

BUSTED FLUSH

A WILD CARDS MOSAIC
NOVEL

GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



**BUSTED
FLUSH**

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A WILD CARDS MOSAIC NOVEL



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FLUSH**



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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

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To Carl Keim,
ace architect,
good friend,
hideous mockery of a man

Keep on shufflin'.

Double Helix

TO THE HUNGRY SOUL, EVERY BITTER THING IS SWEET

Melinda M. Snodgrass

I FIND MYSELF AVOIDING the passages about ashes and worms. The pages are thin, almost feathery beneath my fingers as I turn them, looking for another passage that won't fill my throat with bile. I know my father is dying. I don't have to read about it.

Here's one. It reads more like a page out of Lord Dunsany than a collection of musings by long-dead Hebrews. "Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the water: who maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind." I have a good voice and I know how to use it. I use it now, softening and deepening the final words. I know he should sleep. I don't want him to sleep. I want to talk to him. Hear his voice before it's silenced.

That damn lump is back. I keep swallowing, trying to make it smaller. Through the mullioned panes I can see a glint of sun on the sluggish waters of the Cam. It's August, and it feels like this endless summer will never end. The room is breathlessly warm, and the heavy air holds that sick/sweet scent of fatal illness. I can feel my shirt clinging to the skin of my back. Outside there's the sputtering growl of a lawn mower somewhere on the street, and a dog carols his annoyance. I'll probably need to mow the lawn for my parents, or find a teenager. Through the open window I can smell the green. The branches of the apple tree out back sag under the rosy burdens. *Maybe that's what happens to every living thing when they have to breed.*

My father touches the back of my wrist. His skin feels just like the onion-thin pages of the Bible that now rests in my lap. "Thank . . . you." His blue eyes are surprisingly alert in a face reduced to harsh bone and stretched skin. "There's wisdom between those covers," he adds, and transfers his hand to the Bible. "Maybe by reading to me you'll find some of it."

Fantasies and fairy tales, is what I think, but I keep control of my features. "So, you think I'm foolish." I grin at him. "Thanks."

"No." His expression is serious. "But I know that something is wrong. I raised you, Noel, you can't hide things from me."

He's smiling, but I still have that visceral gut clench that affects every child when their parents display that kind of preternatural omniscience. It passes quickly. After all,

I'm twenty-eight, and I amuse myself for a moment wondering what he thinks I've done. No pregnant fans. I'm a hermaphrodite, so I'm sterile. I'm not in debt. Both my public job and my secret job pay me quite well. What could he imagine I had done? For a moment I toy with the idea of telling him.

You know I'm a member of the Silver Helix, Dad, a division of MI-7. What you don't know is that I'm their designated assassin. I don't remember how many people I've killed. They say you never forget your first. His face is as blank as all the others.

But of course I don't. Standing, I set aside the Bible and stretch. "Tea? There's lemon tarts, and some boiled tongue for sandwiches. Will you eat something?"

"I'll try."

Our kitchen is small and cluttered, and several days' worth of dishes form towers in the sink. A fat fly moves lazily between the trash can and the dirty dishes. The buzzing is almost hypnotic. *No, no, no.* A sharp head shake drives back the sleepiness. Looks like I'm going to have to hire a maid as well as a teenager.

The tongue, sullenly red and pimped with taste buds, gleams with congealed fat under the refrigerator light. American kitchens are almost obscene with their gigantic refrigerators crammed with food. We English are starting to go the same way. Who has time to shop for each day's meal that day?

I wonder who had cooked the tongue—certainly not my mother. She never cooked. My father took care of the house and the kid, and prepared every meal, and he fit every cliché about English cooking. A spurt of anger flares in the center of my chest, but I back down from it. It isn't Mum's fault he's dying. She was the bread winner so I suppose she had the right to dodge the drudgery. But I suspect if she hadn't worked she still wouldn't have cooked and cleaned.

Her devotion to radical feminism has defined her life. Hell, she was so militant that she made damn sure I was raised as a boy. Now figure that one out. They may look funny, but I've got both sets of genitalia. I could have been raised as a girl, and even kept the same name, just changed the pronunciation.

My pager vibrates. I stand there juggling the tongue while I search through my pockets for the correct pager. I'm wearing a med-alert pager since I am so often away from England, and I have the pager my manager uses to arrange my performances, I have one from the Committee that summons Lilith, and another from Prince Siraj, the man that commands Bahir, and I have the one given to me by the Silver Helix. It's Siraj calling.

