

1

Yankee Stadium

May 1, 1927

A great ball club, like a remarkable woman, comes around once in a lifetime. Charlie listened to the rousing crowd. The spring air, fresh and cleansing, filtered through the ballpark, ruffling the tiny flags atop the stadium wall. The crack of the ball against the bat sent tingles up his arms. If someone handed him a glove he would probably run out on the field.

In the midst of the colorful multitude, his eyes were drawn to The Babe. It was only the beginning of May, and Ruth had six home runs, two in this very game. It might be possible, if he continued at this pace, to break his 1923 record of fifty-nine home runs. The Babe trotted like a bow legged ox across the outfield, loosening up between innings. Charlie's eyes darted across the field to Pennock, sizzling the ball into the catcher's mitt. This team had it all. The superb pitching, only one component, complimented the

hitting attack. Charlie shook his head as he watched Gehrig throw practice balls across the infield grass. He had never seen a team like this. God, they were good. Not only could they head to The Series, but might just squash everyone along the way.

He looked at his friends back in the seats. They would razz him if they knew earlier he was watching the cavalcade of women under the grandstand. He could not keep his mind off one woman he had seen near the concession. Tall, with expressive blue eyes, she mysteriously walked under the stands with that odd beeping leather radio box strapped to her shoulder and had disappeared just as he carried his food from the counter.

Joel cupped his hands. " Hey, Charlie! Either go get some more food or sit your arse down!"

" I need a smoke, Joel," said Charlie. He took a pack of Luckys from his shirt pocket.

Ray, rapped on his leg. " Francine know you're at the ballpark, Charlie?" Charlie, cigarette hanging from his mouth, squinted at Ray, and then lit up. He shook the match and tossed it to the cement as he exhaled. " I don't discuss baseball with Francine."

Ray leaned toward Joel. " Any dame that wouldn't let me go to the ballpark..."

" I know you guys don't like her."

" It's not that we don't like her, Chuck." said Joel. Charlie squeezed toward the aisle. " She's just not right for you."

" Rumfords have too much dough," added Ray.

" You can never have too much dough, Bud. I'm getting some more food."

What he really wanted was to find that dame again. Phily was batting and Pennock fired a strike, but Charlie had lost interest and plodded down the ramp. Ray was right. Francine would be upset if she knew he had traveled to the stadium. She was the boss's daughter, but the old man had pushed the relationship. Rumors abounded about her alleged affair with a guy named Rick Serone from Chicago, and she had seen her old beau, Wil Dillingham, on occasion, but the Rumfords were stinking with money and Charlie was set for life.

Once under the grandstand girders, he searched for her blue chiffon frock. The crowd cheered above and realized how much he loved the game. He could taste the feeling, a raw combination of hot dogs, onions, and cold beer, accented with passing stale cigars and pungent bags of second-rate peanuts.

Starting at the concession, he thought about his ambition and began a methodical march under the grandstand. After his arrival from his parent's Ohio farm, subsequent graduation from New York University and employment at the Woolworth Tower, he remained fueled by a lust for wealth and power.

He snuffed out his cigarette on the concrete. Then he saw her. She was tall and slender within the transient crowd, but overdressed in the blue frock, and her rusty hair was bobbed in the

shingled look. Something about her, an aura of mystery, drew him closer. He drifted inauspiciously under the grandstand and stared at her large leather case, but this time it emitted no beeps. Sweet jasmine filled the air even before he was near her. She panned the rafters as if she were structural engineer. He could not keep his eyes off her tight, tanned face, scattered with freckles. As he inched closer, the stadium light cast an iridescent glow within her blue eyes.

" You come to the stadium often?" he asked.

She kept studying the girders. " You've been watching me."

" Who me?"

She lifted her brows and her tiny mouth evidenced a smile as she turned. Her perky but proper, almost British accent, surprised him. " To answer your question, not as often as I would like."

" I'd like to get out here more often, too," said Charlie.

" Then again, actually *being* at the ballpark is better than watching... news reels."

In her face he sensed a youthful exuberance and appreciation of life, but the glint in her eyes suggested she was holding something back. She pushed something inside the leather case.

Charlie folded his arms. " Right. It's like reading about the game in the Sun or the Times. Not the same."

