

# Luminous Nights, 4

*by* Jerry Ratch

When my brother returned from his appointment with this eerie investor fellow in the silent Rolls Royce Silver Arrow, he appeared in my room in dark blue sweats with a broad white stripe, and he herded me into the living room where everybody including Freddie was sitting around on plush couches and cushions tossed around on plush carpeting. Francine greeted me while uncoiling from the couch where she'd been curled up with another man, a fellow with a mustache that crawled over his lip like a caterpillar. The greasy black hair on this guy dropped on either side of a straight part, which ran through his thinning hair like a bright white scar. Francine bent forward, pooching out her fluorescent pink lips for a kiss, while holding a drink up in the air in one hand.

"There's little brother Robins. . .o. . .o. . .on!" she squealed. Francine had an abrasive alto voice, together with an annoying habit of hanging onto the last syllable of a word every now and then for emphasis. "We've all been waiting for you. . .u. . .u." She expected me to kiss her on the lips. I swerved to one side instead and pecked at her cheek.

"Oh, that's not the way we do things around here, is it, Harris?"

She put down her drink.

"Come here!" she squealed, holding both arms out wide.

"Come on, give us a big wet kiss. . .s. . .s."

Francine had on a slinky pink robe, which was tied loosely in front with the neckline plunging down to her navel where both low-swung breasts threatened to sway out in public. She hooked my arm and drew me toward her, planting a big wet kiss on my lips. I felt her tongue working its way into my mouth before I could manage to break away.

"Ther. . .r. . .re! That's the way we do things around here. We share everything with everybody. We're just one big happy

family, aren't we, Harris. Meet my partner, Donald," she said.  
"Donald, this is Harris's little brother, Robbie. He's been living up in Berkeley, but he's down here with us now, aren't you, honey? Sur. .  
.r. .re."

The man with the parted greasy hair stood up, offering his hand. When I reached over with my left, he looked surprised, and kept looking down at my right side. This guy too had a pretty hefty beer belly on him. He was wearing gray sweat pants and a sweat shirt. There were perpetual beads of perspiration dotting his forehead, where his hairline had started on a broad retreat.

"You've already met Freddie," Francine said. "We call him Everready Freddie, don't we, Freddie?" She loved to make things rhyme. She thought it made her sound educated.

Freddie waved at me, smiling. "Yo!" he said. "That's right. Sure do."

My brother sank into a pile of cushions on the floor in front of an enormous television screen. He was sitting next to a woman who seemed somewhat older. It wasn't exactly a television screen they were watching, but a projection screen they had pulled down out of the ceiling. A tri-color projector was casting a picture from the other side of the living room.

"Robbie," said my brother, "this is Quebec. Quebec, meet my little bro. Take a look at him, will you? Can you believe it? My very own brother." They all broke into laughter. "Sit down, bro," the Great Harris said. "You can relax. You're with friends now. Everything's going to be okay."

He patted the pillow and indicated for me to come sit with him. This was as I said my own, one and only brother, and it wasn't the first time that he had virtually saved my life either. He tried his best to make me feel at home, and I felt distinctly like I had reached a safe haven, in some fashion.

He put his arm around me warmly, drawing me close.

"You're in good hands now, Robbie," he said. "Relax. Everything's going to be all right." He was drinking that cheap white wine again. You could smell it on his breath. In truth, he looked

completely exhausted. It must have been about eleven p.m. already, not that I was ready for bed or anything yet. But Harris looked like he could really use some rest.

"My very own brother," he said, hugging me firmly. "Jesus! I can barely believe it."

The next thing I knew, Donald, who was supposed to be the multi-media expert, told Freddie to switch off the lights. Suddenly I felt my brother's head slumping against my shoulder. He went out as though with the lights. I just let his head lay where it was, so he could get a little rest.

"So, we're all here now," the multi-media man said, "ready to watch the promo tape. All set? And action!"

Out of speakers from all corners of the room, came one of those ridiculous deep-toned, booming Hollywoodian voices that are dubbed over scenes of Biblical proportions in movies about Moses, the voice-over droning on in this Biblical way while the camera panned by huge tilt-up concrete slabs at a construction site. At one point my brother, glowingly announced as the "**President of Robinson Development Company**," appeared in the middle of a group of suited business men wearing hard hats, digging up the first shovels of dirt on a new project. My brother had on a three-piece suit. His hair was swept over to one side. He'd obviously been told to smile the entire time, no matter what. I hadn't noticed until then that his own hairline had begun to recede. I was surprised at how much he was starting to look like our father.

Harris cut a fat yellow ribbon that had a fat bow tied into its middle, then dug up a clump of dirt and looked around for someone to give the shovel to. Freddie came on screen, dressed like a pimp in a wide abrasive necktie, and a dark sport's blazer two or three sizes too small. He took the shovel from my brother and moved sideways off-screen.

Next thing we saw, was a bird's eye view of a plot of vacant land taken from an airplane, with the wing occasionally popping into view. Then things swooped up and burst into colors, all swirling into the logo: **Robinson Development Company — a**

**company on the move: "Under All is the Land."** This was the motto from the realtors creed.

The lights went back up when the video was over, and my brother lifted his head from my shoulder, looking around, blinking. After everybody finished acknowledging to everyone else in the room what a great job the multi-media man had done, all of a sudden they disappeared, creeping off in various directions to their rooms in the cavernous house, leaving only me and my brother.