Fuck you, says that febrile part of my mind. But I pull out my mobile and call him. Naturally he wants to see me. Naturally it has to be now. Naturally I'll go.



The only reason it was the premier of the United Arab Emirates who received a visit from Bahir and not the president was due to an infelicitous exchange Al Maktoum had had with Prince Siraj in a Paris restaurant. The premier had mentioned how he liked to relax in a hot bath and watch the sun set through the floor-to-ceiling windows. Naked men are particularly vulnerable, and it's easy to locate bathrooms on building plans.

Add to that west-facing windows, and it was a simple matter for me to use Google Earth and locate my target. The time of day was a little less felicitous. I can't use my powers at twilight or dawn, and Bahir cannot be summoned after dark. But Siraj's recollection of the conversation suggested Al Maktoum liked to read in the tub prior to sunset. And I was delivering a threat, and they rarely take long.

The rippling water in the deep glass-tiled tub makes it hard to see clearly, but it appears the premier's balls have retreated up into his belly. He stares up at me, and terror clouds his dark eyes. I risk a glance at the brace of mirrors on one wall of the marble-lined bathroom. I am a nicely terrifying figure, dressed in a black dishdasha with a pistol holstered on my hip. I had dispensed with the headdress. The trailing edges can interfere with peripheral vision, and in the desert heat my scalp sweats and itches. So my mane of red-gold hair shines under the lights. I use the tip of the scimitar to scratch at my beard. The premier never takes his eyes off that blade. I really wish that genius in operations at Whitehall who conceived of using my male avatar as a Middle Eastern ace hadn't insisted on the sword as part of Bahir's persona. It's so absurdly *Arabian Nights*, but I'm stuck with it now. Bahir's blade has decapitated a lot of people—including the last Caliph.

"Prince Siraj sends greetings to his brother, and is saddened that his brother has chosen not to honor the price of oil set by the Caliph."

"It's just a few dollars." His voice holds a quaver and a whine. As I watch, goose bumps bloom across his shoulders and upper arms.

"One hundred dollars."

"The three hundred that the prince has set is too high. The European and American economies are staggering. How does it help us if we bankrupt them? If no one can buy our oil, where is the gain?"

"You should have made these arguments to the prince. Not sought to slip behind him like a thief. His highness is not a fool. He will ease prices, but not until the westerners have paid a mighty price."

"We were not part of that war in Egypt. Why should we exact vengeance? None of our soldiers were lost." He's becoming angry, beginning to wonder if he really stands in danger of his life. I glance toward the window. The sun is perilously close to the horizon.

"You say these words without shame, which shows you are a pawn of the West."

When a blade swings quickly it really does whistle, faintly, not like in the movies, but you have that split second of sound to let you know something awful is coming. The premier flinches, and flails. Water droplets form prisms as they cascade past the window and the rays of sunlight break apart. Blood fountains and glows in the dying light. I have taken off his right hand at the wrist. He is screaming, the sound echoing and reverberating off the hard surfaces. Outside the door there is the sound of pounding feet.

The threat has been delivered. It's past time I was going.



John Bruckner, the Highwayman, is emerging from Flint's office as I arrive to report about my little mission for Siraj. Out of courtesy to our chief Bruckner had removed his stained Andy Capp hat while in the office, but he's in the process of restoring it to its customary place and customary task—covering his nearly bald pate. I retreat to the wall because the Highwayman has the build of a beer keg and about as much dexterity.

An exuberant handshake later, he's offering me one of his foul black cigars while stuffing one into his own mouth. I wave him off and pull out a cigarette. The heat from his dented Zippo fans my face as I lean into the lighter. He transfers the fire to the tip of his cigar and sucks lustily on it until the tip of the stogie glows red. The rituals having been observed, we lean against opposite walls and study each other.

"Now, how is it that I'm a bloody lorry driver and you're a bloody magician?"

"I'm prettier than you are."

"Right you are, and you dress better," he says, hitching the waistband of his baggy corduroy pants up over his paunch.

"What have you been up to?"

A jerk of the thumb at Flint's door and he says, "Old Granite Face has me running arms from Lagos to the troops out in the bush." When the Highwayman gets his rig up to speed he can move from London to Melbourne or Shanghai without passing through any of the territory in between. "Effing roads are no better than goat tracks," he continues. "They've beat the bloody hell out of my suspension. Bloody natives."

It isn't just white man's burden rearing its head. Bruckner has seen strange and disturbing things while traveling his "short cuts," and he lives in fear of getting stranded in this strange, surreal no-man's-land.