He could sense, as she stared at the girders again, she was not the typical Yankee fan. " This is a unique era. Babe Ruth had two home runs today. I actually saw the second one."

" The Babe's gonna have a good year, I can feel it."

" Oh, he definitely will."

" Is that right? And how do you know that Miss..."

" Jamal."

" French?"

" No, no." She covered her mouth, trying not to laugh.

" Did I say something funny?"

" No, you didn't. I'm laughing because I do have a unique name." She stared into his eyes. Charlie knew that look. What would Francine say to the old man if she saw him talking to this bright-eyed chickadee? Returning to the stands would be the smart move, but wanted to know more about Jamal. " You live around here?"

Before she could answer, the leather case erupted with a series of high-pitched tones and static. She backed away with a panicky look and spoke into the case. " Not now, Elf. It's a malfunction, that's all.

Charlie stepped toward her. " Hey, what is that, some kind of radio?"

She stopped, still flustered. " Right, radio..."

" Are you with the army or something? It's none of my business, but I've never seen people carrying around a radio."

" It's really not important." Her smile was fixed.

" Who's Elf? Are you in the army?"

" Well, I am on a mission of sorts."

" I don't understand."

" I'm sorry," she said, extending her tiny hand.

" My name is Charlie."

" I'm sorry, Charlie."

She started away, but he caught her. " Hey, was it something I said?"

" No, maybe it's better I don't get involved. This is all so precarious. I'm afraid I might change something. I know you don't understand."

" No, I don't."

She paused, again staring into his eyes, and shrugged her shoulders. " Enjoy the game, enjoy the season. You won't see the likes of it again."

With ambivalence in her eyes she turned and scurried toward the gate. Charlie took two steps and then stopped. The fact she was hiding something made her more appealing. He watched her frock swaying at the hips all the way to the turnstile. She stopped on the other side and gave him a quick wave with her fingers.

As quickly she had come into his life, she vanished into the stadium parking lot. He had no business chasing after her, but she had sent his head spinning. Without a second thought, he sprinted across the concrete and rushed through the turnstile. " Where did you go?"

He chided himself as he surveyed the area. For a few moments a hint of jasmine lingered in the fresher air. He checked

the stadium and the mass of parked cars. That bright-eyed woman, tall and slender, was gone with her radio bag.

He shook his head all the way back to the grandstand ramp. The crowd buzzed as Yankee pinstripes and the trimmed green outfield grass rose above the ramp. Before he returned to his seat, he looked toward the turnstile one more time. Letting her leave was a premier boner.

As he took his seat, Charlie heard Ray's prattling. " Do you realize how many clean plays he's made?"

" Who?" asked Charlie.

" Tony the Wop. It's like he can't make an error."

Charlie, still distracted, bit his thumbnail as Joel leaned over.

" Hey, what ya say we get outside after and see if we can catch The Babe before he leaves."

" Great," answered Charlie.

" Somethin' wrong, Charlie?" asked Joel.

Charlie lit another Lucky and shook his head. " Nah. Everything is fine, Bud. Just fine."

2

At his Bronx apartment, Charlie, in his sleeveless undershirt, was sprawled on the sofa and listened to the radio. But his mind drifted back to Jamal at the turnstile. More important than his attraction to her, his indecision concerning his pending marriage to Francine plagued him. The rumors of her infidelity would not go away, but neither would his own ambition.

He scrawled batting averages on a white paper pad as the phone rang. Ruth had sunk to .275, but Gehrig, who never got the headlines, had attained an impressive .447. The Yankees as a team were at ten and five. He reached and fumbled for the phone.

" Well, I've been wondering what happened to you."

" Francine, darling."

" Don't darlin' me! I've been trying to contact you for three hours! You could have, at the very least, tried calling me... I suppose you were out at the baseball park again."

Charlie gulped before he spoke. " Francine, I know that I take the Yankees a little too seriously."

" I knew it! Charlie, following those games is not the best use of your time. You eat, drink, and sleep the New York Yankees."

" But, Francine-"

" You don't see father out at one of those baseball games, do you?"

Charlie paused and then muttered slowly. " No, Francine, I don't."

