bar attendant named Irina. She'd just passed by his seat after delivering another whiskey to Galante. "Come on, baby, let's see what you can deliver besides drinks." He pulled her into one of the bedrooms and closed the door after them.

Fortune piled his chips, tossed in a red for the ante. "Seven-card stud," he announced.

He liked, Nighthawk had noticed, the more straightforward games, without wild cards or split pots.



By five o'clock Golden Boy was busted. All his chips were gone, as was one of the twins, who'd disappeared with Bellerose into one of the private rooms, unnoticed by everyone but Nighthawk. At least, no one had the poor taste to remark upon

their absence. Braun himself was still seated at the table, but was asleep, head down upon it. Dagmar (or was it Hildy?) was curled up on the chair behind Braun, also asleep, but a lot cuter than Jack, who, much to Galante's disgust, was snoring.

"Somebody wake that stiff up. He's drooling on my card table," Galante said. "And order me a steak sandwich."

His redheaded bodyguard named Cyn stood, stretched like a cat, and went to Braun's side. She was a pleasure to watch as she pulled Golden Boy Braun upright and settled him back in his chair, then continued on her way to call room service. "Ah, Mom," Braun moaned. "It ain't time to milk the cows yet. Lemme sleep s'more."

There were general guffaws and titters around the table.

"C'mon," Flowers said, "we gonna play cards or milk the cows? I got a lot of money to win back."

"Good luck with that," Will Monroe observed dryly. He tossed in a red chip to ante for the next hand. "You got enough to cover that?"

Flowers had maybe a dozen blues and a slightly higher stack of whites, the two lowest denominations at a thousand and five hundred dollars each, respectively.

"You worry about your own pile, movie boy," Flowers said gruffly, but Nighthawk thought that the ex-baseball player had to know that Monroe was right. He was one, maybe two losing hands away from being busted.

At this point Dutton was the big winner, Fortune and Siraj

were roughly tied with the second largest piles of chips. Monroe and Galante were both down.

“I’ll give you a chance to last another couple hands,” Galante, who had won the previous pot, said generously as he started to deal. “Five-card stud.”

Galante dealt the first card facedown around the table, then the second, faceup. The exposed cards ranged from John Fortune’s deuce to a queen for Prince Siraj. Siraj checked and the bet went around the table to Galante, who had a ten showing.

“Bet a thousand,” he said, and everyone added a blue chip to the pot.

The third up card was dealt and Flowers got an ace, but Monroe received a second eight.

“A thousand on each,” the producer said. All called but Galante, who folded.

Flowers smiled when Galante dealt him a second ace in the fourth round. He had the high hand showing, though Fortune was dealt a second deuce to join the ballplayer and Monroe with pairs. “About time,” Flowers said, not bothering to conceal a smile. He tossed four whites into the pot for another raise of two thousand dollars.

Prince Siraj folded without a word or expression. Dutton folded with a smile that could only be described as sinister.

“I’ll keep you honest,” Monroe said to Flowers with a straight face, tossing in two blues.

Fortune silently added two of his own to the pot.

Galante dealt the last round to the three who were still in the game. Monroe got a nine, Flowers a queen, and Fortune a three.

Flowers looked from Monroe, who was expressionless, to Fortune, who had a small smile on his face. Flowers had one blue and ten white chips left.

“Check,” he said.

Fortune’s smile grew wider. He added six thousand dollars to the pot.

Flowers stared at him. Fortune looked back levelly. Seconds ticked away.

“Shit,” Galante said, “you might as well go all in in case he’s bluffing. You’ll be gone the next hand, anyway.”

Seconds more passed like hours crawling by. Nighthawk could see sweat beading Flowers’s forehead. His hands twitched once, reaching for his final chips, and then froze as the door to the hotel suite opened. He looked back over his shoulder, but it was only a waiter delivering Galante’s sandwich on a covered silver tray. He also carried a small folding table.

“Goddamn it,” Flowers swore.

The waiter, an elderly man in hotel livery, came to the table.

“Who ordered the steak sandwich?” he asked.

Cyn, who had resumed her seat, nodded at Galante. “Over here.”

“Bring me a whiskey on the rocks,” Galante said with a glance at Irina. He returned his attention to the game as the waiter deftly set the folding table down, after Cyn scootched her chair over

to make room.

Irina approached with the drink as Flowers pushed his remaining chips into the pot with an agonized gesture. Fortune looked at Monroe, who shook his head.

“Your move,” he said.

Still smiling, Fortune turned over his hole card, revealing a third deuce.

“*Goddamn it!*” Flowers stood up suddenly, pushing his chair back and bumping into Irina, who staggered. The drink that she was delivering to Galante slid from her tray into his lap.

For one brief moment time seemed frozen and Nighthawk could smell the danger that suddenly speared the air. He started to rise. Irina, a stricken look on her face, started to bend over, reaching out with the cloth napkin that had been draped over her forearm. “I’m sor—”

Galante swiveled in his chair. “You clumsy bitch!” He slapped her in the face hard enough to knock her to the floor.

There was another moment of silence, broken by a wordless shout of rage from the waiter, who swung the tray bearing the steak sandwich and accompanying fries at Galante, catching him on the side of the head and knocking him and his chair onto the floor.

And suddenly all hell broke loose.

Khan rose from his seat with a feline roar and reached for the waiter, but the old man was changing. In the blink of an eye his body mass seemed to double, shredding the uniform

that he wore. All the added mass was solid muscle. The waiter backhanded Cyn and she slammed into the wall and rebounded, stunned. Khan reached across Galante's fallen chair and he and the waiter grappled. They stood locked together for a moment, clearly matched in strength.

Dutton, Nighthawk thought. He grabbed his client, hoisted him over the bar, and dropped him behind it onto the floor, turning back in time to see Khan and the waiter smash onto the table and roll over it, scattering chips and cards. John Fortune dove away. Tor Johnson stood, uncertain. Flowers drew a pistol he'd had in a shoulder holster. Lilith drew a blade and moved to Siraj, but Meathooks, next to her, lashed out, catching her in the side with the metallic hooks that'd sprung from his hands. Lilith staggered backwards, her gown suddenly torn and very bloody.

It was all happening so fast that Nighthawk could do nothing but stand his ground. Besides, his duty was to Dutton and his job was to stay between him and whatever danger might come his way. So far, all of the action was across the table.

Meathooks stumbled against Flowers as he avoided the sweep of Lilith's blade. Charlie Flowers was shouting and spraying shots. One struck Prince Siraj as he rose from his chair. Khan and the waiter were hammering at each other, as a dazed Cyn pushed to her knees and unleashed a gout of flame that ripped the chandelier from the ceiling and set off the smoke alarm. Part of the heavy glass-and-metal fixture landed on Siraj. Fortune shouted, "Help him," but before either of his bodyguards could

move, Khan and the waiter, still locked together, lurched off the table and bumped into Cyn. Her flames licked across the room. Nighthawk felt the heat of it wash over him, but he was only at its very edge. Part of it flicked across Meek, who cried out in pain, raised both hands, and filled the suite with rainbow light.

The rainbows seemed to wrinkle the very air. Whoever they touched simply disappeared. Only Charles Dutton, on the floor behind the bar, and Nighthawk, at Meek's side, remained. All that remained of the other players, companions, and servers were a few untidy heaps of clothing and jewelry that marked where they'd been standing, sitting, or sleeping.

The window drapes were aflame. Nighthawk, quelling the questions screeching in his brain, arose and put out the fire before the sprinklers came on, using a soda water bottle from the stocked bar. As he was spraying down the draperies the two women emerged from the bedroom, where they'd been occupied.

"Siraj?" Margot Bellerose cried. "What happened? What happened?" Her voice rose in panic. "Where is everyone?"

Nighthawk turned to Meek, who was slapping at the burning sleeve of his jacket. *Teleportation*, he thought. "Where did you send them?" Nighthawk demanded.

But Meek shook his head. "Not where. When."



Down the Rabbit Hole

by Kevin Andrew Murphy

NICK WILLIAMS HAD NEVER been to Chicago before, let alone its Gold Coast district. The Playboy Mansion was Beaux Arts, built to impress, four stories of classical French brick and exposed limestone with a steep slate roof and attic windows flanked with Grecian urns. The chauffeur who'd met him at the airport carried his suitcase up the walkway. Nick carried the Argus's case himself. He paused for a moment to read the brass plaque set over the main door: *Si Non Oscillas, Noli Tintinnare*. Nick grinned, his high school Latin coming in handy for more than the mottos of movie studios: *If You Don't Swing, Don't Ring*.

The February weather was much cooler than Los Angeles, and he wished he'd brought a heavier coat. But it was warmer inside, especially in the parlor off the black-and-white marble foyer. Hef awaited in an ornate Victorian wingback chair upholstered in rose velvet, flanked not by classical urns but by classic beauties. Two young women, a blonde and a brunette, lounged on matching divans to each side, attired in diaphanous gowns like the Muses of old ... or perhaps a more sybaritic interpretation of Old King Cole's attendants, since the blonde was pouring Hef a snifter of cognac from the requisite decanter of an unlocked tantalus while the brunette reclined near a Delft tobacco jar and

a matching porcelain box. The pipe was in Hef's hand, and he was dressed in a rich black velvet smoking jacket and slippers, all the better to enjoy the roaring fire in the parlor's fireplace. The porthole television in the burl-wood cabinet opposite glowed like a fortune-teller's crystal ball. The all-seeing eye within winked and vanished, the CBS logo replaced by the Olympic rings, then the dizzying melody of Strauss's "Acceleration Waltz" started up, a Dutch beauty entering the Squaw Valley ice arena.

"Ah, Mr. Williams," Hef said, rising as the chauffeur took Nick's camera bag, "or may I call you Nick?"

Nick removed his suit jacket, which the chauffeur also took. "Nick's fine." He doffed the new gray fedora he'd bought for the trip. He regretted letting it go, feeling like the soft felt was almost a part of him now. But the chauffeur was implacable.

Hef clenched his pipe in his teeth so he could shake hands. "Welcome to the Playboy family." He glanced up at Nick, who had a good six inches on him. "You'll do just fine. Swimmer, I understand?" Hef glanced to the television, where the skater twirled through her revolutions. "The agent said you'd hoped to compete in Melbourne, but dropped out."

"I pulled something in college," Nick confessed, failing to mention that it was an ace.

Hef swirled his cognac contemplatively. "Any chance you'll represent us this summer in Rome?"

"Doubtful." The Olympics tested for the wild card, and while Nick's ace didn't help him in the three hundred meter, it would

still disqualify him. And tip his hand that he was also Will-o'-Wisp, the Hollywood Phantom, mystery ace of the movie lots, and Hedda Hopper's horror.

"Can you lie?" Hef grinned. "I know you've done some acting, and it will stir up interest on *Playboy's Penthouse*."

"I can lie," Nick admitted truthfully.

Hef glanced to the chauffeur. "Percy, take those to Mr. Williams's room." Hef swirled his snifter. "Care for cognac? Sherry? Port?"

"I don't drink," Nick confessed, not mentioning that alcohol made it harder to control his ace, "but I do smoke."

"Constance?" Hef glanced to the brunette.

She pulled open the drawer of the tobacco jar's table, revealing it to be a humidor stocked with a wide assortment of cigars. She also lifted the lid of a porcelain box disclosing French Gauloises. Nick took one and allowed Constance to give him a light.

It was good, and Nick took a puff while Hef gestured to the furnishings. "These used to be in the Everleigh Club's Rose Room." He took a puff of his own pipe. "Ada just passed away and we were able to acquire her whole collection."

"Everleigh Club?" Nick cocked his head and took a drag on the cigarette.

"Chicago's carriage trade brothel. Exceedingly exclusive, but gone half a century next year." Hef took another puff on his pipe. "Of course, the Playboy Mansion's my home, and our new

Playboy Club will be a gentleman's club, but it doesn't hurt to have some of the gas lamp finery." He took a sip of cognac, then handed the snifter to the blonde. "Thanks, Gwen." Hef gestured to the foyer and the grand staircase leading up. "May I give you the tour?"

"Please."

Plush carpeting secured with brass runners led the way to the next floor, which was nothing if not more opulent. "Got the place last year. Built for Dr. Isham and his wife, Katherine, in 1899," Hef explained. "Supposedly Teddy Roosevelt visited. Let me show you the ballroom. We host our most swinging parties there." He ushered Nick back up the grand staircase, Constance and Gwen fluttering after them like salt and pepper moths.

If the second floor was opulent, the ballroom was beyond compare, the *ne plus ultra* in fin de siècle luxury, with tall Doric columns carved in rich mahogany instead of marble, matching paneling, a cavernous coffered ceiling with gilded rosettes and painted beams, a limestone fireplace large enough to walk into flanked with the sculpted visages of guardian lions, and, in the center of the sweeping parquet floor, a piano covered with a fortune in gold leaf, glittering like the hoard from *Das Rheingold*.

"Ada's treasure." Hef looked slyly to Nick. "We had to have it. Do you play?"

"Not one of my talents, I'm afraid," Nick admitted. "Where is everyone?"

"Oh, they're around the mansion. Lots of bedrooms. Even

rumors of some hidden passageways. Still discovering all the secrets.” Hef gave a wink as Constance and Gwen fluttered right and left around the dance floor in preordained orbits until coming to rest at the piano bench, starting a girlish duet of “Tea for Two.”

Nick let his host escort him across the floor until Hef paused him midway, instructing, “Kick off your shoes. Just had it polished and it’s nice to get the full effect.”

It was a bit odd, but Nick was not going to disappoint his host, and there was a certain childlike fun to sliding across the smooth wood in your socks.

Nick’s ace was electrical, the wild card having saved him from electrocution by turning him into a human electrical capacitor. It mostly gave him the power to toss ball lightning, but along with that came an attunement to the electromagnetic spectrum. Nick sensed something: not electricity, but interference, a good bit of metal somewhere in the floor below them. He didn’t have time to make sense of it, his host beckoning for him to join him at the piano.

Nick took a last puff of his cigarette, then stubbed out the butt on the plum blossoms of the cloisonné ashtray atop the Chinese smoking stand by the piano’s head. “Stand there,” Hef instructed, indicating a small Oriental accent rug by the crook of the piano a few steps back, “you get the best sound.”

Constance and Gwen fluttered their lashes coquettishly, sharing some private joke as they continued their duet, but Nick did as he was told, stepping onto the accent rug. Constance

winked, reaching up to turn the sheet music, but instead pulled a gilded lever.

The floor fell out from under Nick, but not the rug, and he felt himself falling down a chute into darkness. He panicked, remembering stories of Chicago's infamous Murder Castle. He lit up with a nimbus of electricity, but it almost as quickly grounded itself on the copper sides of the chute he was sliding down, the accent rug acting like the burlap sack at a carnival slide to speed his descent. Nick concentrated, letting his electric glow come only to his eyes, illuminating the chute but not grounding on it while his ace sensed something below him, not metal, not earth, but ... water.

A bell rang and not just in Nick's head as he came to the end of the chute and another trapdoor sprang open, spitting him out into light and brilliance.

It was instinct, Nick had felt this before, leaping from the plunge into the high-dive pool at the University of Southern California. Muscles tensed, hands placed together, not in prayer, but to part the water as he entered, steeling himself, pulling his ace taut so none of his internal reservoir would ground out.

The water was warm and the pool was deep. Nick swam down instinctively, then up and over, surfacing at a distance to the strains of more piano music, this time from a black baby grand, and the sprightly chatter and laughter of a pool party.

Women in bathing suits and a few men swam about or lounged poolside, the whole basement chamber decorated with

African masks, dracaena, and birds of paradise till it resembled a mermaid's grotto.

The bell sounded again and the ceiling chute fell open, Hef coming down feetfirst, sans robe, slippers, and pipe, now wearing only swim trunks.

He plunged into the pool, then came up laughing, swimming over to Nick. "Welcome to the Playboy Family. Thought a swimmer wouldn't be too shocked with our initiation prank."

Nick smiled, teeth gritted with the realization of how close he'd come to electrocuting everyone. "Not shocked, no."

"You should have seen him dive!" exclaimed one of a bevy of bathing beauties floating like nereids nearby. "Didn't even make a splash! Like an eel!"

Electric eel, Nick thought but did not correct her.

Hef laughed and the bell rang again, the trapdoor opening as Constance and Gwen entered the pool together, their diaphanous gowns shed like moth wings, now clad only in daring bikinis, black and white. They swam over, Gwen reaching out to him, smiling. "Let's get you out of these wet things ..."

Nick didn't resist, Gwen releasing him from his wet tie and unbuttoning his equally soaked shirt, Constance diving down like a pearl diver and taking off his pants. Hands strayed and lingered, flirtatious and beyond. Nick stopped Constance before she pulled his boxers free, but didn't stop her entirely. *If you don't swing, don't ring ...*

Constance put the play in Playmate, splashing back, laughing,

having teased him then stolen his socks. Hef swam over as the pair of nymphettes left the pool with their booty. “Let me show you around.”