"Show a little gratitude. Nigeria is the only thing that's keeping petrol in your truck."

"Yeah, well, why can't the niggers build a bloody first world road?"

I keep control of my features. Bruckner's somewhere in his sixties. Times have changed, but not the Highwayman. He's racist and sexist, and despises foreigners with a superiority unique only to a white Englishman. Straightening up with a grunt and another tug at his pants, he says, "I've got to push off. Join me and the lads for a pint?"

"Can't." I incline my head toward Flint's office.

"Well, next time."

He leaves, trailing smoke like the fumes from one of his lorries. I tap on the door. I can't actually hear Flint's invitation to enter, but I go on in. He's in his great stone chair, necessary because his sharp stone body would cut the upholstery of any normal chair to shreds.

I take my customary chair, stub out the butt, and take out another cigarette. The streetlights throw shadows across the bookcases. Only a small lamp on the desk is lit so Flint's eyes glow red in the gray stone face.

"God damn it! Must you be this effective on behalf of our enemies?"

Oh, damn, I had hoped to report about my actions in Dubai before Flint heard of it. No such luck. It seems I will not be basking in the sunshine of my chief's approval today.

"I take it the UAE has raised their prices."

"You know bloody well they have. You cut off the man's hand! He's a friend of the prime's."

“I must occasionally succeed, sir, or Siraj is going to wonder if his ace bodyguard/assassin is a complete cock-up.”

“*Can't you exert any influence over Siraj?*”

“Bahir is viewed as a blunt instrument. I think Siraj would be just the tiniest bit suspicious if the Caliph's assassin suddenly started displaying political acumen.”

Flint grunts, and gives a grudging nod. Gestures from my boss are disconcerting. It's like watching a statue come to life. He surprises me when he snaps his fingers together and produces a flame. I realize it's for the forgotten cigarette hanging between my fingers.

My, my, this is rare condescension. I guess I'm forgiven for my unauthorized bloodletting. Leaning forward, I light my cigarette. The harsh Turkish tobacco is like claws raking across the inside of my lungs, but the hit to the nicotine pleasure centers outweighs the discomfort and the theoretical lung cancer.

“*Where are you off to now?*”

“I've got a date.” I preen and Flint makes a grinding sound like frozen gears trying to engage. “Believe me, you don't hate it as much as I. Babysitting is not my style.”



I pause in the bathroom before testing my bladder control against the cold darkness of the Between. As the urine splashes against the porcelain my better nature wars with my real nature. What I really want is to call Lohengrin and cancel our date so I can go home to Dad and sleep in my old bedroom. If I go to New York I'll be eating an overly rich and heavy meal very late, and then indulging in vigorous and inept sex between sweaty sheets with the big German ace. What he lacks in finesse Lohengrin more than makes up for in stamina. I dread tomorrow. Even when I'm back in my normal body I will have an uncomfortable ache in my nether parts.

For an instant I find myself looking with loathing at my short and strangely shaped penis. Would my life have been better, easier, if Mum had let the surgeons cut it away, and make me . . .

My thoughts slam up against the reality. No amount of surgery would have made me a “real girl.” I tuck myself away and zip up, and then move to the sink to wash my hands. I'm still holding the rough paper towel when I allow the transformation to twist my flesh. Breasts soon press against the front of my shirt, and my pants fit uncomfortably over female hips. Long fingernails pierce the paper towel.

The image in the mirror isn't all I could hope. The heart-shaped face looks drawn and there's the hint of a shadow beneath the silver eyes. It's rather a shock to realize that fatigue of the real body translates to the avatars. Checking my watch I calculate the time difference between London and New York. If I stop at my digs in Manhattan and repair my face and change out of pants and boots I'll be late meeting Lohengrin for dinner. But he's got a rather traditional view of women. He'll think that's typical.

I picture the flat in the Village. As my body twists into that cold, strange place I decide on the little black dress. Keep the focus on the legs. . . .



Coulda

Caroline Spector

IT'S DARK. SUFFOCATING. I can hear the sounds of the helicopters overhead. I've got to do something. But I can hear screams now. Oh, God, the way they scream as the flesh is seared off their bodies. I need to bubble. I need to get away from the smell of burnt skin and muscle. Screaming. I need to make the screams go away.

I try to blast my way through the darkness. For a moment, I can't bubble. It's as if there's a wall between me and my power—then a stream of bubbles flows from my hands. Dust and rubble fill my mouth and rain off my body.

There's light. The light is so clean and pure. I bubble more until I chase the darkness away and blow the weight of the debris from me.