" You will find as you move up the ladder, there comes added responsibility. Time must be structured around your job."

Charlie rolled his eyes and held out the phone. Then he lit a cigarette. " Look, I like the Yankees. What do you want from me?"

" Well, in this life, we can't always get what we want."

" Isn't that the God's honest truth?"

" Are you trying to intimate something, Charlie?" She changed the tone of her voice, playing the hurt woman. " I hope that's not the case since I was only calling see where you were..."

" Francine, do you really want to get married?"

" Of course, Father insists."

" Never mind your father, what do *you* want?"

The silence revealed more than he wanted to know. " I will marry you as planned on September thirtieth. And if I didn't want to marry you, do you think mother and I would be spending our days shopping and planning for the wedding?"

" Well-"

" Do you think we'd be inviting guests for our engagement party at The Gables on the Hudson? Everyone in mother and father's social circle will be at that party! My God, Charlie, all of that and you would imply that I don't want to marry you?"

" What I think, Francine... is that you and I are spending less and less time together."

She next alluded to the formal china selections, furniture for their new apartment, and a hundred other aspects of her own agenda. Then she informed him about weekend plans with the family at the Rumford's spacious Connecticut retreat house. He pinched the bridge of his nose until she finally hung up.

Confused, he strutted over to the window and forcefully puffed on his cigarette as he watched the sun's last rays pierce the blue steel clouds over the city. He wanted to end the relationship, but feared he would jeopardize his position with the old man. E.B. Rumford might just release him if his daughter was jilted. Upsetting the old man in any way was dangerous. He had not even bothered to inform E.B. about taking a day off next week, to catch some of the flyers, including the young pilot, Lindbergh, before they attempted to cross the Atlantic from Long Island. Maybe things would get better away from the city, in Connecticut, and he would not have to risk throwing away his future.

Something about the relationship rattled him from the beginning. Now, the pressure now ripped him apart. He longed for the solitude atop the Woolworth Tower, where he worked, to peruse the city at night from the gallery, and sift through his burgeoning problems. Then he might make sense of it all.

* * *

He drove his Chrysler 62', a gift from Francine, through minimal traffic to lower Manhattan. The skyscraper cathedral's thirty-first to sixtieth floors were illuminated against the dark sky and had become a special place in his world. He parked the car and stepped into the night air. The first spring leaves burgeoned through the trees and flowery aromas sauntered about the plaza. But the building's pervasive glow, visible forty miles out at sea, captivated him. He walked under the plaza street lamps, and wondered if he had the nerve to break off the relationship. Then he headed for the Broadway entrance.

As he looked skyward, he knew he would be jettisoning everything this building represented. They called it the Cathedral of Commerce because its rich Gothic architecture connoted a religious flavor. The fact he could rise fifty-eight stories above the city and contemplate life sometimes gave him a sense of the divine.

He passed under the eagle at the Broadway entrance, as he did during the work week, wondering if his secretary had told E.B. about the Lindbergh thing on Long Island. A security guard waved him by and he stepped into what was akin to a marble palace, intricately carved within the Gothic style. The Grand arcade would grace any European cathedral. Such opulence reminded him what E.B. Rumford's daughter offered: A secure future beckoned within

this building and the Rumford's social position would assure him a comfortable life.

He crossed the tile, as if he owned the building, and walked to the ornately crafted arches around the elevator. This area always reminded him of a church confession booth. He heard Herbie across the lobby.

" Hey, Bud," said Charlie.

The greasy haired Herbie looked at the elevator and then at Charlie. " Trouble on the home front again, Charlie?"

" I know why you're here at night, Herb. I'll say it again. As head of operations, you're taking a big chance running booze out of the basement."

They both stepped inside.

" Got to pay the bills."

Herbie shut the outside doors, the car lurched, and they zoomed upward. Charlie held his stomach. " I always wonder if this elevator will come crashing down. Fifty-eight floors is a long way up."

" Charlie, there's a safety switch and what they call the air cushion zone. It can't crash... Listen, it's time to ditch Francine."

" Oh?"

" It's Serone. I have it on good authority-"

" You and your good authority."

" I have witnesses, Charlie. She's playing you for a sucker and trying to please the old man because he likes you."