It was like Neptune introducing his court, except the mermaids were Playmates and the assorted castaway sailors and dolphin riders had been replaced by photographers, editors, and layout directors of the *Playboy* staff. Nick could hardly keep track of them all. The only one of especial note seemed to be Victor Lownes, *Playboy*'s promotions director, who was swimming about with a young actress named Ilse. “So, Hef, what do you think about Ilse's kitten idea?”

“Still like my original plan, but so long as we get Zelda Wynn Valdes to design the final costume, I don't much care.”

“Then let me get someone else's opinion.” Lownes glanced to Nick. “We've been batting around outfits for our new place. Hef wants satin corsets, like the gals at the old Everleigh Club.”

“Got some great examples of those now,” Hef pointed out. “Ada's photo albums are in the library. You need to look at them.”

Lownes nodded while paddling. “Yeah, but Ilse had a swell idea: *Playboy*'s mascot is the tomcat, so she thought we could have the girls dress up as sexy kittens.”

“Pussycats,” Ilse purred with a pronounced and erotic Eastern European accent.

“Maybe a little too on the nose.” Hef turned to Nick, explaining, “When we were first going to launch, we wanted

to be *Stag Party* with a swinging stag for our mascot. But then *Stag* magazine sued so we swapped to *Playboy* and went with the tomcat.”

“So what do you think?” Lownes pressed.

“Not sure, but I like the idea of Valdes.” Nick knew Hollywood politics and when to be a yes-man. “She did Josephine Baker’s costumes, right?”

“Some of them,” Hef agreed. “Not sure if she did the ‘banana dance’ one, but that’s the iconic look we want.” He turned to Lownes and Ilse. “Make a mock-up and I’ll decide.”

“My mother sews,” Ilse told Lownes, who said, “Done.”

It seemed poolside business was as much a thing in Chicago as it was in Hollywood.

They swam on, chatting, mingling, and schmoozing, giving Nick a chance to meet the staff and get a sense of the magazine’s organization. Then, bobbing atop a Jacuzzi that bubbled like a witch’s cauldron or at least a tide pool attached to a thermal vent, sat a familiar face ... familiar from newspapers and television. Hef grinned. “May I introduce our next president, John F. Kennedy?”

“Just senator for now,” Kennedy said in his Boston Brahmin accent, raising his shoulders out of the pool, revealing an old scar, “but call me Jack. Who’s this?”

“Our new photographer,” Hef told Kennedy, “Nick Williams. Out from Hollywood.”

“Excellent dive you did there,” the senator complimented.

“Probably be even better with swimwear.”

“Everything’s better with swimwear,” remarked a pert Playmate perched on the edge of the bubbling hot tub in a white satin one-piece. It matched her fluffy baby-fine platinum hair, which Nick suddenly realized had huge rabbit ears sticking up out of it. Not the antennae from a television set, but actual White Rabbit–style white rabbit ears, albeit scaled up and sized for an adult woman. *Or a joker.* A matching fluffy white tail poked out of the rear of her bathing suit as she sat there dabbling her still human toes in the water. “Go ahead and stare.” She laughed. “Everyone does. It’s natural.”

“Let me introduce Julie Cotton,” Hef said, “one of our aspiring Playmates.”

“I’m guessing you’re Nick, the new photographer.” When Julie grinned her ears stood up straighter. “Hef said you were a swimmer.” She looked to Hef. “Can I have him for my photo shoot?”

“If you like,” Hef said, then laughed. “You just got me to agree to give you a test shoot, didn’t you? Clever bunny.”

Julie’s nose wrinkled as the pride transmitted to her ears, making them stand up higher. “Hey, a girl does what she can.”

Kennedy laughed along with her. “That you do.”

She touched her toes with their painted pink nails to his shoulders flirtatiously. “So do you,” Julie said, laughing, “for all of us. You’re a war hero. ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.’”

It sounded like a quote from something, Nick thought, and evidently Kennedy thought so, too. “Nice line,” he remarked. “Mind if I borrow it?”

“It’s yours.” She laughed lightly. “You’re my favorite president.”

He laughed in turn. “Not president yet. Not even nominee. Have Stuart Symington to contend with, and Lyndon Johnson, and refreshing as this party is, I need to talk with Mayor Daley tonight, or else *my* party may go with Adlai Stevenson again. But thank you for your vote.”

She gave him a wistful look, as if there were something important she wanted to tell him, but only said, “I did my fourth-grade report on you.”

Kennedy glanced back over his shoulder at the bunny girl. “You’re from Massachusetts? Not many girls would do a report on a lowly representative.”

“My family moved around,” she confessed in an unplaceable midwestern accent, “especially after my card turned.” She smiled ruefully. “You’ve helped us jokers a lot.”

“Not as much as I’ve wanted to.”

“Every little bit counts, and you’re going to do more.” She bit her lower lip, revealing slightly, but cutely, buck teeth. Or bunny teeth. Nick couldn’t tell if it was a joker trait or the way her teeth were naturally.

Nick considered. Julie acted awfully confident for a joker, even more confident than your average ace, and he should know.

Maybe she'd drawn a prophetic ace, too?

"Do you think he can beat Nixon?" Nick asked.

Julie gave a pained look. "Yeah, but . . ." Her left ear flopped over enchantingly as she bit her lip again, looking at Jack Kennedy with profound adoration and hero worship.

"Thanks." Kennedy smiled, basking in her attention. "Still need to keep up the fight, though. Nixon might still be president."

"Yeah, but he's a crook," Julie swore. "It'll come out. He won't be president long. Trust me." Her rabbit ears positively vibrated.

Nick couldn't be sure whether Julie was speaking prophecy or the quiet or not-so-quiet rage all wild cards felt for Nixon after the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. What had happened to Black Eagle, the Envoy, and poor Brain Trust was unforgivable, especially after they were betrayed by Jack Braun, the Golden Rat. As a joker, Julie could speak her rage publicly. As an ace up the sleeve, Nick needed to keep his feelings hidden, including his shame and ambivalence.

He'd been rooting for Nixon when the Four Aces trial had been going on, an idiot high school kid in conservative Orange County, his head filled with equal parts swimming and girls—which left plenty of room for hatred of Reds and the twisted victims of an alien virus, except for Golden Boy, whom Nixon praised. But after Nick's own card turned, he'd gotten a jolt, not just of electricity but of reality. He'd had to reexamine HUAC and himself, not liking what he saw.

Will-o'-Wisp, the Hollywood Phantom, was as much an

attempt to assuage his guilt as anything else. Not that idiot high school nat Nick had done much to help Nixon break the Four Aces. But a whole lot of people doing not much added up to a lot so it came to the same thing.

Even so, there were things you couldn't say when you were up the sleeve unless you wanted to attract attention. "Are you sure?" Nick asked. "I know Nixon's conservative, but I think he's an honest patriot."

"He's a crook," Julie stressed. "Trust me."

Hef chuckled. "Knew you were Californian, but hadn't pegged you for a Nixon man."

"My family's from Whittier," Nick admitted with a bashful grin. "Went to the same high school as Dick."

"Hard to compete with a hometown hero," Jack said with a laugh, "but I'll try."

Nick turned his self-deprecating grin to the senator. He'd already decided a while ago Kennedy would get his vote if he got the nomination, but he was not about to tell anyone. Not even Jack Kennedy as it turned out. "I'm willing to listen."

Nick did. He was not enough of a policy wonk to follow everything, but Kennedy's stance on civil rights was quite clear, for jokers, aces, Reds, blacks—everyone.

Hef patted Nick on the back. "Convinced now?" He then said to Kennedy, "Remember that same speech, with the same intensity. We'll have you deliver it tomorrow on *Playboy's Penthouse* when we introduce Nick. And I'll try to get Mayor

Daley there for a second chat.”

“Do I get introduced too?” Julie asked hopefully, her ears flopping slightly as she cocked her head.

“We’ll see, but I want to see your test shoot first. Talk about it with Nick.”

“Talk about what?” asked a tall blond middle-aged man walking up along the deck. He looked about Nick’s own height, around six four, and even had the same epicanthal fold next to his eye like Nick had inherited from his mom. “Who’s Nick?”

Nick looked closer, realizing the man looked and sounded like his uncle Fritz, if slightly older and in better shape.

“This is Nick,” Hef said, “our new photographer. Nick Williams, meet Will Monroe, Julie’s ... agent.”

Nick shook Will’s hand as he stepped down into the hot tub. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Will’s smile was genuine, but cursory. He gave Nick an intent look, but then distracted by the inexorable draw of celebrity, turned to Senator Kennedy.

“John Kennedy.” The senator introduced himself with a politician’s handshake. “But you can call me Jack. Monroe, huh? Not perchance a descendant of President Monroe?”

“Not so far as I know”—Will Monroe chuckled, sitting down in the hot tub—“but I might have a president somewhere in my family tree ...”

“Any relation to Marilyn Monroe?” Nick asked. He’d never met her himself, but they’d been on the same set when he’d

gotten a bit part for the swimming ensemble in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

Will gave him a sly look. "Not yet," he said with a chuckle.

"Everyone wants to meet my first centerfold," Hef pointed out, adding to the merriment. "Hell, I still want to meet her. I just bought pictures a calendar company took before she made it big." He glanced then to Kennedy. "But speaking of meeting people, think you've soaked your shoulder enough to mingle a bit before seeing Daley?"

"Happy to." Jack Kennedy climbed over the lip of the Jacuzzi and back into the main pool.

Nick could take a signal: Hef had left him to talk with Julie the joker and get ideas for her shoot. This was a test for him as well as her. Fortunately for Nick, he'd gotten over the idea of jokers a while ago, having barely missed becoming one himself.

Will Monroe asked Nick, "Join me?" He gave a glance to Julie as well. "You too."

"Okay," she conceded, her coral-painted lips forming a perfect moue, "but don't laugh if I end up looking and smelling like a wet rabbit."

Nick did a swimmer's push-up, hauling himself out of the pool and swinging his legs around into the hot tub just as Julie slipped in. He glanced to Will. "From SoCal too?"

"Yep. Hollywood. Grew up in the movie business. Mom was an actress."

"Anyone I've heard of?"

Will Monroe paused, giving a smile of equal parts humor and sadness. “Possibly.”

Nick judged Will Monroe’s age and did the math. “Didn’t make it into talkies?”

“Oh, she had some success there.” Will smiled. “Lost her, well, a few years ago, but it feels like a lifetime away.”

“What about your dad?”

“Never met him.” Will looked sad. “Or at least not that I knew.” He sighed. “Big scandal, of course. But my mom was a bigger star, so she just went on. Papers had a field day, everyone speculating. All I know is that it was someone important, someone powerful: politician, movie mogul, maybe someone in the mob. Mom never told anyone, not even me.” He grimaced. “Every time I asked her, she got angry, then cried. But I think the truth was, she was scared and trying to protect me.”

Nick couldn’t really understand Will’s pain. He had a close relationship with his father—or at least close enough, he’d never told Dad he’d drawn an ace—but mentioning the fact would be cruel. So he just said, “I’m sorry.” After a long moment, broken only by the bubbles of the tub and the bright chatter in the background, he asked, “Any other possibilities? Other leads?”

“Not really.” Will shook his head. “After a while, I learned not to ask. It hurt Mom, and I knew she wasn’t going to give me an answer, so I just went on with my life.” He sighed again. “The only other chance is something I didn’t really pay attention to. When I was busy making *The Final Ace*, my first major picture,

there was this fake psychic who said she knew who my father was and would tell. And she did. Dumped an old beat-up man's hat on her head, said she was channeling his spirit—like bad community theater with no costume budget. I was so used to people making up wild guesses and bullshit that I completely blew it off until my mother threw lawyers at the psychic to make her shut up.” Will looked up over at Nick, tears in his eyes. “That’s when I knew the psychic had said something right. I’d never seen my mom so scared, not just for herself, but for me. She made me promise never to look into what that psychic said.”

“Even a stopped watch is right twice a day,” Nick pointed out. “I know fake mediums were a big thing in the twenties, but the more convincing ones dug up dirt on their targets first. Could be this medium was a better investigator than she was a psychic.”

“Funny you should mention that.” Will gave a dark chuckle. “The psychic said her phantom had been a private investigator too, some minor gumshoe and background actor who’d stumbled into something bad with my mom and paid the ultimate price.”

Nick felt geese walk over his grave, a horrible horripilation all the weirder for being in a hot tub. But broken watches were often right because coincidence was always a possibility. “Well, at least in the twenties they didn’t have real psychics. Not like now.”

Will chuckled a bit too long. “No, not like now.”

The conversation had taken an odder and more uncomfortable angle than Nick had expected, so he switched the subject. “So, what do you think about Hef guessing the Golden Globe

nominations on last week's *Penthouse* and scooping the scandal sheets? Louella Parson's livid, and Hedda Hopper's speculating that Hef's a secret ace."

Will laughed uproariously. "That crazy old bat. Actually, Hef's picks were my picks. We had a gentleman's bet, so he asked me to prove it. So I told him who would be nominated."

Nick was taken aback. "So you're the ace?"

Will shook his head. "No, just a guy from Tinseltown who knows the score."

Nick whistled. "Knowing the score like that, you should be composing for the cinema."

Will shrugged. "They're both savvy women, but Louella has her ego and alliances while Hedda has a whole arsenal of axes to grind and puts those at a higher priority. Whereas I just have a professional interest in the business and not much in the way of alliances."

"Except Hef."

"We go back a long way."

"Father figure?"

"You could say that." Will chuckled again.

"So what is your professional interest in the business? Just agent?"

"For the present," Will said, sharing another chuckle with Julie at some private joke, "but I've made some pictures myself. Not acting, mind you—producing and directing. *The Final Ace* with Arnold Schwarzenegger. *Hindenburg* with Leonardo

DiCaprio.”

“Sounds like Rudolph Valentino.” Nick laughed. “Stage names?”

“No, their actual names.”

“Never heard of them. Sorry.”

“Not a problem. Didn’t expect you to.” Will Monroe shrugged. “They’ll be famous in Hollywood one day. So will I.”

“You already are to me,” Julie Cotton told him. Her rabbit ears were, as warned, beginning to look bedraggled, like a wet bunny.

She was being kind and flirtatious, but Nick had been around Hollywood enough that he knew how the casting couch worked. Yet even so, he asked, “So what’s the story with you two? How’d you get together?”

“Oh, you know, the usual,” she said, glancing to Will. “I was working as a waitress, hoping to be discovered, then fate just threw us together ...”

“She brought me a martini,” Will reminisced. “Next thing we knew, we were naked together in a hotel room.”

“A swanky hotel room,” Julie bragged. “The Palmer House.”

“We realized we shared a future.”

“Then Will suggested we visit his friend Hef and here we are.” Julie looked about herself to the Playboy grotto and wagged her ears, a party trick making them point to their surroundings as expressively as a model’s hands.

Nick shrugged. It all sounded relatively innocent or at least unremarkable. Julie was hardly the first young woman to hook

up with an older man, and when you were a joker, your options were even more limited.

Even so, there was something that was itching him. Julie seemed unusually self-confident even for a modern woman, let alone a joker, and the brashness of most jokers of Nick's acquaintance was a mask over self-loathing. Nick knew that trick too well himself. Will displayed a similar confidence, and a lot more than you'd expect for a middle-aged producer who didn't much make it out of the silent era and was now playing host to a young protégée. Then again, as astute as Will was with the pictures biz, it wasn't a bad move to go in as the power behind the throne to a new player on the media world stage.

"You think Hef's going to move out to Hollywood?" Nick asked.

"You can bet money on it," Will told him.

The banter continued, pleasant but innocuous, and after setting a time for the photo shoot tomorrow, they moved on, as did Nick, chatting with Playmates, both past and aspiring, and generally getting a sense of the place. Constance and Gwen showed him the way to his room so he could freshen up before dinner, then left him to his own devices and bemusement.

The bedroom was small as things went in the mansion and nowhere near as palatial as the ballroom or Hef's bedroom, which the girls deliberately led him through. Nor was it bedecked in Gay Nineties grandeur. It had plain paneling and few frills, looking to be originally intended as maid's quarters, but had

been expertly painted in black and turquoise, the latest colors, with matching carpeting, geometric sunbursts, and sleek modern furnishings. Nick's camera bag sat on a desk, his suitcase had been placed at the foot of the bed, and his jacket and hat awaited on a valet stand along with his freshly laundered and pressed pants, shirt, and tie. His shoes were likewise by the bed, his socks inside, clean and dry.

Somewhat stubbornly, Nick put the same outfit on, went to dinner, and noted seat arrangements. Hef sat at the head of the table like a convivial king, Senator Kennedy at his right hand, in the place of honor. Apparently the dinner with Mayor Daley had been canceled or postponed. An aspiring Playmate whom Nick had been only briefly introduced to—Sally something-or-other—sat to his right. Kennedy ignored her, focusing his attention on Julie Cotton sitting opposite, Julie alternately doting on his words or making him laugh with her at some witty repartee. Will Monroe sat between her and Hef, the left-hand place of a king's secret adviser, his attention focused on Kennedy, his expression a mixture of hope and sadness when his immediate dinner companions weren't looking at him, but masking it quickly with Hollywood poise when anyone gave him their attention.