"Stop that!"

I look around. I'm not in Egypt. There are no helicopters. No falling bodies. No fiery flesh. Just the clean, antiseptic testing room at BICC. Biological Isolation and Containment Center—who thinks these names up, anyway?

God, I hate government facilities. Why on earth would anyone build anything in an abandoned salt mine? And in the middle of Nowhere, New Mexico, to boot . . .

"The purpose of the test is to see how much force you can absorb, Miss Pond." The disembodied voice belonged to Dr. Pendergast. His voice was normally silky smooth, so it was hard to tell when he was really pissed. But there was a hint of anger and I knew I'd been bad.

But, really, how many more times could they pound the living crap out of me? I was beginning to feel like Wile E. Coyote. Drop me down into that canyon one more time, boss. Or shoot me with a death ray. Your choice.

I wasn't even certain what they were testing me for anymore. At first, it was the usual: some joker with a face that could stop a clock and biceps the size of watermelons. He gave me a left hook that I kinda felt. I tried not to laugh at the look of disappointment on his unfortunate face.

Then they started with the cannonballs, bullets, walls on springs. Honestly, who the hell has walls on springs, just, you know, lying around? I mean, did *none* of these guys watch *American Hero*? You'd've thought they'd never heard of the Amazing Bubbles.

But the superweird thing was that they didn't want me to bubble. In fact, Dr.

Pendergast made it very clear that he didn't want *any* bubbling. I tried to explain to him that when I got hit with as much raw energy as they were throwing at me, I *had* to bubble. It hurt not to.

But Dr. Pendergast didn't care about that. He was only interested in how much power I could absorb. They'd already found out my max size would just about fill an eight-by-eight room. But I was no Bloat. They told me that when I stopped growing in size I started getting denser. Heavier, but no larger. I kinda got the feeling this was very interesting to them.

The problem was, after they got me as fat as I could get, and they kept throwing more and more force at me, I was finding it more difficult to bubble it off after the tests. The denser I got, the more powerful I became, but the harder it was to access my power. Hell, I could barely lift one of my pudgy fingers.

And it didn't help that every time I got hit, it brought back memories. Memories that I didn't want to face. So I did what I usually do—I thought about something else. Thought about anything that would distract me from what was rattling around my head like a bad Rob Zombie movie.

Thinking about Ink naked usually did the trick.

"Okay, Miss Pond, we'll go again."

"Yeah? I don't think so," I replied. I flung my hands out and released an enormous stream of bubbles, and I could feel my clothes getting looser. I grabbed a handful of waistband with my left hand to keep my pants from falling off.

The bubbles bounced around the room, but I kept bubbling with my right hand. As I filled the room, the bubbles just sort of vibrated against one another. I'd made them soft and rubbery so they wouldn't hurt anyone. But it would take a while for them to dissipate. The room would be useless for any more games of Kick the Bubbles. At least for a while.

"Miss Pond, you agreed to be tested."

"I know, and now I'm done with testing. I don't recall this being anything other than voluntary on my part."

"You're acting like a child. We have only just begun to discover the true range of your power."

I glared at the one-way mirror. I couldn't see Dr. Pendergast, but I could imagine the patronizing look on his face. That and how he would stroke his Vandyke when he was trying to "reason" with you.

"Yeah, well . . ." Crap, I always sucked at pithy-line moments. "You're not the boss of me." I marched out with my pants hitched up, trying not to smack myself on the forehead.



There was a knock on my door. They were lodging me in one of the officers' quarters. I suspected the hoi polloi got far less kind treatment.

I pulled the door open. One of the homeliest women I'd ever seen was standing there. Her hair was cropped short like she'd cut it with safety scissors. And her cheeks

and forehead were acne-scarred, with an angry red breakout in full bloom. “Miss Pond?”

“That’s me,” I said.

“I’m Niobe.” She paused.

“Niobe!” I pulled her to me in a bear hug. We’d been corresponding via e-mail since *American Hero*. She had really touched me, as many of her e-mails had been heartbreaking. Her parents had been less than supportive when her card turned, which was like saying Joker Plague had some unattractive members. But there had been something else in her e-mails, something unspoken.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Not everyone gets an all-expense-paid vacation at the lovely BICC.”

“Well, my parents weren’t too pleased that their only daughter wasn’t going to have the perfect coming-out party. It’s hard being a debutante with this.” Her thick tail swished on the floor. I hadn’t noticed it before. It was an ugly gray, thick and mottled, and there were stiff bristles sticking out of it.