Charlie closed his eyes most of the way to the top. He did not want to ruin his career. The doors opened, he looked at Herbie, and stepped onto the gallery above the city. His friend held the doors open.

" Thanks, Herb. I appreciate the information. I think..."

" Charlie, drop her. E.B. likes you. He won't let you go."

Herbie let the doors close. Charlie meandered onto the gallery and the cooler, dank air blew his thinning blonde hair back. He quickly lit a Lucky and leaned toward his favorite view, a span of lights and traffic reaching out twenty-five miles past Brooklyn. The cars crossed the bridge and along the city streets like internal parts of some larger organism.

And where was Jamal? Letting her pass through the turnstile was dumb. After what Herbie just told him about Francine, he wished he had caught Jamal. He had no address or phone number, but he could vividly see her body gently swaying under the grandstand. He pictured that one final little wave with her fingers and could almost smell the jasmine as he spoke into the night.

" Dead end thoughts."

3

In the early morning hours, Charlie drove his 62' along a narrow muddied dirt road toward Roosevelt Field on Long Island. The sun hid behind the mist and he questioned whether they would even fly this morning. He checked his watch. The old man had no problem with his taking the day off, but Francine had put a constraint on his free time, insisting he meet her and the old man at the tower for lunch.

The bumpy, monotonous ride resulted in spraying his shiny car with a muddy residue. A cigarette hung from his mouth as he slowed the 62' and approached a line of cars, uniformed police, and groups of people scattered over the field. He leaned out the window to a motorcycle cops. " Hey, Bud. Where do I park?" The cop pointed across the grass. " Looks kind of crummy to be flying."

" Twenty-five grand to whoever makes it. I'll fly out for twenty-five grand."

" You know how many guys have already died trying?" asked Charlie. " Lindbergh out there yet? I like him."

" They've already started rolling out his plane." He panned the field from his driver's window.

" Too muddy."

" Least it ain't rainin.' "

Charlie nodded and moved his car across the grass. He gazed to his left and wondered why Lindbergh or any of these guys would want to fly on such a lousy day. It might be clearer over the ocean, but it was still risky.

He parked the car and traipsed across spongy field. In the commotion ahead, as he circled, Jamal walked within the crowd. His stomach tingled as he mired in the mud. Dressed in a pale gray flight suit, she carried the same brown leather case, strapped to her shoulder, and had a set of field glasses around her neck.

Charlie ran across the grass, slipping several times, as he called out her name. Startled, she spun around with a fearful look over her freckled face, but she smiled when she saw him sliding on the grass. He was out of breath when he reached her. " Jamal, I knew I'd see you again."

" You did?"

" I kept kicking myself for not getting your number or your address."

" Kicking yourself? Oh... I see, you were upset with yourself."

Her sleek body, even more defined in the flight suit, moved gracefully. He was not going to let her get away this time.

" Are you involved in this thing? This prize across the Atlantic? I mean, you're wearing a flight suit."

" Oh, no, I'm here, Charlie, merely as an observer of history."

" History? You really think this guy's going to do it?"

She touched his arm as she spoke. " Not just some guy. Charles Augustus Lindbergh. This is May 20, 1927. We're standing at Roosevelt Field... right on the edge of history, Charlie. No one has ever crossed this ocean by air. Six people have died trying. The amazing thing about this flight was that he loaded so much fuel into the plane. By all rights, he shouldn't have been able to take off. However, they constructed the struts and braces with aluminum or balsa. A very streamlined craft."

Charlie perched on his toes, trying to view the action.

" Sounds like you have it all figured out. Like it already happened."

" Maybe it has."

She handed the glasses to him. The image of a small silver plane, blocks still wedged under the tires, came into view. He had trouble seeing the writing on the side. " Take me to St. Louis?"

" No, The Spirit of St. Louis." She chuckled as Charlie lowered the glasses.

" I'm glad I found you again."

" I'm sorry I left the stadium so fast. I have my reasons. I'm sorry."

" You seemed a little nervous when I called out your name before... You running from something?" She did not answer and he peaked into the binoculars again. " What are all those red containers?"

" Gas cans. As I said, it was a very tricky maneuver to take off with all that weight. But he needed the fuel."