Nick tried to understand what was going on with Will, but then realized that, though the man looked old enough to be Nick's father, and *did* resemble a slimmer version of his uncle, in place of Uncle Fritz's jocular charm, Will Monroe's resting expression was that of a lost little boy, looking alternately to Kennedy and

Hef as if there were something he desperately wished to ask them or tell them but couldn't find the right words.

Nick was seated much farther down the table with a group of photographers and editors interspersed with Playmates and hopefuls. Their banter was a mixture of ribbing and jealousy; it was well known that Nick was the pretty boy brought out from Hollywood more for his looks in front of the camera than his talent behind it. It made for some unexpected camaraderie with the Playmates, some of whom had aspirations of their own beyond modeling, including Gwen and Constance, who sat flanking Nick like they had Hef earlier in the day.

One of the editors laughed and remarked, "So, you got the hot seat. Joker Julie talked Hef into having you shoot her."

"Kill da wabbit," Constance sang under her breath with barely disguised jealousy to the tune of "Ride of the Valkyries."

A layout director with a heavy beard grinned and paused cutting his steak—the food at the mansion was top-notch—to tell Nick, "Hef's a man of his word. He was calling Julie Cottontail his 'clever bunny.'"

"Dumb bunny is more like it," Gwen stated, a little too loudly, cutting viciously into her steak. When all the men looked at her, she said, "Don't you gentlemen know? All the girls do."

"Know what?" asked the editor.

"Julie just *asked* Dr. Zimmerman for the pill. Just like that. Like it was the most ordinary thing in the world."

"The pill?" Nick echoed. "You mean birth control pills? Those

aren't fully legal yet, are they?"

"No," Constance said, rolling her eyes, "not unless you have severe menstrual cramps."

"Surprising the number of women who now have severe menstrual cramps," Gwen remarked. "The pill might get legalized later this year, *if we're lucky.*"

"Yes, but then Julie just bounces in going, 'Where can I get the pill? I lost my prescription, because my old doctor is being a baby now, so I need a new one.'"

"Doc Zimmerman was *not* being a baby for refusing her," Gwen stressed. "He's got a wife and a baby boy to look after. He could have lost his license."

Constance nodded in violent agreement. "He has to play along with Congress's charade. They're the real babies here."

"Yeah, but Julie's no prize either. Crazy bunny is more like it," Gwen added. "Julie claims she's been on birth control *for years* when Enovid has only been available for two."

"Clinical trials for a couple years before that, if you were lucky enough to get picked," Constance chimed in, "not that they'd pick a teenager, let alone a joker." She shrugged and took a dainty bite of steak. "Julie got the pill anyway, but only because Hef called in a favor and had us give her a talk first." Constance shrugged. "Might as well call her lucky bunny."

"Oh?" Nick asked.

"Yeah," Gwen agreed in hushed tones with a glance up to the head of the table, "she could have ended up in jail. Around

Christmas, Hef got a call from the Palmer House. These crazy swingers had set up in his favorite suite and were charging everything to his tab. Guy claimed he was a friend of Hef's from Hollywood and had the passwords from Hef's little black book. Hef didn't know a thing about it and hasn't even *been* to Hollywood yet. But he went down to have a chat, and the next thing we know, he's paid the Palmer House, brought them back to the mansion, and they've been here ever since."

Constance stabbed a potato with her fork. "I think he just admires their chutzpah."

Nick had to admit that he did, too, though he was fairly certain there was more to Will Monroe and Julie Cotton's story than just chutzpah.



Nick awoke to a presence at the foot of his bed. Actually two. He was used to tuning out the electrical energy in other human beings, but only when awake. Asleep, it made him jumpy, and soon after drawing his ace, he'd even shocked people who tried to wake him up, but never so badly he hadn't been able to blame it on static electricity.

A locked door solved most of that risk, and getting in the habit of sleeping in the nude explained the need for a locked door. Fortunately, mentioning this peculiarity at the Playboy Mansion

was greeted with cries of “Who doesn’t?”

He opened his eyes the barest crack, seeing only darkness except for a dim bit of illumination from the narrow window. No one was standing at the foot of his bed, but his bed was placed against the wall, and the presences he sensed were just on the other side of that wall. And each bore double Ds—not breasts, but batteries.

Somewhere there had to be an ace or deuce who could sense breasts, but Nick was not him. But batteries were easy, their size and charge, and whether or not the circuit was connected. These were paired D-cells in a configuration Nick immediately recognized as indicative of flashlights switched off. And the height they were held at suggested the bearers were female, breast size unknown, but given what he’d seen at the Playboy Mansion thus far, probably at least a B-cup, likely a C or above.

And by the glimmer of moonlight coming in the window, once Nick’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, he could see a tiny strip of paneling was missing, and behind the missing strip he could see the glitter of a pair of eyes belonging to the owner of one of the pairs of batteries and the presumed flashlight.

Nick tamped down the instinct to fluoresce with an aura of light and energy. It had happened a few times and was the worst defense for an ace trying to keep his card up the sleeve, and the only thing that had saved him before was that no one had seen his face. But Hef and half of the Playboy staff knew who was sleeping in the former maid’s bedroom, and then they’d not just

get the show they'd been hoping for, the former swim champion sleeping alone in the buff, but also get to see an ace blowing his cover.

Using a parlor trick to draw some of the energy out of the batteries and light up the flashlights was also not a good idea, nor was ionizing enough energy to light up the light bulbs in the room without touching the light switches. But touching the lights as a nat would ...

Nick reached out and pulled the chain of the bedside lamp.

The light crackled to life as the slot in the paneling slammed shut. Nick felt the pairs of double D batteries retreat along with the associated human energy fields.

Being able to control electricity did not mean being able to control light, and Nick was blinded by the sudden glare. But once his eyes adjusted, he got up and went and looked at the paneling. The panels were smooth and polished, but he could just make out the crack in one, set in to look like a bit of piecework used to remove a knothole. Nick's ace, however, could sense the metal behind, the interference consistent with an iron bolt and a hinge.

Two more hinges were detectable as well as a latch. Feeling around on a nearby section of panel revealed a knothole not large enough to warrant removal, but the center functioned as a button. The panel at the foot of his bed swung out.

Nick had already been dropped down one secret chute—thankfully into a swimming pool and not a vat of acid—and now he'd been spied on through a peephole from a secret passage.

The chance that the architect of Chicago's Murder Castle had designed only one such building was not a chance that Nick was willing to bet his life on. So while it would usually be the height of foolishness for a former swimmer to wander nude into a dark cobwebbed passage, most former swimmers weren't aces who could conjure ball lightning charges that could hang in the air with the same illumination as Chinese lanterns. Plus his will-o'-wisps moved as he willed. And Nick could sense other people, especially if they carried flashlights.

Whoever had spied upon him was definitely shorter since they hadn't broken the cobwebs at his head height. He used his hands for that, not wanting to set the mansion on fire, and explored down the passage, will-o'-wisps bobbing before and after.

A few yards down, he found the bolt-and-hinge arrangement of another Judas peephole. Nick recalled his will-o'-wisps, letting the energy ground back into his reservoir, dousing their light, then popped the peephole and gazed out into the bedroom of two Playmates. A night-light provided soft and erotic illumination of one lying on her back in a languid pose, breasts exposed and glorious. Nick wished he'd brought the Argus and some Kodak 120. The second Playmate was not in a flattering pose, sprawled face-first into the pillow, arm dangling over the side of the bed, having apparently lost a wrestling match with the comforter.

Nick shut the peephole and proceeded on, keeping his ace alert for the presence of batteries, especially moving ones. There

were a disconcerting number of flashlight D-cells throughout the mansion, all switched off at the moment, stored at heights you'd expect for dresser drawers, until Nick sensed one move and then have the circuit connected, turning on.

He vanished his will-o'-wisps back into himself, dousing the light, ready to race blind down the passage, realizing that perhaps he hadn't thought this plan through completely. The flashlight batteries moved forward and back, again and again, as if their holder were searching for something. Nick held his breath, hearing only the pounding of his heart and then a low oscillating whine reverberating through the walls.

The batteries continued to move and the whirring hum was joined by the sound of a woman moaning. Moaning in pleasure ...

Nick brought a glow to his eyes long enough to find the peephole, then spied in, seeing a Playmate atop her bed, naked in the moonlight, demonstrating that flashlight batteries could be used in other handheld tools, in this case a vibrator, as she came closer to finding what she was looking for, that something being her G-spot.

"Oooooo!" the Playmate moaned, having found it.

Nick found his erect penis sticking into cobwebs. He wiped them free then shut the peephole. The Playboy Mansion was showing itself to be less Murder Castle and more Voyeurs Paradise. But there was still more to explore.

A secret stairwell led up and down. Nick chose upstairs,

finding a peephole into the library: currently unoccupied but with a light left on. A collection of photo albums lay on the coffee table, one open to boudoir photos of beauties half a century past.

Nick proceeded on, spying through another peephole into the ballroom, empty at the moment. Then he sensed the presence of two sets of flashlight batteries on the move, not in pleasure, but coming up the stairs at the end of the passage. Nick grabbed the knob on the panel in front of him and turned. It wouldn't budge and the flashlights were nearing the top of the stairs. He pulled his will-o'-wisps into himself, plunging the secret corridor into darkness.

The darkness did not last long, beams of light illuminating the end of the hall. Nick fumbled desperately then found the catch, releasing it. The panel beside him slid aside, a hidden pocket door, but rolled slowly. Nick squeezed through the gap the moment he could, turning his shoulders sideways.

The ballroom was illuminated by moonlight through the grand windows. Nick ran to the piano, pulling on the gilded bar to the right of the music stand. He heard a click from the trapdoor, then ran to stand atop it. For a second time, he fell down the secret chute, this time on purpose. But this time also without the rug or pants. The cobwebs he was covered in offered scant protection as he discovered the slide was not so smooth when you slid down it naked.

He dove on instinct.

The pool was not deserted, but everyone there was drunk, no

one questioning his use of the slide or his apparent decision that clothing was optional at this hour.

Nick took one of the mansion's guest robes from the poolside cabinet then went back to his room, half expecting someone to be waiting for him.

No one was. After a long while staring at the secret panel, Nick pulled the chain on the bedside table lamp and went back to sleep.



The next day, Nick went out of the mansion for a walk until he found a convenient phone booth and dialed a number. A woman's voice answered: "Hedda Hopper's office. Who may I say is calling?"

"Nick Williams," Nick answered.

"Nicholas darling," Hedda replied. "So, what did my favorite gumshoe find out for mother?"

Nick started with the petty gossip: the Playboy Club's theme was still undecided, but a toss-up between a revamped Everleigh Club corset models and sex kittens.

"How quaint. I'll tell Lollipop. Let's see how she spins that." Hedda laughed nastily. "But on to my question. Is Hef an ace?"

"No," said Nick.

"Does he employ one?"

“Probably not, but . . .” Nick related the bare details about Will Monroe and his Golden Globe picks.

“Well, far be it from me to say I’m *happy* with being beaten at my own game,” Hedda remarked, “but I’m at least pleased that it isn’t some cheating ace. Will Monroe, you say? Name’s not ringing any bells. Likely assumed. I’ve never heard of those pictures or those actors either. DiCaprio and Schwarzenegger? A wop and a kraut? And one of the films is *Hindenburg*? Smells like German cinema. You said ‘Monroe’ is blond? How tall?”

“About my height. Couldn’t tell precisely. We were both sitting down.”

“Still not tall enough,” Hedda’s tinny voice snapped over the phone, speculating out loud. “Murnau was a freak back when they weren’t common, just one inch shy of seven feet. *And* he was queer as a three-dollar bill. But there are rumors of him having a love child with some actress. Still . . . Just how old is this ‘Will Monroe’?”

“I’d guess mid-fifties, maybe a little less.”

“Likely too old then, unless Murnau fathered him at ten. But thirteen/fourteen? Murnau/Monroe? If *I* were Murnau’s love child looking for an alias, *that* is what I would go for. And who knows? Very tall boy, very small woman? It’s really not outside of possibility, especially if it’s what put Murnau off girls to begin with . . .” The phone held silence except for the static, then Hedda pronounced, “I’ll dig on this end, you dig on that. See how far down the rabbit hole you can get.”

“Okay,” Nick said, “but speaking of rabbits ...”

He told her about Julie. Hedda was not pleased. “Well,” she said, “it would compromise you as my spy to have you take unflattering pictures of her, so do your best. But on to my most pressing question. Why is Hefner so certain that Kennedy will win the presidency?”

Nick wondered how to phrase it without tipping his own voting preferences. “Hef’s as liberal as they come, and Kennedy was visiting the mansion ...”

“*Kennedy?*” Hedda nearly shrieked. “Talk about burying the lede! Tell me everything.”

Nick did.

“Flirting with a joker prostitute in a hot tub?” Hedda fumed. “What I wouldn’t give for pictures of that!” After a moment of sinister static, Hedda added, “Fortunately I know a photographer ...”

Once the call concluded, Nick reached frantically for his cigarette case. He felt dirty after that conversation, and even dirtier after he realized he’d used his last match in the book, then on reflex mimed lighting one and shielding it in his hands to light a cigarette. In reality, he conjured a tiny will-o’-wisp in the palm of his hand.

He took a slow draw till the cherry caught, then pulled the electric charge back into himself and flicked his hand sharply to toss the nonexistent match into the gutter before it could burn his finger. Nick took a drag on his cigarette, checking those in view

for any reactions. But no one evidenced any, not the smart young couple out walking a pair of pugs, not the boy on the bicycle wearing a crowned beanie.

Nick exhaled a cloud of smoke. There was not much remarkable about a tall man in a fedora and an overly thin coat walking down the sidewalk with a cigarette. Will-o'-Wisp, or at least reports of him, was left safely back in Hollywood. At least for the moment.



After collecting the Argus's case from his room, Nick found his way to the library. He glanced to the coffee table with the photo albums and, from the angle of the open one, guessed which bookshelf held the peephole and presumably the secret door.

Julie Cotton was already there, apparently oblivious to the secret passage. Today she wore nothing but lingerie, a white satin singlet with bustier, customized like yesterday's swimsuit with a spot for her fluffy tail to stick through, sticking up in the air as she bent over a random assortment of garments stacked on a red velvet sofa. "What do you think?" she asked, straightening up and gesturing to the collection.

Nick thought she'd have given a great show to any voyeur using the vintage peephole but only said, "I think you won't have a chance to wear all those. The point of *Playboy* is to see women

with their clothes off, not on.”

She smiled. “I thought you read it for the articles.”

“That too.” Nick grinned. “But the pictures bear repeat viewing.”

“True,” she admitted, “but we girls get interviews too. If you could ask me one question, what would it be?”

“How did your card turn?” Nick answered honestly.

“Exactly. Most guys will beat around the bush a bit, but that’s what everyone wants to know. And, you know, if there are any other surprises down there ...” She reached up to the top of her bustier, putting her hands atop her large and very natural-looking breasts. “Want a peep?”

Nick nodded.

With a stripper’s training, she teased the edge of one side of the bustier down, then the other, exposing two pink and perfect aureoles before finally letting him see her full breasts. They were magnificent, smooth and firm with pale white skin and the faintest tracery of blue veins, without any visible stretch marks. She slid the costume down, exposing her slim middle, perfect navel, and finally, the surprise.

The surprise was something Nick both halfway expected and, he realized on some level, hoped for. The hair of her feminine triangle, while matching her natural platinum blond, also matched the soft down of an angora rabbit, just like the fluffy fur on her ears and tail.

She let the costume fall to her feet, stepping out of it, then

turned around so he could see only her pert derriere and the fluffy white cottontail she twitched flirtatiously as she peered at him over her shoulder.

“Julie . . . Cottontail?”

“Yep.” She cocked her head and her ears flopped coquettishly. “If you think the kids teased me with that before my card turned, you should have heard them after.” She turned, falling back on the sofa, and laughed as her breasts bounced with the springs. “I was seven and mad for bunnies. Had some as pets, had the slippers, had them sewn on my clothes, Bugs Bunny pajamas, the works. Even rabbit wallpaper and bunny cutouts my mom glued on my lampshade. Plus all the books. *The Velveteen Rabbit*, of course, and the March Hare and the White Rabbit from *Alice*, and *Peter Rabbit* and *Benjamin Bunny* from Beatrix Potter. But my favorite was *Rabbit Hill*, this old kids’ book that won the Newbery Medal.” She looked troubled then, but then most wild cards did when discussing the trauma of their card turning.

Nick also put together her age now with what she’d said. “You were one of the first,” he realized. “You changed back in ’46 when the blimps blew.”

She gave him a wide-eyed look like a frightened bunny. “Yeah, on Wild Card Day. In ’46.” She looked away. “All I knew is that I had an awful fever like the kid in *The Velveteen Rabbit*, then I dreamed about . . . *Rabbit Hill* . . . and I woke up like this.” She looked up at him and her ears twitched. “What about with you?”