I turned and started putting the rest of my things into my suitcase. She looked so forlorn it made me uncomfortable.

“They’re studying me,” she said, “just like they were studying you.”

“God, I hope not,” I replied, looking over my shoulder. “They’ve been pounding the crap outta me.”

She gave me a wan smile. “No,” she said. “I don’t have a power like yours. You know, you’re prettier in person.”

I laughed. “Whoa, Non Sequitur Girl, er, Woman.”

“I mean, I guess you’re different than you looked on TV.”

“You mean I’m not as fat now.” I shoved the last of my clothes into my bag. “Yeah, I just bubbled the hell outta the test room. I’m leaving, and I don’t want to be as recognizable when I head back to New York.”

She shoved her hands into her pockets and looked unhappy. “I guess this means you’re not going to spend any time with the other patients.”

“I didn’t know anyone wanted to see me,” I said. “They’ve pretty much kept me in the dark about everything except for the whole, ‘Let’s see what we can throw at Bubbles this time.’ ”

Niobe looked even more morose at this. “Yeah,” she said. “They treat us like rats in a cage.”

“Look,” I said. “I’ve got plenty of time before my flight—if they even have enough fuel to get off the runway today. Why don’t I come and meet whomever you want me to meet?”

“You’d do that?” My God, her eyes were so sad.

“Sure, let me grab my things.”



“Is it cool being a part of the Committee?” Niobe asked as we sped along the silent corridor in a BICC golf cart.

“I guess,” I said. “I mean, it’s great being a part of something that’s supposed to be doing good, but sometimes . . . sometimes it’s hard.”

There was a faint whiff of burning flesh. I glanced around, but there was nothing but smooth, unblemished wall flashing by.

“But you get to do a lot of other cool things, too.”

“True. I got to go to the Academy Awards and the VMAs, and they had a parade for us at Disneyland after that mess in Egypt. So that was okay. But doing press junkets, not so great.”

The cart slowed as Niobe lifted her foot from the pedal and looked at me. “But isn’t it fun having them ask you questions and then they actually pay attention to you?”

“Yeah . . . not so much,” I replied. “When we got back from Egypt they sent us out on a goodwill tour. It was pretty hellish. Not because of the people who wanted to meet us—they were almost always cool.” *Except for the woman who threw pig’s blood on me and called me a murderer*, I thought. “But that press stuff is less than thrilling. Trust me, no fun at all.”

We sped up. “Oh,” Niobe said. “I just thought that after *American Hero* and being on the Committee that your life would be, you know, perfect.”

“I don’t think life’s ever perfect.”

“It was pretty perfect when Tiffani got knocked off *AH*.” She gave me a sly smile.

I smiled back. “Yeah, that was kinda perfect.”

“Have you seen any of the promos for the new season of *AH*?” Niobe asked. She sounded excited.

“Yeah,” I said. “They wanted me to do some teasers, but I was out of the country when they were shooting.”

“What do you think of the new aces?”

“I think they have no idea what they’re getting themselves into.”



Being an ace, sometimes you forget that other people who get the virus aren’t so fortunate. Everyone knows that the virus kills, but people forget that it also maims.

Niobe led me through a pair of swinging doors into the children’s ward. There were bright mobiles, stuffed animals, and posters on the walls. Some of the girls had wrapped their IV stands in beads and Mylar stickers. At least I think they were girls. This was the place where they put the sickest kids—the ones the wild card virus had not transformed, but had crippled.

“We have a special guest today,” Niobe said. “She was a contestant on *American Hero* and she’s now a member of the Committee: the Amazing Bubbles!”

There wasn’t thunderous applause, but I hadn’t expected any. I’d done my share of hospital appearances in the last year. From Walter Reed to Beth Israel they were mostly the same—sick people who just wanted anything normal in their lives again. Even seeing an ace in person seemed normal. After all, I’d been on the TV in their living rooms.

Niobe led me to bed after bed. In one, a boy lay wrapped in a plaid robe. He was

indigo. He looked like Violet Beauregarde after that unfortunate gum incident. We passed another bed where a child floated above the covers like a balloon. Balloon Girl gave a little wave as we went by. It was obvious that Niobe liked all these children and they liked her. But at one bed, she stopped and began laughing before she could introduce me.

Sitting in the middle of the bed was a tiny boy. He was perfectly proportioned with a shock of black hair. As I watched, his features began to change. It was like watching a live-action version of computer morphing.

His hair grew longer until it came to his waist. His features changed, became more feminine. Then I realized: he looked like Cher.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s just wrong.”

