

I still remember the day that dame first waltzed into my office. I knew she was trouble the moment I lay eyes on her. There I was, feet up on my desk, rolling another cigarette, watching the rain beat down hard on the thick layer of grime coating the streets of the city like icing on a cake, but less delicious. This shitty city. This gritty city. Long nights of drowning my sorrows in gin, like unwanted kittens presumably in something other than gin, was making it hard for me think straight, and I couldn't come up with any more rhymes for city. Pity.

It then transpired that the dame had waltzed into the wrong office altogether, and she waltzed out again, but not before tripping into my coat rack and causing it to break in half, probably because she had to waltz everywhere rather than move like an ordinary person. Getting a new one proved to be a great deal of trouble, confirming my intuition. It was after I finished dealing with the coat rack that I noticed a man sulking furtively in the hall, like a rat, sulking furtively in a hall. I knew I recognized him from somewhere as sure as I knew my similes needed work.

"Listen, buster," I said. "I don't know who you are, but I'm a private eye. That means this property is *private*, and it belongs to *I*. To me. So why don't you start by telling me exactly what you're doing here. You're Lyndon LaRouche, aren't you?"

"No," said the man who was not Lyndon LaRouche. "You might know me as Bartley. We have to talk."

"Oh, right. You're the other guy who loses elections. I heard—"

I didn't get further than that, because Bartley pulled me into the office and slammed the door. He reached into the pocket of his trench coat and pulled out an ID that read *Bartholomew Nath*. A different part of the ID read *CIA*. There were other things on the ID as well, but they struck me as less important.

"Listen," said Bartley or Bartholomew. "We don't have much time. I see you've already heard about my recent electoral failures. But I bet you didn't know that it was really part of an elaborate plan by the CIA to infiltrate the government!"

I knew there would be trouble as soon as he mentioned the feds. The kind of trouble that could end in a broken spine instead of a broken coat rack. I didn't like it one bit.

"Isn't the CIA part of the government?" I asked.

"It's all part of the plan," said my binominal guest. "The reason I've come here is because we need you to accept a position in the new government, and then report back to me with whatever you can discover. We have insider information claiming that they're already planning on offering you the job of minister of propaganda."

I refrained from asking why they needed a man inside the government when they already had insider information. Instead I asked the other question, the one I had asked far too often recently.

"Why me?"

“You made a name for yourself last year by speaking out publicly against corruption in Franco’s administration. The Jorgonaut likes that. He’s a sworn enemy of Generalissimo Franco, but we have reason to believe his reign might be even worse.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that he promised at least four years of tyranny and egotism in his first public address after seizing power.”

I pulled my fedora over my eyes and said nothing.

“Listen, why don’t you think it over, and give me a call when you’ve come to the right conclusion. Here’s my card.”

He fished around in his pocket for a while and handed me a jack from a worn bicycle deck. The ‘J’ in each corner had been covered with a piece of masking tape with ‘N’ written on it.

“N stands for Nathan the same way that J stands for Jack,” Bartley explained. “It’s supposed to be badass, but it’s still a work in progress. It would have been so much easier if my name was Jack.”

I had no idea what to say, so I just stared at him.

“Never mind,” Bartley said, and slumped out of my office like a cat with its tail between its legs. I sat back at my desk, pulled my fedora even lower over my eyes, and rolled another cigarette. That part was hard, because I couldn’t actually see anything other than the brim of my hat. When I was finished, I gazed off at the brim of my hat, and thought about everything Bartley had said.

Jorgen Harris. Men had lived in terror of him for centuries. He’d been known by many names over the years. Jorgonaut. Jorgmungandr, the World Serpent. The Jorgan Grinder. Jorj Bush. If he really was the new ruler of Hitchcock, the nation, perhaps the whole world, was knee deep in shit, like a thirteenth-century cesspit cleaner. I didn’t like it, but Bartley was right. Somebody needed to keep tabs on him, and unfortunately, for me, I happened to be somebody.

I stood up, accidentally put out my cigarette on my own hand, and then remembered to adjust my hat so I could see again. It was time to hit the streets and ask questions in the underworld. Visit bars. Squeeze people, but not too hard, because I had learned from experience that the bigger ones tried to squeeze back. I returned to my office in the wee hours, with all the information I needed as well as a complementary nasal realignment.

It turned out that the Jorgonaut had stacked his cabinet with crooks like they were dinner plates. Ashley Altman, his Vice President, had no prior political experience, and no platform other than insatiable ambition. Sam Spiegel, Minister of the Treasury, was a world famous gambler and con-man known wanted in nine countries on seventeen separate counts of fraud. He was known as The Numismatist because money that wasn’t watched closely had a nasty habit of winding up

in his “collection.” Elizabeth Gray became Minister of Immigration by default after it turned out that one of her rivals was a sexual predator, another an escaped convict, and a third totally insane. In a nominally unrelated election, Bryce Lanham became the president of the Hitchcock Historical Society, but rumor has it he came out of the whole process with a lucrative, government-financed book deal.

What was I getting myself into? Only time would tell, but time had been keeping awful quiet of late. What I really needed was a more audible clock. For the time being, I decided that if time wouldn't tell me, I wouldn't tell time, and threw my clock out the window. I still had no bed after a similar falling out with sleep two weeks ago, so I lay back in my chair, kicked my feet up, and listened for signs of the future.

TO BE CONTINUED

But first, a message from the publisher...

Hiya folks,

We here at B&B Books are sure glad you've picked up this latest serial work from Ben Brubaker. He really is one of our finest writers: real exciting, real hard-boiled. Our latest experiment in publishing sunny side up detective novels didn't prove too lucrative, so we're glad to be back on track with the demands of our fans. There's just one thing about Brubaker's writing, though: many of our readers have complained that they haven't the faintest idea what on earth he's talking about fifty percent of the time. This is kind of a big deal, so we've decided to include a helpful appendix after each installment describing what happened in clear, uncluttered prose. Some of this stuff didn't actually make it into the final version of the book, but trust us, it's actually more important than most of what did. Without further ado:

-The Hitchcock House Council consists of Jory Harris (President), Ashley Altman (VP), Ben Brubaker (Secretary), Sam Spiegel (Treasurer), Bryce Lanham (Historian), Yuto Nakafuku (IHC), Steven LaRue (HARC), Lib Gray (PSAC), Elizabeth Lee and John Bobka (IM Sports), Sam Bowman and Talia Penslar (Social Chairs), Max Falkowitz (Bartlett and Section I), Austin Feller and Aaron Space (At Large), Erica Fagin (Condom Czar), Glenn Wang (Section II), Jesse Roth (Section III), Graham Albachten (Section IV), and Natalie Levy (Section V). Phew.

-The Hitchcock front door will be locked starting Monday, on account of those pesky traveling salesmen. You can open it with your CX60 key, which is the one that says “CX60” on it.

-There is such a thing as Richard III. Moreover, you could sign up to go see it!

-There is also such a person as Robert Grider. He will fix your computer.

-Bad Movie Night at 10PM Sunday in the Rec Room.

-Also Sunday at 10PM (I think) is a study break with food brought to you by Aaron Horton.

-Jordan Phillips may or may not have your jacket.

-You could have gotten a flu shot, but by now you can only get the flu. Sorry.