“What?” Nick asked. “What about what with me?”

“What was it like when you turned your card?”

“I’m not a wild card,” Nick denied on reflex. “I’m a nat.”

“You sure?” Julie asked, her ears perking up a bit straighter.

“You asked me the way us cards ask each other, like you already knew what it’s like.” She tilted her head the other way. “Don’t worry. If you’re up the sleeve, it’s okay.”

Hef was right. Clever bunny indeed. But all Nick said was, “Sorry, really, I’m just a nat.” He then added, since it was true and gave him cover, “I’m just from Hollywood. Lots of jokers end up there for B movies. Makes easy costuming for monsters.”

“That’s exploitative,” Julie remarked disapprovingly, sitting there naked beside a pile of costumes.

“It’s a job,” Nick pointed out.

Julie gave a wry grin. “Speaking of which, since I’m already nude, wanna do my centerfold?”

“Centerfold?”

“Hey, aim high. Worst Hef can do is say no.” She grinned wider, fishing around in the pile of props until she came up with a circlet of braided wheat. “What better Miss March than the March Hare?”

With that, she placed it on her head, reaching up and pulling it down over both ears. On any other model, it would have looked like a head wreath for a harvest queen or a classical accessory for a Gilded Age tableau of the Greco-Roman goddesses, the wheat sheaf crown of Demeter/Ceres. But on Julie Cotton, tilted rakishly askew like the halo of a hungover angel, it made her

resemble Tenniel's illustration of the Mad Hatter's chum from the Mad Tea Party.

"Got a teacup?" Nick asked.

"Oh yes." Julie produced one from her pile of rummaged props. "And I've got something even better ..." With that she hopped over to the bookshelf, doing a mad little dance en route with terpsichorean grace before pulling down a volume.

She flipped it open, revealing a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* with hand-tinted illustrations. The page she'd chanced on bore the illustration of Alice and the Cheshire Cat.

A scrap of paper fluttered out, landing on the floor in between them. Nick reached down and picked it up. The penmanship was round and feminine, European in style, with two words: *possible costume*.

Nick showed Julie. "Lownes wants the Playboy Club girls to be dressed up as sexy kittens."

"*The Pussycat Dolls*." Julie rolled her eyes, then raised her teacup and the book, thumbing forward a couple pages to show the illustration for the Mad Tea Party. "Rather than fake kittens, wouldn't it be better if the first *Playboy* mascot were an actual bunny girl?"

She was audacious, he gave her that. *Playboy* had yet to even feature a black girl. "You need to sell that to Hef, not me," was all Nick told her as he took the first photo.

Julie was easy to work with, eager and almost ridiculously photogenic. She donned a gentleman's waistcoat and pocket

watch to give the impression of the White Rabbit, assuming the White Rabbit was a young woman with large breasts. "I'm late! I'm late!" she cried, holding a running pose with a ballerina's poise, purposefully pointing her ears back to give the impression that she was racing like the wind.

Nick used half a roll of film for that, getting her from multiple angles.

Julie cycled through her pile of props: A carrot and a shotgun made for Bugs Bunny. An Edwardian red woolen wrap and a series of three poses made for Peter Rabbit's sisters, Flopsy, Mopsy, and, of course, Cottontail. The Velveteen Rabbit was less obvious, but a beautiful nude reclining on divan with an assortment of vintage children's toys was still a sexy pose.

"So what's *Rabbit Hill* about?" Nick asked, changing film, remembering back to childhood. He'd never read the book, but he'd thought it was relatively new, not a reprint of a forgotten classic. He recalled a cover with a rabbit hopping gaily over a hill. There'd been a new copy on the shelf at his school library, but the book had looked too cutesy to bother with, so it hadn't crossed his recollection till she'd mentioned it now.

"Um, rabbits. On a hill."

"I sort of expected that." Nick thought back. "The rabbit on the cover was naked, right? Bouncing in the air but standing up?"

"Ooh, that's a good idea!" Julie exclaimed. "Let's do that!"

With that she leapt onto the sofa and began bouncing, not so much like a child on a bed as a naked woman on a trampoline.

Nick began to take photos, Julie's glorious breasts bouncing for all to see, "all" in this case meaning him and the camera.

And maybe someone using the peephole. Nick felt a presence there, the electrical energy the hazy outline of a living being but with the telltale nuggets of a flashlight.

He wasn't a professional dancer, unless you counted a bit part in the men's water ballet in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, but a swimmer and actor could still do sudden leaps. Nick did, angling the Argus to get a wild action shot of Julie while in the background snapping the spying eyes. The peephole snapped shut and the flashlight batteries completed their circuit as they retreated, the hazy human energy along with them. Nick continued shooting Julie until the film roll was exhausted and so was she.

He was a bit, too, and also curious if the spy in the secret passage would come back. "Want to take a break?" he asked. "Look at the albums from the Everleigh Club?"

Julie smiled. "Hef said something about those. They're here?"
"I think so." Nick picked a spot on the love seat with the best angle on the closed peephole, which now looked like nothing more than a strip of carved laurels.

Julie, still nude, picked up the open album and brought it back to the love seat so they could both look at the pictures.

The Everleigh Club girls modeled bustiers and corsets, some sporting headbands with oversize poppy rosettes to each side, the fashion of the era. White ink, neatly penned onto the album's

black paper, gave the names of the girls and the various special occasions. This album, dated 1902, featured a visit from the smiling, bearded, and mustached Prince Henry of Prussia. Ada and Minna Everleigh, the club's eponymous proprietresses and madams, posed with the prince, a bevy of girls about them.

Julie giggled as she paged through the rest of the album, but Nick was distracted by the dual tasks of trying to monitor the peephole and the very close presence of a beautiful naked woman snuggled into the love seat beside him.

"Let's look at another!" Julie closed that album and picked the next at random: 1908. Highlights included a tableau with the girls costumed as Eskimos, a pair of selkie maids in sealskin coats, and a polar bear played by a large woman clothed only in a polar bearskin rug, all fawning over Admiral Peary, the famed polar explorer. A page on, another nude woman played mama bear, but this time with a brown or at least sepia-tone bearskin rug, hunted by none other than Teddy Roosevelt. Beside TR, playing his guide and gun bearer while looking directly at the camera and grinning ear to ear, stood a young man with pale skin, dark hair, and dark soulful eyes, and an amusingly upturned pug nose.

"It's Pug!" Julie exclaimed, pointing to TR's pug-nosed guide.

Nick read the caption: *Our intrepid guide, Gary Peterman, leads President Roosevelt to the lair of Ursula, the She-Bear!*

"Who's 'Pug'?" Nick asked.

"Um, a child actor," Julie answered. "He's a friend of Will's."

"Here he is again." Nick pointed to the next page, where

Teddy Roosevelt posed formally if cheerfully with Ada Everleigh while Minna was escorted by Gary Peterman, again with the goofily charming grin, giving both thumbs up to the camera like the world's cheeriest Roman emperor.

“Child actor?” Nick questioned. “I assume you mean on stage, right? Because this guy’s at least twenty and these photos are from 1908.”

Julie bit her lip and looked at Nick anxiously. “Um, yeah. On stage. Pug’s career didn’t make it into talkies. I mean silents. But he was hoping to start it up again.”

“Again? Is he still around? He must be in his seventies.”

“Um, I hope so. Will will want to find him. And he needs to see these. Sorry.” She got up, clutching the photo album to her ample chest as if it were the most precious thing in the world, and ran out of the room like the White Rabbit late for a croquet date with the Queen of Hearts. Naked croquet.

Nick felt the presence at the peephole again and took a picture of the eyes that appeared the moment it was opened. The peephole shut as quickly and the flashlight batteries retreated. Nick suspected Gwen and Constance. But eyes were distinctive and there were a lot of Playmate photos. What was more intriguing was Julie and Will. For as much as they maintained a playful affability, Julie was possibly Will’s daughter. They acted like they had a shared history, but not necessarily a sexual one.

But more to the point, Will had mentioned that he was a bastard, his mother an actress, his father presumably a rich and

powerful man, but one who could be undone by scandal. Will Monroe, perhaps not the illegitimate son of F. W. Murnau, but the bastard son of Ada or Minna Everleigh and one of their prominent guests? Prince Henry of Prussia would certainly explain Will's Germanic look, as would the Dutch origins of the Roosevelt dynasty. And Gary "Pug" Peterman, the former child actor, then apparently Ada and Minna's trusted majordomo? Who better to act as surrogate father to the famous madams' unacknowledged son and nephew?

This also explained Will's interaction with Kennedy and for that matter Hefner. Teddy Roosevelt was long dead, Prince Henry likewise, but the senator was the closest Monroe might come to actually meeting his father, or at least a man like him. And Hefner was the closest thing Chicago had to a carriage trade brothel keeper like the Everleigh sisters.

Then there was the Everleigh sisters' fortune. If Monroe was the unacknowledged bastard son of one, but could find proof in the albums Hefner had purchased from Ada's estate, then he might have a good chance of suing for at least that half of his inheritance, maybe even extracting acknowledgment or at least hush money from the Roosevelts or whatever was left of the Prussian royal family.

So many possibilities. Nick didn't know if he'd guessed the right one, but he meant to follow the rabbit hole down.



That night, the taping of *Playboy's Penthouse* went much as planned: Nick was introduced as the new Hollywood photographer, then served as a foil for Kennedy to give his speech. Then Julie bounced in, introduced as nothing more elevated than a “prospective Playmate,” but that in itself was a civil rights statement, as was Kennedy’s conversation with her, pledging his support to the joker community.

Nick was rotated out for this, relegated to the sidelines of the penthouse cocktail party that was really just a soundstage at WBKB. Mayor Daley entered. Will Monroe stood beside Nick as they watched Julie hop to fetch drinks for Kennedy and Daley, Hef smiling, ever the genial host. Nick got out his cigarette case and wordlessly offered one to Will.

“Shorry, don’t shmoke,” Will told him, slurring his words. He’d been moved to the sidelines to keep up the *Playboy* image of social drinking, not wanton inebriation. “Y’shouldn’t either. Things’ll kill you.”

“These are filtered. Companies say they’re safe now.”

“They’re lying,” Will stated flatly. “It’ll come out. Trust me.”

He was curiously insistent about this, like a prophet. But Nick had heard fire-and-brimstone health warnings before, mostly recycled temperance rants like Carrie Nation going on about

President Grant and his lips rotting off. “Well, Prohibition didn’t turn out too well either.” He nodded to Will Monroe’s scotch.

“I’ve got reasons to drink.” Will raised his glass. “Trust me on that too.”

“And I’ve got reasons for not drinking.” With that, Nick put his cigarette case away and lit his cigarette with one of the numerous matchbooks that littered the set. He then whispered sotto voce, “So, Kennedy reminds you of your father?”

“What?”

Some of the best clues were dropped by drunk people, so Nick pressed on. “Put two and two together. You think your father was someone powerful, maybe a politician. Julie ran off with the album with the photos of Teddy Roosevelt. You’re the right age. I’m guessing either TR or Prince Henry of Prussia, with an outside chance of F. W. Murnau.”

“Always loved his work, but that would be a trick.” Will Monroe guffawed and took a swig of scotch. “Murnau was gay ...”

“Or maybe Admiral Peary?”

“No, try again.”

“Gary Peterman?” Nick prodded and saw Will Monroe’s eyes go wide. “I was thinking he was a surrogate father, but maybe he’s your actual father? Julie said Pug was a child actor, and you mentioned the psychic said your father was an actor ...”

“Pug and I had a father-son relationship, but it’s not what you think.” Will Monroe’s eyes narrowed as he nursed his scotch,

then he shrugged. “Maybe you’re my father. Who knows?”

“I wasn’t around in 1908 to have an affair with the Everleigh sisters.”

“The Everleigh sisters?” Will chuckled. “No, my mom’s an actress. A famous one. But I’m not going to tell you who. But my father?” Will smiled, his expression equal parts bemusement and admiration as he looked Nick up and down. “You even look like me, or at least like I used to. Still swim laps, try to keep in shape. But no one stays young forever ...”

“Except the Golden Rat,” Nick put in. “Guy’s in his thirties, but still looks like he’s in high school.”

“Just you wait.” Will Monroe chuckled and took another swig of scotch, adding, “Jack swore he wasn’t my dad, and I finally believed him, but he looks like me too. Or did. Or will.”

Nick took a long drag on his cigarette and raised an eyebrow at the drunk man. “So Jack Braun is not only strong and invulnerable, but he can travel in time?”

“Maybe not now, but he will.” Will downed his glass. “I wonder where he is now.”

“In Hollywood somewhere boning a starlet.”

“No, I meant my old poker buddy.” Will Monroe staggered, putting his arm around Nick for support. “Jack’sh the one who told me about the Palmer House game.” He paused. “If I tell Jack now to not go to the poker game, then ...”

Nick didn’t know what Will was talking about, but he did know that a drunk was passing out on him. Nick dropped his

cigarette as Will dropped his glass. It shattered on the floor of the set, scotch and glass shards flying everywhere, as he grabbed the older man around the middle and eased him to the floor.

“Your name’s Nick Williams.” Will grabbed Nick’s hand and squeezed it, looking at him plaintively. “William’s my first name. But my mother always called me Will ...”

The alcohol on Will’s breath was almost overpowering and the fumes from the spilled scotch even more so. Nick felt a shock going through him from the contact high and it was all he could do to keep his internal battery in check.

“Are you him?” Will begged, clutching his hand. “Are you my father? Will you be?”

“I’m sorry,” Nick said honestly. “I can’t be.” He gritted his teeth with the effort to keep from lighting him up like a Christmas tree and shocking Will to death, but he forced the bleeding electricity away into an invisible ionic charge.

Floodlights overloaded, light bulbs exploded, cameramen began swearing, then with a crack and a pop and a cascade of sparks, the studio was plunged into darkness.

“What the hell!?” came Hef’s voice. “We’re on air!”

“Not anymore!” someone called back. “Blew a circuit breaker!”

Nick knelt by Will, cradling him like a baby, the only illumination the cherry of the dropped cigarette then the flare as it caught the spreading pool of scotch. The drunk man’s face crumpled up like a wet paper bag in the hellish glow. “My father

...” He sobbed a child’s sob. “My father ... I never knew my father ...”

Nick laid a hand of solace on the drunk’s forehead, brushing back his hair from his eyes. “I’m sorry,” Nick apologized, “I don’t know who he is.”



Back at the mansion, Hef had a couple Playmates who were also trained nurses. They were given the job of hydrating Will and getting him to bed. Hef took another couple Playmates to bed himself, and while there were Playmates ready and willing to join Nick, he begged off, preferring to turn in early for the night.

Of course, he’d also seen Julie Cotton still fawning over Kennedy, and part of a private investigator’s job was taking pictures of men having affairs. Hedda had wanted pictures of Kennedy and Julie in a hot tub, but Nick thought he could find even hotter water than that.

This time, however, he brought a flashlight and wore clothes to explore the Playboy Mansion’s secret passages, including his hat.

The mansion had more than one set of passages. The main ones, until him, had not been explored by anyone tall, judging by the breaks in the cobwebs. The secondary corridors had not been explored in years, if that, opening in secret off of already

secret passageways.

Of course, most explorers weren't able to sense the electromagnetic interference caused by a spiderweb-covered bolt. Nick could and in short order found his way down a cobweb-draped corridor that led to the room where Jack Kennedy was staying.

The peephole bolt was rusted shut, but electricity removed rust. Nick looked out into dimness, able to make out the silhouettes of a four-poster bed and the two people in it, one atop the other, the one on top sporting a round tail and distinctive long ears.

"Did you hear that?" asked Julie Cotton.

"Mmm, hear what?" asked Jack Kennedy in his Boston Brahmin drawl.

"That sound."

"Just someone slamming a door somewhere."

Julie's ears twitched in silhouette. "No, it was closer than that." They swiveled toward Nick.

Nick started to swing the peephole shut but there was a faint creak so he stopped. Julie's ears stood straight up. Hoping her eyesight was only human, Nick covered the slot of the peephole with the soft gray felt of his hat brim. It muffled sound as well, but when he finally thought it safe to steal a glance, Julie's silhouette was again facing forward.

"—only thing creaking here is the bed," Jack insisted, thrusting up into her, making the springs creak with his exertions.

"I don't think so." Julie's ears twitched. "These ears are for more than just petting, you know."

"Then it's a rat." Another thrust. "This place is old."

Nick did feel a bit like Judas, but he wasn't one of Kennedy's disciples, the man was just a politician, and what's more, a married man, having an affair when he had not just a wife but kids. If Nick was a rat, he certainly wasn't the only one.

"Okay," Julie said, "but promise me one thing. Don't ever go to Texas."

"Can't promise you that." Jack laughed. "You're a crazy bunny." A grunt. "I like you, Julie." Grunt. "But it's a big state." Grunt. "Gonna have to stump."