Niobe giggled. “Watch this.”

The boy’s body began to bulge, arms and legs expanding as if there were balloons in them.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said. “The Michelin Man?”

Niobe and the boy started laughing together and I realized that this was one of Niobe’s children. I knew she was psychically linked to them, but that was about all I knew about her power. She’d been pretty closemouthed about it. When she stopped giggling and could speak again, she said, “This is Xerxes.”

I reached out so we could shake, and he slipped his tiny hand into mine. “It’s very nice to meet you,” he said. He sounded like Marvin the Martian.

“You should take that act on the road,” I said.

Niobe stopped laughing. I was baffled. I mean, I’m not the greatest joke teller in the world, but I didn’t think my comment had sucked all *that* bad: besides, as deuce powers went, Xerxes’s wasn’t a bad one.

“Uhm, I guess we should move along,” I said. “It was nice to meet you, too, Xerxes.”

Niobe led me to another bed. I wasn’t certain of this patient’s gender, so I decided to follow Niobe’s lead.

“This is Jenny,” she said. “Jenny’s card turned about a month ago. She isn’t sick, but she keeps expelling her internal organs when she gets too excited.”

“Hey, Jenny,” I said. “You’re not going to spew on me, are you?”

Niobe gave a little gasp, but Jenny laughed. Or kinda gurgled. “Usually people are too freaked out to say anything to me,” she said. “You know, I was rooting for Drummer Boy on *American Hero*.”

“I can see why,” I said. “He’s a musician and chicks dig musicians.” That was my polite response when people said anything about Drummer Boy. I still thought he was a massive douche even after Egypt.

“Would you sign my book?” One of her flippers shoved an autograph book across the bed.

I flipped through it. She had an astonishing number of famous people. She must have started it before her card turned. I found a blank page toward the back and scrawled my name and a dedication across it.

“There you go. I can give Drummer Boy a call and see if he can send you a signed picture. I mean, if you’d like that.”

“That would be so great!” Jenny said. “Oh, dear, I think you better stand back.”

Niobe and I moved back and, sure enough, Jenny hurled her innards. It was not only disgusting to look at, but the smell was awful.

“Okay, well, I think Bubbles has a flight to catch,” Niobe said.



The flight to New York had been about what I expected: long, boring, and way too crowded. (The less said about the flight from Carlsbad to El Paso the better. Terror in the skies.)

I was ready to get back home to Stuyvesant Town. It wasn't in the hippest part of the city, but it felt like a real home to me. It was at Fourteenth Street and Avenue A. Lower East Side, but not quite trendy—yet.

The neighborhood was only just beginning to be gentrified. It still had lots of cheap clothing shops, good ethnic food (also cheap), and some great bookstores within walking distance. And the Stuyvesant Town complex remained what it had been designed for—middle-class housing.

Of course, I was living there illegally, subletting from a couple who had moved to Columbus after their baby was born. They'd wanted to be closer to the relatives, but hadn't wanted to give up the idea of being New Yorkers. So we'd agreed that when they wanted to come back, I would vacate. That had been two years ago, so I felt pretty secure where I was—for now.

But I couldn't get home from the airport without transportation, and today there were only a handful of cabs and a wicked-long line to get one.

I eventually found myself in the back of a makeshift cart being pulled by a joker. He was at least eleven feet tall, almost all of his height in his legs. It was weird as hell being dragged through NYC by daddy longlegs. I wondered where he got his pants tailored. At the Big and Tall Men's Shop?

Traffic was almost nonexistent. But we still had to navigate around cars that had been abandoned by their owners. Bikes shot around us, the riders whooping at us as they went by. The buses were running, as there had been an executive order to keep them operating.

Things had been bad when I'd left, but they seemed worse now. There were boarded-up shops on almost every street. And the places that were open, mostly bodegas, had signs out with shocking prices on them.

The joker pulled over to the curb in front of my building and I paid in cash. Between the Committee stipend and the endorsement work I'd had over the last year, I was doing okay. Who knew letting a Volvo hit you could be so lucrative? And with commercials, I didn't have to wonder if the rest of the people involved were going to be alive the next day.

I walked up to the fourth floor. *Good for the muscles*, I thought.

When I absorbed energy, I didn't just get fat. My muscles got bigger, too. That much I'd figured out by myself. So I'd started training to give myself as much muscle as I could pack onto my frame. I was certainly more buff now, but my body type didn't bulk up. I wanted to be more agile when I was fat. The muscles helped with that, too.