" I love things like this. The excitement and daring," replied Charlie. He could feel the tension building.

" Almost as good as being at the ballpark?"

" Depends whether the Yanks are winning."

Then she held his arm, her body tensing as she looked across the field. " God, what a moment in time! "

" *If* he makes it."

Through the lenses a lean young man with a huge crop of auburn hair strutted around in army pants and a sweater. She nudged against Charlie and pointed. " That's him! Charlie, you have no idea what it's like to be able to view this. No idea. The key is the telephone wires. He has to clear the telephone wires. Most people of this era have no grand vision as to what this flight means to the world. Everything will change now... They only see the heroes."

" This era?"

" The Twenties, of course."

" How can he clear those wires, with all that fuel, *and* the wind coming in?" asked Charlie.

" No, he'll have the tailwind, five miles an hour, when he takes off."

He snapped his fingers. " Now, I know. You're from the National Weather Service. That's why you carry the case-"

" Nice try."

" I'll figure it out."

" Oh, you will, will you?"

He studied Lindbergh and tried to imagine himself in the same position. The guy had guts. " You know, if he really does make it... People will go crazy."

A hint of sadness swept her azure eyes. " This flight will make him famous. At such a cost... Fame. They wouldn't let up on him. This society destroys its heroes. Heroes are so necessary."

" How do you know all this?"

" I apologize. It isn't my mission to be talking about things past. I might make some radical time change."

" Radical time change?"

" Well, you never know how a changed event will play out. Most things you change on the timeline come to a dead end, but you do risk affecting more than you bargained for."

" Okay, I'll buy that."

She sounded as if she just got out of the loony bin. He raised the binoculars again. After checking the runway, Lindbergh went over to the windsock and seconds later he stripped to his flying suit. Charlie sensed the exhilarating anxiety as Lindbergh climbed into the plane. How would he pilot that small craft down the rain soaked runway and clear the wires and woods at the far end?

The men moved toward the propeller and pulled it down, the motor sputtered, but finally caught. A buzz reverberated across the misty morning, but the engine sounded weak.

" He's letting it idle. You'll hear him turn it up in a second," said Jamal, looking ahead.

" I know, you're a reporter."

" Nope."

" I give up."

She clutched his shoulder. " Mulligan and Boedecker! "

" Sounds like a slick law firm. "

" They're pushing the wings, Charlie! Seven fifty-two a.m., May 20, 1927. God, what a brave man!"

The small silver plane, with the single occupant inside, moved awkwardly down the field, the tires skipping in the mud. The nose pointed ahead and the wings dipped a few times as the plane hit uneven ground.

" Oh, no. He's not going to make it up," said Charlie.

" He'll make it."

Charlie covered his eyes but peaked through his fingers. " All that gasoline. He's moving along, but he isn't in the air, Jamal!"

" It's Okay, Charlie. Tonight, he'll be in Paris." Lindbergh neared the ravine at the end of the runway. The Spirit of St. Louis would tumble into the ravine at high speed if he did not get the plane up in a few seconds.

" Come on! Come on!"

The plane catapulted into the air and Charlie jumped up and down as if he were at the ballpark.

" See," said Jamal.

" He did it! He did it!"

The airborne leap was short lived. The plane bounced off the ground just before the ravine and then back into the air. Charlie grabbed her as Lindbergh hit the field again. She spoke softly.

" Just a little more... Just a little more."

The Spirit of St. Louis rose into the air, above a group of onlookers and a tractor beyond. Once clearing the ravine, Lindbergh soared skyward. Charlie thrust his arms into the air.

" Yes, yes!"

The tiny plane's engine hummed, pushed to the limit, moved upward from the crowd, and missed the telephone wires by fifteen or twenty feet. Jamal had her arms clasped around Charlie. " What a man!"

" Why, thank you."

She grinned and rustled her hand over his shoulders. He was only inches from her bronzed face and soft wavy hair and wanted to kiss her, but she turned toward the far end of the field. Lindbergh traced the undulating terrain beyond and simply disappeared into the May mist. Getting off the ground proved miraculous, but crossing the Atlantic seemed laughable. But Charlie soon centered on Jamal and her bizarre reflections about the flight. He held her arm as they stood on the grass. " So, where are you from? And what is this mission you talked about?"