"I don't care if you stump! Just don't go there after you're elected."

"Might wanna run for a second term ..."

"I want you to too," Julie cried, beginning to sob, "but you won't. Trust me, you won't. Just promise me you won't go to Dallas."

"Dallas is a big city."

"Then just promise me you won't go to Dealey Plaza," Julie sobbed. "Don't go anywhere near that damned school book depository ..."

"Okay," he moaned, "on one condition ..."

"What?"

"You quit teasing me with the crazy talk and we just have wild bunny sex!"

“Deal!”

With that, Julie began bouncing as gaily as the rabbit on the cover of *Rabbit Hill*, except instead of a hill, she was atop Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

This was the money shot, but the room was too dark, and it would give away the game to use a flash. But unlike most photographers, Nick had an ace. He bled off electricity into the air like a Tesla coil, the ionic charge making the light bulbs light up on their own.

Light up they did, enough to get three clear shots until the bulbs in the chandelier went up like flashbulbs, overloading one after another.

“What the hell!” cried Jack.

“What on earth!” cried Julie.

Nick cried nothing, only used the distraction to slam and bolt the peephole.

The bulb in his flashlight had blown, too, but he had will-o'-wisp to light the way.



Two days later, Nick deposited a stack of photos on Hef's desk. A second smaller stack of photos and their negatives were hidden under the lining of the Argus's case.

Two other photos and negative frames, one with a blurry photo

on the model but a good focus on the background, another just a shot of a bookcase, had been left out. Nick had compared the eyes in the library peephole with the eyes of the Playmates and matched them with Constance and Gwen, as expected.

Hef picked up the photos, flipping through them without comment, then began to lay them in groups atop the desk. “White Rabbit, March Hare, Peter Rabbit’s hot sisters ... What’s this?”

“The Velveteen Rabbit,” Nick answered.

Hef nodded and came to the last set of photos, flipping through them. He paused at one. “Great action shot. Got *centerfold* written all over it.”

“Centerfold?”

“Yep,” Hef said, “had a gentleman’s bet with Will. He won. Asked me to make Julie centerfold. Was thinking of doing it anyway, but later. But these photos? I’m moving her up to Miss March. *And* we’ve got the new theme for the club. That harpy Parsons somehow got word we were doing kittens, so we’re going to switch it up and unveil bunnies instead.” Hef gazed at the centerfold, Nick’s shot of Julie bouncing gaily in the air, then laid it on the desk. He then opened a drawer and pulled out a book, setting it beside the photograph with a grim chuckle. “Knew I’d seen this pose before.”

A shiny Newbery Medal sticker adorned the cover of *Rabbit Hill*, a bunny bouncing beside it in the same pose, a hill with a little red house in the background below. “My daughter Christie’s seven,” Hef mentioned. “I asked Julie what sort of book a seven-

year-old girl would like. She suggested this.”

Nick reached out and flipped it open, noting the title page and the words below: *The Viking Press—New York 1944*. “Two years before Wild Card Day ...”

“Must have made quite an impression.” Hef tapped the nude. “So will this.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re going to need a clothed shot for the cover, but that doesn’t have to wait until Valdes swaps the kitten costumes into bunnies. Julie already has her own ears and tail.”

“Should I be the one to tell her?”

Hef mused. “Sure. Go ahead. You’ve earned it.”



Nick knocked on the door of Will and Julie’s suite. Julie opened it.

“Congratulations, Miss March,” Nick greeted her.

Her face lit up while her ears stood up straight. “Are you kidding me?”

“No, it’s almost as much a promotion for me as it is for you. I’ve gone from the pretty boy chosen for his looks to the guy who can actually shoot centerfolds.” Nick grinned. “May I come in?”

“Of course.”

Nick stepped inside. The suite was decked out in Oriental

splendor, more elegance from Ada's collection. Will was there, too, on a chinoiserie sofa, getting an early start on the scotch. "Sorry about the other night," the older man apologized. "I babble when I'm drunk."

"No need. I think you were telling the truth, some of it anyway. You're trying to find your father.

"And you told some of the truth too." Nick looked to Julie. "I may not be a wild card, but one thing I do know about wild cards is they seldom lie about what happened when their card turned, not the little details. You said your favorite book when you were seven was *Rabbit Hill*, that it was an old book. But if you were seven on Wild Card Day, that book was only two years old, and it's not even an old book now." Nick paused, then continued before Julie could dissemble, "But it will be for you, in the future where you're from."

Julie's jaw dropped, exposing her bunny teeth.

"You're not just a joker, you're a joker-ace." Nick pointed at her. "You're the White Rabbit. You've got some power to murder the time, make it six o'clock and always teatime or fall down the rabbit hole into the past, taking others with you. But your power's not perfect and you overshot, taking Will here, who wanted to find his father, to sometime a little before he's born. But he won't say who his mother is, because then his parents might never meet and he'd never be conceived. Am I right?"

Julie said nothing, but Will took a slug of scotch. "Not quite, but close," he admitted, and took another swallow. "Very close."

Nick nodded. “The only thing I’m not sussing is Pug. Is he your son and you lost him when you fell down the rabbit hole to meet his granddad or is something else going on?”

“Something else.” Will took another drink. “Abigail’s former boyfriend sent him back to the Everleigh Club.”

“Who’s Abigail and who’s her boyfriend?”

“Abigail’s a young actress—British, talented, was hoping to put her in a vehicle with Pug. Abby’s also an ace. She can read other aces’ powers, even copy them. We call her the Understudy.” Will regarded his scotch, then set it down and looked straight at Nick. “Her former boyfriend was one of the other players’ bodyguards, introduced as ‘Mr. Meek’ but I’m sure that’s an alias. He was a dead ringer for Donald Meek.”

“Lots of aliases going around right now, ‘Will Monroe,’” Nick pointed out. “You think you’re the son of some president, but it’s not Monroe, and it’s not Roosevelt. Who is it really? Kennedy? Nixon?”

“God I hope not.” Will reached for the scotch. He took a good swallow. “Lot of suspects. But Jack Braun wouldn’t have any reason to not acknowledge me. Same thing with Hef. Hef ended up being my mentor, and Jack’s been my poker buddy the past few years. Beyond that, I really don’t know.”

Nick took out his cigarette case. “You weren’t kidding about the cigarettes, were you?”

“No,” said Will, “it all comes out.” Julie nodded in agreement.

Nick glanced to her. “So what’s the deal with Dealey Plaza?”

She looked shocked. “How did you ...”

“I talked with Kennedy,” Nick lied quickly. “He said you were adamant that he not go anywhere near Dealey Plaza in Texas. Why? What happens there?”

Julie’s ears wilted like wax tulips in the sun. “He dies. Assassinated. By Oswald.”

“We’re not talking about the magic rabbit Walt Disney sold to King Features, right?”

“No, Lee Harvey Oswald.”

“Harvey’s the invisible rabbit from that Jimmy Stewart movie.”

“I am not making this up!” Julie ranted, her ears standing back up. “Yes, it’s a dumb name, but he kills Jack Kennedy!” Her ears began to turn pink and quiver with rage. “But anyway, it doesn’t matter, I’ve already changed history. I had sex with Jack Kennedy.”

Will considered her over his drink. “You plan for him to fall in love with you and leave Jackie and the kids?”

“Pretty much,” Julie admitted. “Sucks for Jackie, but I figure she’d rather be a divorcée than a widow. At least that way her kids have a living dad. And I’m not jealous—I can share. Plus I’ve got my ace in the hole. It’s not much of an ace, and I always considered it more of a joker, but I’m using it. Already have.”

“What’s that?” Nick asked.

“Along with a rabbit’s sex drive, the wild card gave me a rabbit’s fertility.” Julie grinned, showing her rabbit teeth. “You

won't believe the number of birth control pills I had to go through till I found one that worked. And they won't make it for another fifty years." Julie picked up a carrot from a snack tray and nibbled it like Bugs Bunny. "And Kennedy's a Catholic, and with me pregnant now, that means the baby will arrive in November, just in time for the election. What do you think Jack's chances will be then?"

Nick stared at her. Kennedy having a love child with a joker Playmate? Hedda's photos were now just icing on Nixon's inauguration cake. "Wait, I thought you hated Nixon."

"I do," Julie swore. "Asshole's responsible for getting my grandpa killed in Vietnam. You won't believe how bad that screwed up my family. But Nixon's president in '69 anyway, so why not move up the timetable? Either Oswald ices him in '63, or Tricky Dick gets caught for Watergate a few years later. Win-win either way."

"Watergate?" Nick echoed, beyond perplexed.

"I'd recommend you watch *All the President's Men*," Will remarked, topping off a new glass of scotch, "but that's not going to be made until 1976. If ever." He took a sip, considering. "Going to royally screw up Hoffman's and Newman's careers. Are we ever going to get the Butch Cassidy Film Festival?"

"You really are a movie mogul in the future," Nick realized, looking at Will. "That's why you know all this."

"That and a film history major," Will admitted. "Who knew it would come in so useful?"

“I studied joker rights.” Julie cocked her ears. “*Playboy* didn’t have a joker centerfold until a letter-writing campaign in 2003. Then they overcompensated and recruited a bunch of cat girl jokers for The Pussycat Dolls. But I thought, now that I’m here in 1960, why not do it early when it might do some good?”

Nick nodded. “Looks like you thought of everything.” He glanced at both of them. “Anything you’d like me to do?”

Julie bit her lip. “If anything happens to us, promise me you’ll keep Kennedy away from Dealey Plaza on November 22, 1963.”

“That’s when he dies?”

“Yeah,” she said sadly, her ears wilting, “he does.”

“Then I promise,” Nick swore.



The Playboy Club opened, appropriately, on Leap Day, February 29. The chic, the influential, and the press were lined up outside. Hedda Hopper, being all three, arrived in style, her latest millinery confection bewilderingly beribboned and festooned with swags of lemonyellow silk and twists of cream-colored lace, its resemblance to a lemon meringue pie accentuated by rhinestone-encrusted lemon-wedge hat pins.

Hollywood’s harpy queen arrived early, with Hef himself squiring her in, bringing her by Nick’s table. “And let me introduce Nick Williams, our newest photographer, out from

your town.”

“He’s even more handsome than Louella said. Lollipop scooped me about you hiring him.” Hedda gave Hef the world’s most insincere smile. “But I’ll try to not hold that against him.”

“Nick here even photographed our new centerfold, tomorrow’s Miss March,” Hef bragged.

“Well then,” Hedda said, still smiling, “you won’t mind if I join this handsome young man to get my own scoop?”

“Of course,” said Hef, “but Nick’s sworn to secrecy.”

“Humor me?”

Hef took this offer as a chance to extricate himself from the Terror of Tinseltown and go greet less venomous guests. “Of course.” He gave Nick a glance of mixed gratitude and warning.

Once Hef had left, Hedda snuggled into the booth beside Nick, shedding her shawl and, in the same motion, reaching into the pocket of Nick’s jacket where there was an awaiting packet of photographs and negatives. She slipped this into her pocketbook, covering the motion as an excuse to take out a compact and check her lipstick. “There,” she pronounced, clicking the clasp shut, “I should probably take a powder room break in a bit, see if there’s anything *shocking*.”

Nick smiled, wondering how Hedda would feel if she knew those photographs, regardless of whether they caused Kennedy to withdraw from the campaign due to blackmail or scandal, would eventually lead to her hero Nixon’s death or disgrace. Then Nick frowned, wondering how he would feel himself. Once

Nixon won, if all other things remained unchanged, would there still be an assassin awaiting him in Texas in November 1963? Would there be a slightly different date or site? And if Nick foiled Nixon's assassination, would it make him complicit in Nixon's later crimes, including the death of Julie's grandfather? Or would that war even happen if the Watergate scandal, whatever it was, occurred a decade early?

Nick didn't know what to do, but his decision could wait. November 1963 was almost four years away. A lot could happen in that time. The point might be moot. Nick hoped so.

He looked across the room to where Will Monroe sat, still looking, in quiet moments, like a lost little boy, aside from the glass of scotch. Nick wished there was something he could do to bring him comfort, to help him find his father.

But after Will was born? Well, then there'd be ample time to find out whoever his father was, and his mother, too.

Of course, Nick considered, Will had said the psychic had channeled his father's spirit, and with this being in the future, the psychic could be an ace instead of a charlatan. But that future was also a long time away. And it might be changed.

After seating the fourth estate, the second was ushered in, the foremost being Senator Kennedy and his beautiful wife, Jacqueline. Hef seated Jack and Jackie with Will Monroe, whose demeanor immediately changed to one of genial surface charm, the mask of Hollywood.

Hef took the stage and the microphone. "Gentlemen, ladies,

our beloved guests and fellow swingers, welcome to the Playboy Club. I know there's been some speculation as to our secret theme, the surprises for our March issue, and I thank you for waiting for Leap Day. But now, without further ado, I'd like to reveal the reason why. Cy, would you like to begin?"

Cy Coleman, the pianist, started into the *Playboy's Penthouse* theme song, but quickly segued into a jazzy variation on "The Bunny Hop" as the curtain went up and the Playboy Playmates were revealed in their new costumes, the Playboy Bunnies, wearing silk bustiers in jewel tones with matching satin ears on their headbands. They were all huddled together in a knot, leaning forward, fluffy cottontails facing out like a bunch of bunnies. But then they rose, turned, and parted, revealing that they all bore trays on straps, like cigarette girls.

All save Julie Cotton, who rose up from where she'd been hidden, revealing herself as wearing the same satin bustier designed by Zelda Wynn Valdes, but with her own ears and tail.

Gasps erupted from the audience, none louder than Hedda Hopper's. Nick took a certain pleasure in that.

"Let me introduce Miss March, Julie Cotton!" Hef announced with a showman's flourish.

All the other Bunnies promenaded down into the club with their trays, but instead of being filled with candies and cigarettes, they bore the March issue of *Playboy*.

Hedda accepted hers, and opened it to the centerfold. Men about the club were doing the same. "Well, Nicholas darling, it

appears you may have a future in photography,” Hedda sniffed after a long look, “but I would suggest you look for more worthy subject matter.” She folded the magazine back up, turning across the way to view Julie Cotton cozying up to the Kennedys. Julie leaned over and whispered something in Jack’s ear. His expression went from happy to shocked, but just as quickly covered as Julie turned to chat with Jackie, who smiled back graciously, seemingly oblivious to the news Julie had whispered to Jack.

Hedda, however, was a better judge of human expression, and Nick watched her hard old eyes as they noted every nuance. Her lips pressed to a hard line. “You must excuse me, Nicholas.” She clutched her purse with an iron grip. “I have a sudden urge to powder my nose.”

She patted him on the shoulder and winked, then sashayed off to the ladies’ room. Nick watched Hef continue to work the crowd while Julie chatted with Jack and Jackie, secretly plotting the future course of her life and theirs.

Will Monroe’s eyes locked with Nick’s, looking like he desperately wished to tell him something, but couldn’t find where to begin, or how.

Nick gazed back. He felt the same.



A Long Night at the Palmer House

Part 2

CHARLES DUTTON SHAKILY GOT to his feet and moved over to the window, shunting the drapes aside. He stared out into the sky, which was still dark with the last legs of the night.

“What’s happening out there?” he asked rhetorically. Neither he nor Nighthawk nor any of the others who drifted toward the window could make any sense of the noises, flashing lights, and dark shapes they saw moving erratically on the street until a sudden burst of sheet lightning illuminated the scene for a moment. Even then, they were distracted by the accompanying rolling rumble of thunder that seemed as if it would never stop.

The escort Jack Braun had brought to the game—the twin who’d sneaked into the bedroom with Bellerose and had escaped the dangers of the fight—screamed aloud, wordlessly, turned, and ran from the room. Nighthawk and Dutton stared at other speechlessly, while Margot Bellerose sank to the floor on her knees and asked in a little voice, “What happened, *mon Dieu*, someone please tell me what happened.”

Meek cleared his throat and said, diffidently, “Well—”

And then the twin returned to the room, screaming even louder. “It’s changing! *It’s all changing!*”

Nighthawk moved to intercept her as she ran crazily around the room, her eyes wild. He grabbed her arms, shook her. She blubbered wordlessly, the incoherent sounds she was making drowned out by another roll of thunder like the clap of doom hovering over the Palmer House.

“Breathe deep!” Nighthawk ordered the girl. He held her tightly against his chest, and could feel the tremors running through her entire body. He took a shot in the dark. “Hildy?” Her head, tucked against his chest, nodded. “Calm down. Calm down and tell me what’s happening in the hallway.”

“I was—I was waiting for the elevator,” she got out between hiccups, “and when it came—it was different. It wasn’t a regular elevator. It was a steel cage with a man in a uniform in it and he looked at me so funny, so funny, I just screamed and ran—”

“Look at the buildings,” Dutton said in an awestricken voice.

Nighthawk looked. They all did, except for Bellerose, who was still frozen, struck silent and motionless. Hildy looked for only a moment, gasped, and returned to the sanctuary of Nighthawk’s arms, nuzzling his chest with her face like a kitten trying to bury itself against the warmth of its feline mother.

Outside, making the sounds of giant behemoths moaning in strange pain, the buildings were shifting, growing, shrinking, grinding against each other, changing in multiple ways that lasted only for seconds before they morphed again from skyscrapers to smaller, simple structures of stone or brick or even wood, or swelled into ovoids of glittering metal connected by sweeping

ramps and skeletal metallic catwalks. Once they became a set of tepees along a tranquil stream, once burned-out, destroyed hulks from a blast so powerful it must have been nuclear.

The sky itself was also changing, rippling from darkest night to strange purples shot through by rays of silver and golden light. Snowstorms and rain and fog whipped by tremendous winds howling between the buildings, but nothing except spatters of water made it down to the ground below. The rest all dissipated into mist or showers of colored sparks like the grandest fireworks display ever launched into the air.

The Palmer House itself seemed mostly immune to the strange, seemingly endless transformation. The room they were in, at least, stood like a rock in a sea of chaos. *But why*, Nighthawk wondered, *and for how long?*

“Time storm,” Donald Meek said in his mild voice. “We’re in the eye of a time storm.”

“What?” Dutton asked, turning his attention back to inside the room.

“My fault,” Meek said meekly. “When Galante’s bodyguard lashed out with her fire power, I was caught in the edge of it.” His singed eyebrows and ruddy, though not deeply burned face and hands, attested to that. “And I returned fire.” He sighed, looked from Dutton to Nighthawk. “Unfortunately, the power can be hard to control.”

“So,” Nighthawk said hesitantly, “they’re out there somewhere—*somewhen*—doing things that are ... are ...”

“Ripping the time stream apart,” Meek said resignedly. “Changing history. Continually and at cross-purposes. There’s no unified ‘present’ anymore—only a dozen warring ‘presents’ overlapping, contradicting, competing with, and melting into each other.” He gestured toward the window. “A time storm.”

Hildy moaned softly, and Nighthawk felt her going limp. He half walked, half dragged her to a nearby chair and set her down in it. Bellerose finally wandered closer to the others. She looked out the window listlessly.

“What will happen?” Dutton asked in a low voice.

“Oh,” Meek said. “I suppose that eventually the fabric of the universe will tear and the Earth will be destroyed and maybe eventually everything else with it. Or not.” He shrugged. “This is all new to me too. I haven’t had this power long.”

“Unless—” Nighthawk prompted. “Can you find them?”

Meek frowned in concentration. “They were scattered around the room and absorbed different levels of time shift. Those close to each may have been popped into the same time. They’re all in the same space.” He rubbed his chin. “Somewhen in the Palmer House, if they were sent to a time when the Palmer House exists. They’re all somewhere in Chicago, anyway. If they were sent to a time when Chicago existed ... but I *can* sense them, more or less, like blips on the radar screen of time.”

“Then we can go after them—” Nighthawk began.

“I could send you after them,” Meek said, “at least one of them. But what good will that do? You can’t bring anyone back.

You could stop one from acting, but which one is causing the most damage? Or is it a question of accumulative damage to the time stream brought on by all of them ...”

“These ‘rays,’” Dutton said thoughtfully, “the rainbows you shot out ... that’s what caused these temporal displacements?”

“Yes,” Meek said.

“Are they reflective?”

“What? The rays?”

“Yes,” Dutton said. “Of course.”

“I ... don’t know.”

“The bedrooms have full-length mirrors in them,” Margot Bellerose offered helpfully without looking at them.

“Okayyyy,” Meek said. He and Nighthawk looked at each other.

“We have to do something,” Nighthawk said.

Meek looked reluctant, but nodded. “I suppose we do.”

Nighthawk turned to Dutton. “Lock the door. Don’t let anyone in. Barricade it as best you can. There’s a couple of guns lying around.” He reached down for the .38 he kept snugged in an ankle holster. “Here’s mine.”

Dutton took it, nodding. “Let me accompany you into the bedroom.”

They turned and looked at Bellerose. She was silently contemplating the landscape below them through the hotel windows. Out of the dark sky a great flying lizard swept with leathery wings, soaring toward the window. She ducked,

screaming. The lizard banked away at the last moment.

Dutton nodded to the bedroom door. “We had best do this soon,” he said quietly.

Bellerose was right. The room had a full-length mirror placed strategically on the wall before the bed. “In the service of full disclosure,” Dutton said to Nighthawk, “there is something we should tell you.”

“A surprise?” Nighthawk said with an expectant frown.

“Of a sort.” Dutton gestured at Meek grandly. “Meet Croyd Crenson.”

Nighthawk pursed his lips, but remained silent. *Of course*, he thought. He should have known. “The Sleeper,” he observed. That explained much. He felt more than a little annoyed at himself for not suspecting, and somewhat more annoyed at them for keeping him in the dark. “I see. The Sleeper, at a card game with seven million in the wall safe.”

“Hey,” Croyd said, “it’s not like we were planning on stealing the cash or anything. Dutton was going to win it fair and square.” He laughed, shortly and insincerely. “Heh. Sorry we didn’t let you in on it sooner, but we, uh, thought it best to keep that on a need-to-know basis.”

“Now that the stakes have changed,” Dutton intoned, “it’s best you know the truth.” His expression and his voice grew even more serious, if that were possible. “Of course, sooner or later Croyd will need to sleep again. And when he sleeps, he transforms.”

And loses his powers. Nighthawk eyed Croyd dubiously. “How long have you been awake already?”

“Oh, only a couple of days. Don’t worry, I’m used to it. I can handle it.”

So you say, Nighthawk thought. “We’d better get started,” he said in a neutral voice.

“I guess,” Croyd said, “we’ll be right back. Or maybe not. We’re dealing with time here. Who the hell knows?”

“Good luck,” Dutton said. “Everything’s riding on you!”

“We better get real close,” Croyd said, “like hugging close.”

They stood before the mirror. Side by side, one arm wrapped around the other’s waist.

“Ready?” Croyd asked.

Nighthawk felt a roiling in his gut. This was the strangest, most dangerous thing he’d ever done. But it was better to die trying rather than just stand by and watch the world disintegrate around them. “Yeah. Just do—”

The rainbow arced again from Croyd’s palm and hit the mirror. As the spectrum of colors rebounded and washed over Nighthawk he felt like someone hit him all over his body with the hardest punch he’d ever taken. The air swooshed out of his lungs, his testicles tried to ascend back into his abdomen, and his buttocks clenched so tightly that you couldn’t pull a pin out of his ass with a tractor. He thought he was struck blind and then he realized that he’d just closed his eyes. He was naked, but warm air caressed his skin, as well as Croyd’s arm, which was still around

his waist. The soles of his feet were planted on thick, lush carpet.
“—it.”

Nighthawk looked ahead, blinking, and realized that he and Croyd were standing behind two men. One was young, immaculately well dressed in the finest of evening attire, if, Nighthawk recognized, you were going out to do the town about a hundred years ago. He wore an expensively cut black coat and white tie, and the second man was using a whisk broom to brush off some imaginary flecks of dust from his well-clad shoulders.

They were standing before a full-length mirror and the young man was admiring his reflection in it when he caught sight of Nighthawk and Croyd materializing behind him. His eyes suddenly bulged out of his pleasantly featured face and he did a credible imitation of a goldfish removed from water gasping for breath. His lips moved, but it took a moment for words to actually issue from them. When they did, they were in a striking English accent.

“I say,” he said. Then, apparently unable to think of anything to add, he continued with, “I say, I say, I say.” Struck with further inspiration, he added, “What? What now? What?”

He was rather tall and willowy built. The other man, who also wore formal attire, but more in the line of someone in service, a valet, probably, was even taller and more solidly built. He turned and looked at them. He had a shrewd-looking face with an imperturbable expression and a steady, intelligent gaze.

Croyd made an embarrassed sound in his throat, took his arm

away from Nighthawk's waist, and stepped a foot or two to the side.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "We're from the future."

The valet's left eyebrow lifted a quarter of an inch, as if expressing vast surprise.

They were in a luxuriously appointed hotel room. Nighthawk could recognize the general outlines of the room they'd just left, though the furnishings were completely different. Everything was expensive-looking, if heavy and ponderous. There was a large four-poster bed, an ornate wardrobe, a smaller dresser, side tables on either side of the bed with bric-a-brac all over them, and an overstuffed chair with antimacassars on the arms and back.

"Indeed, sir?" the valet asked. His gaze swept over them briefly and then focused somewhere on a distant spot between them. "And does everyone in the future go about disrobed?"

"Ah, well," Croyd replied. "That's just an effect of time travel, itself. You can't bring anything with you. Not even clothes."

The young man had turned around and was eyeing them with a puzzled expression that somehow seemed habitual. "Rummy, that," he said, then added briskly, "Well, we can't have you sporting about starkers. There must be something you can find —"

"Immediately, sir."

"Well, fine. Fine, fine, fine." The young man beamed at the unexpected arrivals. Nighthawk couldn't help but feel an instinctual liking for him.

“Well, sit down and tell me all about this ‘future’ business. Or”—his expressive face suddenly took on a concerned expression—“wait a mo’ ... let’s get some”—he made a helpless gesture with his hands—“you know, some, uh, before you sit, you know.”

Nighthawk understood, and shook his head at Croyd, who was about to plop his butt into the overstuffed chair. Croyd caught himself at the last moment and nodded.

“Oh, sure. Sure. Very generous of you—”

The young man shook his head, briskly. “Not at all. *Not* at all. I’ve been touring your country—just out of New York, Boston. Fascinating. Everyone’s been most accommodating. Least I can do to help out you chaps. And from the future you say! Extraordinary!”

The valet had been piling up articles of clothing from both a dresser drawer and the wardrobe, and he approached Nighthawk and Croyd with an armload. The young man’s face fell as he handed the items over. “Not the new checked suits!” he said. “I just got those in New York.”

“I know, sir,” the valet said imperturbably. “I feel they will serve these gentlemen more suitably.”

Nighthawk thought he could detect something of a note of relief in his voice as he handed the suits over. Nighthawk understood. They were not exactly his style, either.

“Ah, well,” the young man said, shrugging. “Needs must, I suppose.”

“Yes, sir,” his man said. He watched critically as Nighthawk and Croyd dressed. “I’m afraid, sirs, that the fit is not perfect. The young master is taller—”

“That’s all right,” Nighthawk said. “We’ll make do.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was something in this man, Nighthawk perceived, something that bound him to the younger man who was so generous and, well, naive was probably a kind word, with cords of loyalty and protectiveness that went deep into the soul. He nodded, and the valet nodded back.

“So,” the young Britisher said eagerly as they dressed, “tell me all about the future.”

“Well—” Croyd began. He and Nighthawk exchanged glances. “You wouldn’t believe it,” Croyd finally said.

“We can’t say much,” Nighthawk explained, “on the chance that you can use your knowledge to change history.”

The Englishman looked crestfallen. “That’s a bit of a disappointment.”

“But I’ll tell you one thing,” Croyd said.

“Yes?” the young man said eagerly.

“Don’t trust Hitler. And another thing—whatever you do, don’t visit New York City on September 15, 1946. It’ll be very dangerous on that day.”

“Well, thanks awfully for the warning.”

“You bet,” Croyd said. He and Nighthawk looked at each other. “Well, time to go save the world. Thanks for everything.”

“Certainly. Good luck, chaps.”

Croyd paused. “One last thing.”

“Yes?”

“Could you loan us a twenty?”

The young man shook his head as he reached for his wallet.

“I say,” he said, “they’ll never believe this at the Drones Club.”



“So how does this temporal tracking ability of yours actually work?” Nighthawk asked Croyd as they went down the hotel corridor, heading for the elevator.

“I kind of see those displaced in time as blips on the temporal landscape,” Croyd said. “Sort of like a radar screen. I can’t tell who they are and it’s hard to say how many are in a given location, especially since we’re dealing with a relatively small number of people.”

“Seems like enough to me,” Nighthawk said. “And the actual place where they landed is, essentially, the same place they left?”

They stopped at the elevator bank and punched the button for the lobby.

“Well, most times anyway. I suppose. Actually, I really haven’t sent too many people back in time. Just that pigeon. Oh, and an alley cat when I first woke up. It seems like a pretty useful power, but, really, how often would the necessity for using it come up?”

Great, Nighthawk thought. Our temporal expert seems to be groping around as much as I am. The elevator arrived and Croyd and Nighthawk got on. The car was empty except for its operator, a tall, young black man in Palmer House livery. Seeing him took Nighthawk back through a hundred and forty–some years of memory to a time when he, too, wore the Palmer House uniform, when he worked at the hotel that stood on this very spot, before the Great Chicago Fire. Memories flooded into his mind and he clamped down on them and sent them away to where he kept them, hidden, but never forgotten.

“Floor, please,” the young man said.

“Lobby,” Croyd said.

“So,” Nighthawk said as the door closed, “whoever we’re after —”

Croyd looked at him and nodded. “Would have ended up—”

Nighthawk shook his head, his eyes shifting to the elevator operator who stood in front of him. “Say,” he said, “any strange things happen in the hotel, lately?”

“Mister,” the operator said without turning around, “strange stuff is always happening around here. You’d be surprised.”

Actually, Nighthawk thought, he wouldn’t. “Like what?” he asked.

“Well—” He thought for a moment. “Couple of weeks ago this crazy white man broke into a room, somehow, naked as a jaybird. He—”

The operator glanced back over his shoulder, catching Croyd’s

eye. “Sorry, sir,” he said. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, no,” Croyd said. “This is fascinating. Do you know what he looked like?”

“Well, he was kind of, uh, stocky, I guess you could say.” He paused for a moment. “And he had a funny haircut for a grown man. You know, like that Buster Brown in the comic strip.”

Croyd and Nighthawk looked at each other.

“Charlie Flowers,” they said simultaneously.

A bell dinged as the elevator stopped.

“Your floor, sirs,” the young man said.



The air on the Chicago street was cool and crisp with the tang of early autumn. It was as crowded a street as any Nighthawk had walked down during the twenty-first century and perhaps even noisier. But he’d forgotten the old smell of the city. It all came back to him in a sudden rush when they left the Palmer House lobby.

“What’s that smell?” Croyd asked, wrinkling his nose.

Nighthawk waved at the street. “Horse manure.”

Horse-drawn carts and carriages were still battling the automobile for supremacy on the streets of Chicago. It was a losing fight, but there were enough of the old-fashioned conveyances that the distinctive sweet tang of horseshit still

lingered on the air. They stepped into the flow of the foot traffic and let it carry them down the street until they came upon a café that had a few tables set out on the sidewalk as well as inside.

“I could use a bite to eat,” Croyd said.

Nighthawk was hungry as well. Such mundane concerns as food and drink had been forgotten in the excitement of the game and subsequent events, but now they came back to the time travelers. They took a seat at one of the small sidewalk tables and a white-aproned waiter appeared almost instantaneously. They ordered ham sandwiches and beer and were surprised and happy at the size of the slabs of rye bread, the thick cuts of ham, the whole dill pickles on the side, and the mugs of beer. A pot of spicy German mustard accompanied the sandwiches, which both slathered generously on the bread.

As they tore into the thick, juicy sandwiches, a newsboy came by hawking the afternoon edition of the *Tribune*. He was a runty little kid, maybe ten or twelve, looking like he stepped out of a Norman Rockwell illustration, or, Nighthawk realized, his memories.

“Hey, kid,” Croyd called. “Give me a paper.” He reached into his pocket for the bill that their British benefactor had given them back in the room in the Palmer House.

The kid’s eyes grew big as Croyd held it out. “Jeez, mister, I can’t change a twenty.”

“How much is the newspaper?” Croyd asked.

“Two cents.”

Croyd laughed. “Two cents? Even when I was a kid ...” He looked at Nighthawk in surprise. “It was three cents,” he said, wonder in his voice. “Have I forgotten so much?”

“You’d probably be surprised,” Nighthawk said with a gentle smile.

Croyd called the waiter over. “Give the kid a nickel,” he said, “and add it to our bill.”

The waiter complied.

“Keep the change, kid,” Croyd said.

“Thanks, mister!”

From where he sat, Nighthawk could read the banner headlines: IRISH HOME RULE NEAR! The front page was crowded with columns of text. “Don’t keep me in suspense. What’s the date?”

“Oh, October 8, 1919. Say—” Croyd looked up, frowning in concentration. “I got us pretty close. Flowers has been here a month, tops. Not too much time to get up to a lot of mischief. Now all we have to do is find him. He’s around here somewhere. But where, exactly? How many people lived in Chicago in 1919?”

“Two and a half million.”

“Really?” Croyd looked at him.

“I do know Chicago,” Nighthawk said, looking up and down the bustling street. The memories were flooding back upon him like a wave that threatened to drag him under with its powerful pull. “Wait a minute ... 1919? October?”

Croyd looked at him. “Yeah. What?”

Nighthawk set his sandwich back down on the plate, chewing thoughtfully. “At least we missed the riots,” he said.