" I live in the city. Oh... we all have missions."

" Where's your car? I'll walk you back."

" Well... I don't have a car... You know, Charlie, there is something very likable about you."

Charlie smiled and quickly lit a cigarette. " I have one of those faces and I have a *car*. You're coming back to New York with me."

She hesitated for a moment, but he did not doubt she wanted to go back with him. " Oh, all right."

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In the car Jamal held the leather case in her lap and continued talking about Lindbergh, but once on the open road she expanded her dissertation to include current events. Charlie found it odd how she spoke as if she were a historian or had some prescient knowledge.

" Charlie, this is a golden age."

" Golden age?"

" Yes, everything is starting to happen technologically on Earth."

" I guess that's a good place for it to happen."

" Henry Ford is producing gasoline powered cars. Edison is still alive, but it wasn't that long ago he brought electricity into practical application. To be in a period where Albert Einstein-

" I'd like to go out with you again."

Jamal's response was so lackadaisical, he wondered if she had agreed. " That would be fun... Think of it. Radio waves just being localized, or broadcasts as they say, but video and web virtual broadcasts are years away."

" Excuse me, Jamal, but I don't know what you're talking about."

" I know."

" Oh... Okay."

She smiled. Mystified, he looked at his watch as he drove into the city. Francine would be livid if he missed the lunch appointment. But Francine would have to wait. Jamal asked him about his job and Charlie talked about his position at the tower and told her everything; except his engagement to Francine.

" I'm set for life. Guaranteed job, moving right up the ladder. Money, stocks,... I have so many stocks... property. See, the old man, E.B., he liked me right away. I'm set, Jamal. Set for life."

She squeezed his wrist and her crisp blue eyes were serious. " I wouldn't call that being set for life, Charlie. Forget about planning everything out. Take the moment, like we just did at Lindy's flight, it's the most valuable asset you have."

" You sound like a philosopher, a student of James or Freud? Or maybe Coue... Every day and in every way."

" That thought has some validity."

" Lindy?"

" That's what they'll call him. Lucky Lindy."

" I guess he'll have to be Lucky if he makes it."

" He will."

" Jamal, exactly where do you live?"

" You can drop me at Columbus Circle near Central Park."

" Okay."

He gazed down at the leather case as he turned the wheel. That case and her bold and varied references had him baffled. And he noticed how she would peer out the window as if she was never in the city. A few minutes later he pulled onto Columbus Circle.

" Well, we're at the circle. Let me bring you to your place..."

" You can drop me right there under that sign with the woman's smiling face inside the tire..."

" You live under the Kelly Tire sign?"

But she was distracted as he looped around the circle. " You said you have lots of stocks."

" I'm loaded with stocks. Bought them cheap on margin."

" Dump whatever stocks, you have, Charlie. Do yourself a favor. This is the 1920's, for goodness sake."

He pulled off the road, but had reached the limit with her private knowledge and intimations. " Do you work on Wall Street? Who *are* you and what's in that case?"

" Oh, I'm from the future."

She had said it so casually. Charlie stared at her and she smiled.

" Really."

" Right." He took out his Luckys and lit a cigarette. " Tobacco, the scourge of the twentieth century."

He raised his brows as he inhaled. The leather case beeped as it had in the ballpark. She pulled at the case and unzipped an odd beige attaching fabric with a crackling rip. Charlie leaned over. Inside, a pewter framed box's magenta screen glowed brightly. He alternated glances between Jamal and the box. " Tell me this is some kind of joke."

" No joke, this is Elf. Elf, meet Charlie."

A human voice spoke from the box. " Hello, Charlie."

" What's the gag? That's a radio, powered by a battery. Very clever."

She grinned at Charlie's consternation. " Elf, tell him you're real."

" I am a consciousness with the combined knowledge, exceeding all your twentieth century libraries."

" I've been working too hard... Pressures. Too many pressures. Listen, how can a box be talking to me?"

Someone blew a horn and he brought the 62' under the billboard sign.

" Because I am on a mission back here, Charlie. A critical mission affecting all of the future..."

" Getting involved with him was not smart," said Elf.

" Hey, if she wants to get involved... What am I saying?"