“Riots?”

“Chicago’s worst race riots—ever.” Nighthawk’s voice became pensive, his gaze turned inward. “The summer of 1919 was known as Red Summer because of the racial tension that spread across the entire country. There were riots in many cities. My people were coming up from the South in massive numbers. Here in Chicago the tensions boiled over when a thrown rock killed a young black man at a beach in late July. By the time the National Guard had been called in to quell the violence, almost forty people were dead, a few more blacks than whites, but most of the property damage occurred in the Black Belt on the South Side, at the hands of organized ‘athletic clubs.’” Nighthawk frowned at Croyd. “Mostly Irish, mostly fairly recent immigrants themselves, competing for the jobs with the blacks coming up from the South.”

“What are you, a history buff or something?” Croyd asked.

“Or something,” Nighthawk said quietly. “It was pretty terrible. But, look, what else happened here in Chicago in 1919?”

Croyd, thumbing through the paper, looked up. “What?”

“The Black Sox scandal! The year the White Sox threw the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds.”

Croyd’s eyes widened. “Flowers would be drawn to that like a fly to shit. But is the Series still going on? Wait a minute.” He

flipped the pages more quickly. “Here it is.” He looked up at Nighthawk. “Game seven is at Comiskey Park this afternoon.”

Nighthawk frowned in concentration. “Give me a minute ... Yes, that’s right. The White Sox win today, four to one.”

“Wait,” Croyd said, “the White Sox *won* game seven? I thought they threw the Series—”

“This was one of the years when the World Series was a best of nine.” Nighthawk signaled to their waiter. “Pay him,” he told Croyd, when the boy came over.

“Wait,” Croyd said again. “They played a *nine-game* World Series? You knew that?”

Nighthawk smiled. “I’m a baseball fan.”

“Where are we going?”

“I know a man—”

“You *know* a man?”

“I’ll explain later,” Nighthawk said as the waiter came back with their change. They had a little less than nineteen dollars left.

“You’d better. Just where are we headed?”

“You know that Black Belt I mentioned?” Croyd nodded. “We’re going to a part of it called Bronzeville.”



The geography of Chicago hadn’t changed all that much in a century, and the details of it came back to Nighthawk quickly.

The Palmer House was located fairly near the northern edge of the Black Belt, which ran about thirty blocks, from Thirty-first to Fifty-fifth Street along State Street, but, as indicated by its name, was only a few blocks wide. The heart of Bronzeville, Chicago's Black Metropolis, was around Forty-seventh Street.

They took the el, and got off at a pleasant neighborhood that consisted of rambling single-family homes interspersed with business centers lived in and run by blacks. It looked fairly prosperous, except for some spots of destruction they passed where buildings once stood but had obviously recently been burned to the ground. Rubble still remained in many of these spots like broken teeth in an otherwise healthy smile.

“Results of the riots?” Croyd asked.

Nighthawk nodded grimly. “Yes. Like I said, Irish ‘athletic clubs’ paid the hood a visit. And since most of the cops were Irish themselves, they weren’t too interested in restraining their friends. It took five thousand National Guardsmen to enforce the peace.”

“Doesn’t sound pleasant,” Croyd said.

“It wasn’t,” Nighthawk muttered. Before Croyd could question him further, he said, “Here we are,” and turned up the steps of a pawnshop that was in a row of businesses—grocer, barbershop, drugstore, and other small stores.

Inside it was well lit, airy, and spick-and-span clean, with shelves stocked with every kind of item you might be looking for, from clothes to tools to furniture. Near the front, behind a

glass counter that was divided by display cases containing guns—small arms, mainly—and jewelry, stood an immense black man. He was fashionably and expensively dressed, with diamond rings on both pinkies and a diamond stickpin in his tie that was the size of a walnut.

“Hello, Ice,” Nighthawk said.

The man looked at him, frowning.

“You know my father,” Nighthawk said.

“John Nighthawk,” the man said, his face lighting in a broad smile. “You favor him, most precisely.”

Croyd opened his mouth and Nighthawk stepped on his foot.

“I’m happy to say that I do,” Nighthawk said. “He’s a good-looking man.”

“Yes, indeed,” the Iceman said.

“This is my friend, Mr. Crenson,” Nighthawk said, indicating Croyd, who smiled and nodded.

“Any friend of John Nighthawk’s son is a friend of mine,” Ice said. “Welcome to Bronzeville.”

“Thanks,” Croyd said. “It looks like a swell place.”

Ice nodded. “What can I do for you—” He paused.

“John. After my father.”

“—John?”

“Mr. Crenson and I just got into town and we’d like to attend the game this afternoon—”

Ice smiled broadly. “So you came to see Ice?”

“We know it’s a hard ticket. We’re willing to pay—”

Ice made a dismissive gesture. "I got what you need, boy, but the money of John Nighthawk's son is no good here." He reached into his waistcoat pocket and came out with a sheaf of tickets. "Good thing you got here now, though. I was just going to send my boys out to see what we could get for them. All prime seats. Here, take two."

Nighthawk knew better than to argue. "Thanks, Ice."

As he handed over the tickets, the pawnbroker said, "Since you're just back in town—a warning. I hope you don't have any business going on the game."

"Business?" Nighthawk asked. "You mean a bet? No. Is it rigged?"

"Sure as hell is. It's not well-known, but Ice knows all. He hears everything. You can't fart in my town without me knowing. That eastern trash comes to our town with their dirty money and bribes our boys to throw it!" There was real anger in Ice's voice and eyes. "Thank God *our* boys aren't part of that filthy deal."

"Our boys?" Nighthawk asked.

"You know—Smokey Joe and the Thunderbolt. They wouldn't take dirty money. They wouldn't let Chicago down."

"No," Nighthawk said thoughtfully.

"Anyway ..." Ice brightened some. "Smokey Joe Williams is pitching today, and he'll show them. Tomorrow, though ..." He shook his head. "The white boy is going, the other Williams, Lefty. Bet on Cincinnati if you want to, but I wouldn't dirty my money."

“Nor would I,” Nighthawk said.

“Damn right. Well ...” Ice smiled as they turned to go. “You remember me to your daddy. And tell him to come by sometime soon. He always brings the best when he comes to visit.”

“I will,” Nighthawk said as they left the shop.

Croyd looked at him. “What the hell?”

Nighthawk sighed. “I suppose I should explain.” He paused. The street was quiet, with a few people passing them as they went about their daily business. “I’m ... older than I look.”

“Hey, man, I don’t judge,” Croyd said. “After all, I’m like, Jesus, seventy-seven myself. Or about that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m older than that.” There was a faraway look in his eyes.

Croyd looked impressed. “No shit?”

“No shit. I’ve been around a long time. And though I’ve done some traveling, worked for a while in lots of places, Chicago has been my home ever since I came here after the war.”

“What war was that?” Croyd asked.

Nighthawk looked at him. “The Civil War.”

Croyd’s jaw dropped. “Hey, I’m not trying to pry or anything. We all have our little secrets, our little foibles. It’s not like you’re a vampire or something and drink blood to stay alive for so long.” He paused a moment before adding, “Right? Because, if you were, that would be disgusting.”

“No,” Nighthawk said. “I don’t drink blood.”

“Great. That’s cool.” They started down the street again,

heading for the el. “You know, I was a kid when the virus hit, back in ’46. I never finished school.” He shook his head. “Always regretted that I never learned algebra, but then it hasn’t really come up much in my life. I always loved history, though.”

“I’ve lived through a lot of it,” Nighthawk said.

“You ever meet General Ulysses Grant?”

Nighthawk shook his head. “No. But I knew Teddy Roosevelt pretty well.”

“Tell me about it,” Croyd said.

“Well, there was this time when we were ordered to take this hill ... you think Cuba is something now, you should have been there in the 1890s ...”



Comiskey Park, known as the Baseball Palace of the World, was jammed to the rafters, and then some. Even though it was one of the largest baseball stadiums of its time, every seat was taken and even the aisles were crammed with standing-room-only patrons. Ice’s word was good—the tickets he’d given to Nighthawk and Croyd were excellent, box seats located on the field level, just behind the White Sox dugout. Nighthawk was impressed. He’d been to many games at Comiskey Park, before it fell to the wrecking ball in 1991 ... not only White Sox games, but also those of the Negro National League before, and even

after, Jackie Robinson broke the major league color barrier. But he'd never seen it so crowded.

While unusual but not unique for this time, Comiskey Park wasn't racially segregated, so no one even batted an eye when Nighthawk and Croyd took their seats, right on the aisle about six rows above the dugout. Nighthawk didn't notice any other black fans in his immediate neighborhood, though that was more of an economic rather than a social commentary on the times. These were expensive seats, \$5.50 each, as printed on the tickets. Though the stands were already crowded, the field itself was empty. The players had yet to appear for infield practice or even warm-up games of catch.

A vendor passed by hawking scorecards, and Nighthawk called him over. He gave the kid a nickel for the pamphlet. Nighthawk looked at the cover musingly as the kid moved on with his wares. Croyd glanced at him. "Who's that on the cover?" he asked.

"Oh, the owner, of course, Charles Comiskey. A notorious skinflint whose miserly ways in large part caused the ..." He paused, looked around, and lowered his voice. "You know, the thing that Ice told us about."

"Right. Got ya."

Nighthawk glanced up. The players were just starting to take the field in ones and twos, strolling about and stretching desultorily. He looked back down at the program, thumbing through it. "You know how much this nickel program would be

worth back in—back home?”

“How much?” Croyd asked, interested.

“I’m not really sure, but probably thous—” He stopped. “Oh my God!”

“What?” Croyd asked.

Nighthawk stood up, staring out onto the field with a shocked expression on his face. He was silent for several moments, despite Croyd’s repeated, “What?” and he finally sank back into his seat.

“What is it?” Croyd asked. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“On the field,” he croaked. “Black men.”

“Yeah, so ... oh. Right.”

“Jackie didn’t break the twentieth-century color barrier until 1946,” Nighthawk said in a choked whisper, “in the minors. Forty-seven in the majors.”

He thumbed through the program until he came to a team photo. It was grainy black and white, but he pointed out the three men who were quite obviously black. The names under the photo read Joe Williams, Oscar Charleston, and Spottswood Poles.

He wasn’t familiar with Poles, but knew the other two quite well. He’d seen them play, followed their exploits in the black newspapers of the day. And Ice had named them, though what he’d said was so foreign to Nighthawk that he hadn’t really processed it. Smokey Joe Williams, six feet four, a towering figure on the mound who’d come out of the dusty diamonds of west Texas, half black and half Indian. He’d pitched well into his

forties, and was said to throw harder than the Big Train, Walter Johnson. Said so even by Johnson himself, whom he'd faced frequently in exhibition games when black players faced major leaguers back in their day. And Oscar Charleston, a compact but strongly built outfielder, who was called the Hoosier Thunderbolt because of his combination of power and speed.

He looked out over the field. There he was. Charleston was playing catch with Shoeless Joe Jackson himself and chatting with a smaller, more slimly built black man who had to be Spottswood Poles, tossing the ball with a player whom Nighthawk didn't recognize.

As he watched a tall black man came strolling up the sidelines accompanied by another player in catching gear. He started to warm up. It was Smokey Joe Williams himself.

"Are you all right?" Croyd asked in a low voice.

Nighthawk suddenly realized that tears were running down his cheeks.

"I'm fine," Nighthawk said. "I'm just fine." He turned to Croyd and smiled. "I'm really going to enjoy this game."

And he did.



It was the fourth inning and the White Sox were leading the Cincinnati Reds 2-0. Spot Poles, who turned out to be a speedy

outfielder and lead-off man, had walked in the first inning and then scored when Charleston, who was hitting fourth, right after Joe Jackson, tripled to deepest center. Charleston then homered in his second at bat. No other Sox player had done much at the plate, but no one else had to. Williams was on his game, and was throwing heat. He had a perfect game going through four innings and had struck out seven of the twelve Reds who'd come to the plate, including their own black players, the veteran shortstop John Henry Lloyd and Cuban-born outfielder Cristóbal Torriente. No one was touching Williams and maybe no one on the White Sox dared to boot a play purposely.

Not only was the game itself entertaining, but in the bottom of the first, a couple of latecomers went down the aisle, right past Croyd and Nighthawk, to the front row of boxes. A man and woman, both expensively, even extravagantly, dressed in the fashions of the day. Croyd noticed them first as they passed by. He poked Nighthawk in the ribs, and started to rise, but Nighthawk laid a cautionary hand on his arm as he watched Charlie Flowers and Dagmar take their seats.

“Keep an eye on them,” he whispered. “And let’s enjoy the game.”

It was a crisply played match, over in little more than two hours. In the eighth inning Shoeless Joe Jackson made an incredible running catch, preserving Williams’s perfect game. Williams waited on the mound to shake his hand as they headed for the dugout.

Croyd shook his head. “Is Jackson really trying to throw the game?” he asked in a low voice.

“Some say that he was in on the fix, but didn’t play like it, double-crossing the gamblers.” Nighthawk shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe he couldn’t help himself from catching the ball. Maybe he couldn’t let his teammates down in a game like this.”

It was the only bit of help Williams needed to retain his perfect game. He struck out the side in the ninth inning, and the 2–0 score held up. As Williams was mobbed by his teammates for pitching the greatest game in World Series history, Charlie Flowers stormed up the aisle, a scowl plastered on his face, dragging Dagmar by the hand behind him.

Nighthawk and Croyd looked away, watching out of the corners of their eyes until they passed.

“Let’s go,” Nighthawk said. They followed at a discreet distance up the concrete stairs.

They stayed behind the couple, sheltered by the crowd rushing out onto the streets to celebrate the victory. Nighthawk’s face was grim. He’d just witnessed one of the most incredibly historic sights of his life, and now they had to wipe it all away to mend the time line and preserve their present. It wasn’t a small thing, this breaking of the baseball color line decades before Jackie Robinson. It had tremendous implications, social, political, and economic, for his people, not to mention that it righted a great wrong that had kept deserving men from performing at the highest levels of their chosen profession. Nighthawk had no idea

what possibly could have triggered the historic change and, even though it was positive, he and Croyd had to wipe it away. To erase it. To bring back an injustice that would harm the social fabric of the entire nation. He had to blink back tears, this time tears of frustration and rage. But he would remember. He would remember the two hours or so of perfection, just a second or less in eternity, but something of beauty and grace that was an accomplishment for the ages.

They followed Flowers and Dagmar to the line of horse-drawn carriages waiting outside the park. The two time travelers climbed into the seat of an enclosed coach, Flowers shouting an address to the driver. Before he could pull away from the curb, Nighthawk and Croyd leaped into the coach themselves, taking the seat opposite.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Croyd said, smiling.

Flowers stared at them blankly for a moment, until recognition appeared in his eyes. “You’re—” he began, stopped, began again. “You’re those guys from the poker game. What the hell?”

“We’ve come after you,” Nighthawk said, “to return you to our time.”

Flowers stared at him. “What?” He shook his head. “Fuck. No. I *like* it here. I know important people. I *am* important people!”

“You help fix the World Series, Charlie?” Nighthawk asked coldly.

“What if I—I mean, what the hell you talking about?”

“Come on, Charlie, it’s in all the history books.” Nighthawk

paused. “Although I don’t recall reading your name in any of them.”

“Well, you will.” Flowers flushed. “It was half-assed until I signed on—”

Croyd shook his head. “You’ve got to go back, Charlie. You both have to go back. Our present is being torn apart. History is getting all messed up ...”

“Who cares?” Flowers snarled. His face was dark with rage and suddenly he was holding a pistol in his hand. He still had an athlete’s reflexes. “I don’t give a goddamn. I was never very good at history. Let those lousy bastards take care of themselves. They fucked me over when they had their chance, well, fuck them, twice as hard—”

Dagmar, sitting next to him on the seat, had quietly taken a cosh out of her bag. She smacked Charlie hard, on the side of the head. His eyeballs rolled up and he sagged limply on the seat as Nighthawk and Croyd looked on.

She turned to them. “Oh, take me home. Take me home, *please!*” She started to cry. “*I hate it here.* It’s so hot and dirty. There’s no television, the movies have no sound! And the food is terrible. *Nothing* is gluten-free, they don’t even have sushi. Oh, please, please—”

Croyd gestured briefly. Nighthawk could see the rainbow ripples pass between him and his targets, and then Dagmar and Flowers were gone, leaving piles of clothes and a pistol behind them.

“Jesus,” Nighthawk said, “that’s it? They back in our present?”

Croyd nodded in satisfaction. “Yep. That’s it. Standing on Michigan Avenue in 2017 naked as jaybirds. Or jailbirds, in Charlie’s case. Let the son-of-a-bitch explain *that*.”

“All right then,” Nighthawk said. “Let’s go find a mirror.”

“No place like the Palmer House,” Croyd said.



The desk clerk at the Palmer House didn’t bat an eyelash when Nighthawk and Croyd booked a room for the night, sans suitcases. Nighthawk, acting a part as Croyd’s valet, informed him that their luggage would be delivered later that evening.