He hit himself in the forehead. " I'm arguing with a box!"

" No insult intended, Charlie," replied the box. " I was more questioning Jamal's judgment."

" Is he a *robot*?"

He took another drag on the cigarette and pitched it out the window as a bright yellow lettered message covered the screen.

ROBOT IS AN ANTIQUATED TERM

Jamal held his wrist but Charlie still stared at the screen.

" Why don't we meet at the ballpark again? When is the next game?"

" Yanks play Phily again on Tuesday... I think you'd better tell me what's going on here, Jamal."

" I will, but not now."

" Give me your number."

" I can't take the chance of having a phone... I could be tracked if I had a phone."

The box spoke again. " We have to be careful. You can't mention this to anyone, Charlie."

" Why, are there people after you?"

Jamal nodded. " There could be. It's just a matter of time."

" No pun intended," said Elf.

She closed the case and strapped it over her shoulder. Charlie quickly scribbled his phone number on a crumpled envelope as she opened the door and bopped around to his window. He handed the scrap through the open window. " My number."

She leaned forward and whispered. " I believe... I do have your number, Charlie."

Then she pulled back and sashayed along the circle. He could not take his eyes off her. When she reached the park, she turned and gave him the turnstile wave. But Charlie, so smitten by her, and by what she had said, shut off the car, yanked the keys. He fumbled with the door handle and then raced after her. This time she could not get away.

4

Jamal, in her gray flight suit, Elf strapped to her shoulder, shifted through the park. Charlie's mind was in flux as he rumbled like a polar bear across the grass. She claimed she was from the future. She had a talking box named Elf. She was on a secret mission. She was gorgeous.

" Jamal! Jamal!"

She stopped near the road as he trotted forward.

" I was hoping you'd follow me. But I didn't know."

" She was testing you," said Elf.

Charlie breathed heavily and started to cough. " Testing?"

" I need your help."

" *My* help?" asked Charlie.

" Come on." She took his arm and they crossed onto one of the side streets, jammed with apartments.

" Okay, you're from the future. I have no idea how... If you are from the future, what are you doing in 1927?"

Jamal stopped on the sidewalk under the building shadows. Her blue eyes sparkled in the light's glimmer and she seemed hesitant before she spoke. " I am from Earth's future. After humans moved into space."

Charlie looked skyward and pointed. "Up there?"

"Yes. I was sent back in time, but I am here purely by accident. See we sent our Rrerra Ship-

"What's a Rrerra Ship?"

He grabbed his Luckys and they proceeded down the sidewalk.

"Rrerra is a Sageon term meaning zone of time travel."

"Perhaps you better tell him who the Sageons are," said Elf.

"The Sageons are another race of beings."

"Okay," answered Charlie, still holding the cigarette pack.

"We were under attack. We were the allies, those of us who were left, with the Sageons. The plan was for the first Rrerra Ship to simply go back in time-

"Simply... But who was attacking?"

"The Avegis... Not life in the sense you and I know life. They were constructed by a distant race, but the Avegis destroyed their creators, and aggressively moved into the galaxy. They had nearly conquered us."

He listened intently. With genuine credibility, she said the original Rrerra Ship moved back in time to warn their Sageon and human predecessors of the pending attack, but the ship malfunctioned, probably because of the attack, and skidded across time and space, nearer to Earth than the planet Sageon. The Rrerra Ship carried the archives of combined consciousness, planetary

histories, and direct evidence of the Avegis attack. The Sageons sent Jamal back to find the Rrerra Ship and retrieve the archives.

She brought him into a narrow brick alley. Her flat was located even deeper within building maze, away from the park and nearer the river. They entered through an opening below the front stairway and took a freight elevator upward.

Soon, they were in an open area with a wooden floor and brick walls. Her apartment bordered the outside large window. Charlie shook his head when she had Elf automatically open the door. He walked by a stairway and into the apartment.

It looked like any apartment, wire mesh skylights above, expansive floorboards, and modest furniture. When Elf opened the inner wall a ten-foot high, square blue door spread over the room and a series of colored lights blinked around the frame.

A tilted, oversized chrome dish, mounted atop a square black box with smaller side panels was plopped in the middle of the room and below a full Mercator projection, more like a movie screen than a map, on the back wall. She stood with her arms crossed as the door slid shut.