It made sense for them to return to the Palmer House. A hotel room provided the requisite privacy to make the jump, not to mention the necessary mirror. It also served as a ready source of clothing and other necessities for the newly arrived travelers. And both Nighthawk and Croyd were hungry. The hot dogs they’d had at the stadium had been a decent snack, but what they really needed was a good meal, which was just a phone call to room service away.

They ordered steaks, several sides, a couple of desserts each—most of them for Croyd—and a large pot of coffee. Black. Croyd was used to remaining awake for extended periods of time. That wasn’t Nighthawk’s normal lifestyle, but for now at least he was

willing to match Croyd's string of sleeplessness. It might turn into a problem as their quest continued, Nighthawk realized, but for now he could deal with it. He was feeling tired, though, and at some point in the near future knew that he would have to energize himself with a jolt of life essence. Again, that was something to worry about perhaps during the course of their next jump.

After their repast, Croyd sat at the table, staring into the bottom of his coffee cup.

"Well, no time like the present," Nighthawk said.

"Yeah," Croyd said. "Very funny."

They went up to the room and stood together in front of the full-length mirror on the wall next to the bed. "Wait a minute." Nighthawk reached into his pants pocket and pulled out all the money he had. "Give me your cash. We might as well leave it on the nightstand to pay our bill. It can't do us any more good."

Croyd's meek-featured face crinkled in disappointment. "Much as I hate to part with money, you're right." He pulled out his cash and sighed. "Now look into the mirror."



The Motherfucking Apotheosis of Todd Motherfucking Taszycki By Christopher Rowe

TT FEATHERED THE JOYSTICK to the right. He felt the tower crane’s cabling respond as he split his attention between the video feed on his control panel and the real-world view of the three-and-a-half-yard bucket hundreds of feet below. The bucket, carrying fourteen thousand pounds of wet concrete, shifted a few feet and came to a rest precisely on the mark his rigger had spray-painted on the ground in the middle of the busy construction site.

“That where you want it, boss?” TT asked.

“X marks the spot, TT,” the rigger replied, his voice crackling in TT’s earpiece.

“Fucking A,” said TT.

The site foreman broke in, then. “Remember to watch your language on the radio today, TT,” he said. “When the investors get here they want to get wired up when we give them their hardhats. They’ll be listening.”

TT rolled his eyes. He knew exactly who the “investors” on this project were and he doubted a bunch of motherfucking mob types were going to care much about whatever colorful words might float down from the crane’s operating cabin while they

toured the site. Still, if he could rein it in around Ma and that piss-drunk son-of-a-bitch Father Dobrzycki then he could watch his tongue around a bunch of suited-up assholes who were probably packing guns.

Just then he saw a pair of SUVs pull into the fenced parking lot. TT was only twenty-six and had excellent vision, and had been up in the cabin long enough to learn to recognize things from above that most people normally never even *saw* from above. So he could tell easy that these were a pair of black, late-model Suburbans, windows tinted way darker than the legal limit. Not that he needed to actually see them to guess those details. Fucking mob guys all drove the same cars.

He checked the job list the foreman had handed him that morning at seven. Next up was unloading some truckloads of girders, but TT didn't see any eighteen-wheelers in the delivery yard yet—probably stuck in traffic, the poor assholes—so he figured he'd be sitting tight for a little bit. He reached into his lunch pail and took out his little pair of field glasses and the bird-watching log his younger brother Sonny had given him for Christmas. Last year, TT had been into Chicago's architecture. This year it was birds. There was a lot of time to look at shit from the crane, and you couldn't beat the view.

“Holy shit, take a look at this guy,” came a voice over the radio. “They ain't going to find a lid that'll fit *him*.”

That was Joey Campsos down in the welding shop. TT waited for Joey to get dinged on his language, but looking down, he

saw that the foreman was busy shaking hands with some suits standing by the gate. One of the suits looked ... odd.

TT trained his field glasses on the little gathering and saw what was fucked up about the guy Joey had seen. He was an ace or a joker or something. Big guy, all bulked out, which wasn't that weird. What was weird was that the motherfucker was half *tiger*. Not split top and bottom like the old goat-legged joker actor who advertised prescription drugs to keep your cock hard on TV. Like, down the middle. Like his left half was some big muscly mook like mob guys always kept around and his right half was a motherfucking *tiger*.

TT opened up his bird-watching log to the blank pages in the back and wrote MOTHERFUCKING TIGER MAN in careful block letters.

He did not, however, get to add any new birds to the book over the next half hour. The downtown Chicago high-rise taking shape around him was used as perching space by a lot of birds, but none he hadn't seen already. After a while, TT got bored looking at starlings and pigeons and decided to watch the mob guys and their tiger man bodyguard tour the site.

Huh, TT thought, *one of them's just a fucking kid*.

The lone member of the tour group taking their time checking out the site who was *not* wearing a slick gray business suit was a black-haired kid, maybe sixteen. He was wearing a white tracksuit. Through the binoculars, TT could make out the gold chains the kid was wearing, which probably meant they were

some pretty fucking big gold chains. The guys in business suits—all wearing hardhats now except for tiger man—deferred to the kid.

Must be some high-up mob fucker's son getting his feet wet on an easy project, thought TT. He was losing interest, though—the tiger man wasn't actually *doing* anything—when the foreman came over the radio.

“Hey TT, the iron is inbound and our guests want to see the crane operate. When the beams are unchained move a bundle of them up to sixteen, okay?”

The sixteenth floor was currently the highest floor of what would eventually be a forty-story office building. TT watched two trucks slowly make their way into the unloading yard and began to manipulate the controls of the crane. He wasn't exactly nervous about being watched by the mob guys, but he was extra careful in lowering the hook for the truck drivers and the yard hands to attach to a bundle of girders.

Once the load was secure, TT began the delicate process of maneuvering it over the site and up to the sixteenth floor, where a crew was waiting to guide it in. The video feed on the jib was less useful to him during the move than it was during loading and unloading, so he was looking out and down at the carefully balanced load when he saw one of the truck drivers crouch on the bed of his trailer and *jump* from the unloading yard, arcing up and over the welding shop and the architect's trailer, to land among the mob guys.

“What the fuck?”

The mikes of the radio system were voice-activated, so TT guessed he would have been in trouble with the foreman for offending the delicate sensibilities of the investors, but the investors were busy pulling out handguns and unloading on the truck driver. The truck driver who, TT could see, was landing some serious blows on the suits, sending a couple of them flying halfway across the site as he watched. One suit wasn't shooting, though, he was hustling the kid in the tracksuit back toward the parking lot.

“Fuck, the beams!” TT remembered. He stopped the load in its swing up and over, slightly overcorrecting and feeling the sway in the crane mast as the tons of steel came to a halt. But he shouldn't feel *that* much of a sway.

The radio was useless now, voices overlapping and cutting one another off as guys from all over the site yelled at the foreman to get down while the mob guys yelled and cursed. At least one of the mooks who'd gone flying was still alive and conscious; he was screaming. There was no way anybody would hear TT ask for somebody to get eyes on the tower to see what was causing it to vibrate.

“Shit, shit, shit,” said TT as alarms sounded. The load suspended from the jib was shifting, which was bad enough. But he was getting icons flashed across the panel that indicated the whole crane was losing stability.

He cycled through the camera feeds until he found one looking

straight down from beneath his control booth, and was astonished by what he saw. The jumping truck driver was now climbing the mast, reaching up for a crossbar and launching himself up fifteen or twenty feet at a time to catch the next. And right below, closing fast, came the tiger man.

“It’s a hit. It’s a fucking mob hit,” said TT. “With motherfucking aces, oh shit.”

The tiger man didn’t launch himself up in jumps like the truck driver, the truck driver, who, TT could now see, was an old man. Like a hundred years old or something, but with arms and legs and a neck as big around as TT’s torso. No, the tiger man just climbed, but he climbed fucking *fast*.

What the hell are they doing coming up here? TT wondered, but then, finally, a voice broke through the chaotic chatter on the radio. It was the foreman, screaming, “TT! Move the beams! Move the fucking beams!”

TT looked out at the boom. The girders were tilting badly and would soon slip free of the cable loops holding them. And if they fell, they would fall ...

Right into the fucking parking lot! Right onto those fucking Suburbans! That’s what the old man is doing, he’s trying to crush that mob kid!

The old man was no longer climbing, though. He’d made his way to the slowing unit just aft of TT’s cabin and was now running along the jib like he was just running down the street, headed for the hoist unit with its drum and gearbox. Tiger man

was right behind him, reaching out, then yes, catching the old man before he could do whatever he was planning to do to the cable.

Tear it right in fucking two, I guess.

Then the two aces were trading blows, hitting each other so hard that TT could feel the vibrations traveling through the crane's superstructure. The old man staggered back, blood flowing down one side of his face from where the tiger man's claws had opened up a trio of ugly gashes, and the tiger man closed in.

But the fall was a feint. When the tiger man kicked out, trying to send the old man off the crane, the old man caught his tiger leg and lifted the mobster high. He swung the tiger man down hard against the jib's metal lattice, looking like a steel driver swinging a hammer down on a spike, except the hammer was a twisting, spitting, clawing ace. An ace who slumped, dead or unconscious, once he struck the crane.

The old man turned his back on his foe and walked over to the hoist unit. Then, proving TT's prediction true, he reached out and rested one hand on the main cable array. He squeezed his fingers together, and the strands parted. Below, the load fell.

"Oh, fuck. No!"

Then, in the operating cabin of a Liebherr tower crane situated in a construction site near Chicago's Loop, something happened that had happened thousands of times before across the world over the previous sixty years. Something that had been studied

and speculated upon by the finest minds of more than one planet.

Inside Todd Taszycki, a change occurred on, at least, the chromosomal level. Some of those fine minds had theorized that the change occurred even more fundamentally than that, at the level of gluons and gauge basins, right down at the very bottom of matter, where the world becomes impossible to both understand and predict at the same time.

Inside Todd Taszycki, a card turned.

Outside, the girders surrendered to gravity and plummeted toward the parking lot below. TT saw people scattering.

He reached out.

And a superstructure of tightly spaced glowing neon-yellow I-beams came into existence below the falling steel, catching the girders in a net that bent, but did not break. TT felt the weight of the fallen load in his mind and instinctively added more support to the structure he had created.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and he reached up and pulled off his hardhat, absent-mindedly pulling the squawking earpiece out as he did so. He risked a glance out along the crane and saw that the old man and the tiger man were both gone.

Below, the Suburbans went peeling out of the lot, heedless of traffic.

The glowing yellow structure stabilized, and TT realized it was because he was getting used to the feel of it in his mind. He could sense the matter and the energy of it, he could *direct* the matter and energy of it.

“Well, fuck me,” said TT.



TT had a cousin, Sylvia, who was a meteorologist at a TV station up in Green Bay, and a nephew, Tobias, who edited a trucking magazine. So technically speaking, he'd been around reporters before. Sylvia and Toby, though, weren't assholes.

“Todd! Todd! Is this the first time you've used your powers to save someone's life?”

“Mr. Tad ... Tatsicko! Can you do anything else besides create magic girders? Can you fly? Can you shoot rays out of your eyes?”

“Will you be keeping your job as a crane operator, Todd?”

“Are you married? Have a special someone?”

“What does your family think about your ace power?”

Oh Christ, that last one got his attention. With the way Ma kept three televisions going all the time, not to mention her police scanner, not to mention his sister Margaret the firefighter probably having heard all about this from the emergency crews who had showed up after everything had already settled down, there was no fucking way his mother and his siblings wouldn't have heard about his “ace debut” already.

TT didn't have a clue how to answer any of the questions, didn't know which one to try to answer first, didn't know which

one of the many cameras he was supposed to be looking at. Luckily, Local #221 had proved again what his pops had always said when he first brought TT into the construction business: “Don’t look at dues as a cut out of your check. Look at ’em as an investment.”

In this case, his investment had paid for the services of a union lawyer, a guy named Kassam who maybe wasn’t as slick as the lawyers on Ma’s programs but at least he knew how to talk to the media.

“It’s Mr. Taszycki,” said Kassam, and he spelled it out, spelled it right and everything. “And he doesn’t have anything to say at this time, other than that he’s glad that nobody was hurt in the incident.”

The “incident,” yeah, TT guessed that’s what it fucking was. Tiger man fighting off a super-strong old guy trying to pull off a mob hit by pulling down his crane. None of the reporters had asked about any of that, though, which was kind of fucking odd, now that TT thought about it.

“Hey,” he asked the lawyer, “what about those motherfuckers in the Suburbans?”

Unfortunately, a couple of the reporters heard him ask and they started in with the yelling bullshit again. But the lawyer and the shop steward hustled TT away from the scrum and into the architect’s trailer while the foreman and a couple of the guys kept the reporters from following them.

“We don’t want to get into any details of what caused the

accident, TT,” said the steward, who was, really, kind of a weaselly fucker TT had never gotten along with. “The main investor is pissed off that his son came so close to buying it and he’s not a man who likes publicity.”

“But it was a fucking mob hit,” said TT. “We didn’t have anything to do with it. We should call the fucking cops or something, shouldn’t we?”

“It would be the Feds if we were going to call anybody,” said the lawyer. “But we’re not going to make any such calls. Though I’m sure you’ll be contacted by them soon enough. Not the organized crime guys, though. SCARE or somebody like that. They’re always interested in new aces.”

“I don’t want anything to do with any of that,” said TT. “I don’t know what happened out there. I should, I don’t know, go to the fucking doctor or something.”

“What I advise you to do,” said the lawyer, “is seek legal counsel as soon as possible. I can make some recommendations. The reporters will file their stories and forget about you, hopefully, so long as you keep your head down and don’t start fighting crime or something stupid like that. But even if the government doesn’t come sniffing around, somebody will. Be careful, TT.”

And that was pretty much that for TT’s debut as a superpowered construction worker. Catching the falling I-beams then lowering them to the ground had been easy compared to all the bullshit that followed talking to the union and the

construction company and the lawyers and the reporters. But at the end of the day, TT found himself in the mobile locker room with the rest of the crew, like usual.

The trailer was big enough for twelve showers and a bank of lockers, and the crew was big enough that it was always crowded in there come five o'clock. But today, TT noticed, he didn't have to elbow his way to his locker and wait in line for the shower. The other guys kind of made way for him in a way that wasn't comfortable at all.

Finally, he said, "C'mon, what the fuck is this? You assholes going to treat me different now? I didn't ask to get the virus and if any of you motherfuckers had been paying attention in sixth-grade science you'd know it ain't catching. At least I didn't grow three more cocks or something."

Bell, one of the riveters, said, "That'd give you a total of three, then," and the other guys all laughed and then it was more or less back to normal until TT pulled his phone down from the little shelf at the top of his locker and saw that he had a hundred and nine missed calls and forty voice mails. Most of them from Ma.

TT lived in a room above his mother's garage, and it would take him about an hour to get home, where she'd be fixing supper for him and for whichever of his sisters and brothers would be coming over tonight. On a Friday night, there would be more of them than usual. Hell, on a Friday night when one of the siblings had been on the local news all afternoon for being a fucking ace *all* of them might show up. Ma would have to put the extra leaf

in the dining room table.

That piss-drunk son-of-a-bitch Father Dobrzycki would probably wander over from the Polonia Hall, too. Better stop for extra wine, then.

He was always one of the first guys to arrive on the site in the morning, which meant his truck was parked at the far end of the row. Parking was tight enough that there was a rule that you took the farthest space available when you arrived. TT had the same *We Build Chicago* bumper sticker that most of the other trucks and cars did on his F-250, and his wasn't even the only F-250. So TT figured it was either just a coincidence or because his vehicle was the most secluded from the street that the old man had crawled into the plastic-lined bed of his truck.

TT thought he was just some homeless dude at first sight, but then the old man rolled over and those three gaping wounds were still bleeding on his face from where the tiger man had clawed him. The old man looked different, though. His arms and legs weren't so heavily muscled. In fact, his coveralls hung off him like they were a couple of sizes too big. He'd actually fucking *shrunk* since his fight up on the crane.

Somebody yelled at him to have a good weekend and to try and stay out of the papers and TT threw up a hand, waving in response. The old man looked out at him from his hiding space, held up a finger in front of his lips asking TT to keep quiet.

This was a fucked-up situation.

TT walked over to the driver's-side door of the pickup and

stepped up on the footrail where he could lean in and open the toolbox behind the cab. He looked around, but nobody was close.

“What’s up, *dziadek*?” he asked.

The old man gave him a ghastly grin. TT could see some of his teeth through his torn open cheek.

“I have no *wnuki* that I know of,” he said. “But I have been called grandfather before. Recently, in fact. Or, rather, ten years from now.”

Oh yeah, this was making more fucking sense all the time.

“I’m going to get you to the ER, old man. And you should try not to talk. It makes you bleed more and it ain’t too fucking pretty, neither.”

“No,” said the old man. “No hospitals. No police. No authorities. I will heal in time, Hardhat.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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