Charlie pointed at the dish. "What's that?" He pulled a cigarette from the pack, but she cautioned him against smoking near her equipment. Then she set Elf on an adjacent table. "This is my transmitter. When I complete it, I will be able to broadcast, to use a contemporary term, to Capella, home of the Sageons. But I need the archives before I send out anything."

Complex panel consoles bordered the map bottom. She said something to Elf, the projection assumed a green glow, and a brilliant orange sweep of pulsating particles formed a trail across the United States, ending in an area of upstate New York.

Charlie stood in disbelief. " I must be dreaming."

" No, this is all real. I did arrive here last February. I had to implode my Rrerra ship upstate and then I began work here on the transmitter-"

" I?" asked Elf from the table.

" We began work on the transmitter and we constructed the wall monitor."

" Where did you get money?" asked Charlie.

" Elf has printing capacities among his many talents."

" Convenient. Is that the Rrerra ship's trail, upstate?"

" No, that is my trail. I followed the original Rrerra ship trail as projected on the Sageon instruments. But I arrived somehow *before* the first Rrerra ship. This hasn't gone the way we had hoped."

" In essence, you're waiting for the ship."

" Correct, when the ship arrives, I'll get the archives. Hopefully, I will have completed the transmitter by then. But I live in the constant shadow of the Avegis."

" Why? You said you escaped the attack."

" Yes, I escaped, but the Avegis knew what was happening... They vowed revenge. The Avegis were coming after me, Charlie.

They possess great powers. They could crush your skull with one hand, but that isn't their great asset. The beings that constructed them gave them the ability to alter their appearance. They could come back here and appear as humans."

" Oh, boy."

" But they are vulnerable. Because they possess such great energies, they implode if their outer sheath is penetrated. So, they aren't invincible, but their brutality is well known throughout the galaxy of my time."

She slowly raised her brows and smiled, but Charlie was stunned. " I need a drink."

" The United States is currently under a prohibition law."

" Jamal, what you're saying is... all of this, it's beyond me."

" Want to help?"

" Me? What can I do to help you?"

She brought him over to a black and pink flowered sofa and put her hand on his knee as she spoke. " I need a collaborator. Someone who knows this time".

" You seem to be doing very well in 1927."

" Thank you, but you're of this time. I need your help to build the transmitter. And I need a place to transmit. We're talking about strong pulses here. I know you work at-

" At the tower and you want to use your transmitter on top of the tower. Ah, so you were watching me first. What else do you know about me?"

" You're engaged to your boss's daughter."

" That's another story. But I suppose you know all that, too."

" Upset?"

" I should be. But I can't even believe this is happening."

" Charlie, we're talking about preventing Sageon's and humanity's demise at the hands of the Avegis. It never should have happened. The Sageons were so advanced, yet, what's the present expression, they were asleep at the switch?"

Charlie thought for a few seconds. " I guess I could talk to Herbie."

" Herbie?"

" He's head of operations at the tower. And he owes me. I caught him running booze out of the tower basement. He made me swear not to tell anybody. You know, he has a wife and kids."

" Could he get the transmitter to the gallery?"

He looked at the dish. " You know about the gallery, too."

" Yes, an excellent location."

" Yeah, we can get the transmitter up there."

" This would eliminate a great hurdle for me, but I still have problems. I need raw materials, I have to rendezvous with the first Rrerra ship once it pierces the continuum between dimensions."

" What?"

" You don't have to understand this knowledge. Point being, the Avegis will come through, believe me."

She told him that Elf would alert her to any change in the continuum and a trail would appear on the map. Charlie studied the wall projection, turned to the transmitter and tried to sort through the fantastic events. He had just agreed to help some woman from Earth's future, had stiffed Francine and E.B. at the office lunch, and was allowing himself to fall in love with this woman in the gray flight suit.

" You make it very tempting. "

She smiled, crossed her arms, and leaned back on the sofa.

" So, do you want to join forces?"

Charlie stroked his chin, intrigued by the offer. He nodded. " I like excitement."

" There won't not be a lack of excitement. I guarantee you that, Charlie... Consider yourself enlisted."