"What say we take a hot tub out on the deck, little brother?"

He slid aside a glass door to the deck, and disrobed. His belly looked like he was about eight months pregnant. I could hear the jets when he switched on the Jacuzzi. Naked, he climbed into the hot tub. "Hey, frtt!" he whistled through his front teeth. "You coming or what?"

I slipped out of my clothes, and crept into the bubbling tub with my brother. For some reason this made me feel weird, I don't know why. I guess I couldn't remember being naked around him, is all, and then there was the problem about my right arm, which made me feel self-conscious whenever I removed my shirt around anybody, if it wasn't in a completely darkened room.

"Ah," he said, sitting back, "it's great, isn't it? This is the life. Well, you're in L.A. now, little brother. Things are different down here, you'll see. Give you a chance to get away from that crazy wife of yours up in Bezerkeley. She's history."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Just take a look at this. It's not like Berkeley here, is it?"

"That's an understatement," I said.

"Tomorrow I'll take you down to our office building, which we just acquired in downtown Pasadena, and introduce you around to everyone. We're all going out to dinner tomorrow night in honor of your arrival. We've got you set up with our secretary. She'll show you around. She's young and really neat. Her name's Lynnette."

My brother looked over at me in the hot tub, waiting for me to say something, though I felt I had to be careful even with my

own brother. I didn't want to say anything that might be taken the wrong way. He seemed so different now to me — from the way I was used to thinking of him, I mean. Something fundamental seemed to have changed with him, as though a large part of his innocence had slipped away.

"The girls down here are totally different, Robbie, compared to what you've been used to up in Berkeley. Lynnette's a party girl. She comes along with us to all the parties. Hey, Robbie, you want a joint?"

I just shook my head. I should have known — a joint yet! I didn't know what exactly to say.

"Harris," I ventured, "I'm still living with my wife, you know."

My brother frowned.

"On the weekends, anyway."

"What do you mean, on the weekends? You're down here with me now, for good."

"I was planning on flying back up there to be with her on the weekends. That's what I told her when you offered me this job."

"Robbie . . ." he breathed out, "you never really belonged up there in the first place. You're not totally happy up there, are you? Are you trying to tell me that?"

"Well . . . totally?"

"All right, then. Listen, what do you think I've got you down here for, if not to relax and party a little too? We work hard, and we play hard. That's how we do things here. If this isn't for you, just say so now."

I was scared. I wasn't ready to lose yet another work situation so soon, and I could see that my brother had already made up his mind for me.

"After a couple of days," Harris continued, "you'll be starting to take real estate courses in this class we've got you enrolled in."

"Real estate classes?" It had been a long time since I'd taken classes of any kind.

"Everybody in Robinson Development has to get their real estate license," he stated. "That's the rule, and it's no different with you. I've got my broker's license, so you'll be working under me as a trainee until you get your own sales license. But you can't do any real activity until you get that piece of paper under your belt. I want you to get that out of the way as soon as possible, hear?"

"Jesus," I said. "Classes? Does everybody have their license?"

"They've taken the classes. Not everybody passes the exam the first time."

"How about Francine? What does she do in the company?"

Francine and I had a run in years ago, when she appeared at my wedding strumming a ukulele and singing this annoying version of the Hawaiian Wedding Song. This, after shutting off the Rolling Stones' *Sweet Virginia*, which I had blaring away on my stereo.

"She's the bookkeeper," said Harris. "She'll be cutting your pay check."

Oh, boy! I thought. I knew I had to be real careful what I said about her.

"Does Francine have her license too?"

"She's taken the test," he said. "She'll get the knack of it sooner or later."

"Who's her friend there, that Donald character? What's with him?"

"He's our multi-media specialist. He's taking a night class in film editing at UCLA Extension. They met at a swinger party we were at. In fact, that's the same party where I met Becky. Isn't she something? Did you see the knockers on her? We were at this wild-ass swinger party, all lying in one big squirming naked pile of bodies on the floor when she walked past. Her knockers were throwing shadows, they were so big. I just hooked on to her ankle, and said: Who are you? The rest, as they say, is history. She moved right in with me. She's taking the same classes you'll be taking."

"What did she do before?"

"Retired from the phone company on a pension."

"One more question, Harris?"

"Go ahead, little brother, shoot your wad."

"I've got to tell you — that guy in the Rolls Royce? For some reason that gave me a real scare."

"What do you mean, Rob, a scare?"

"I mean a real bad scare. I got this vivid impression all of a sudden, when you swept away from the curb in that Rolls — that you were never coming back. Who was that man anyway?"

"That man represents a lot of money, that's who he is. But it's very expensive money. Maybe a little too expensive."

"You're not going into business with him, are you?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On how desperate things get. We'll have to see."

All of a sudden Harris' eyes seemed to lose focus, and his gaze drifted out toward the horizon, while the glare of the carbon-arc lamps floated up from the valley below where they were filming a winter scene. Harris made that weird noise again back in his throat, like a chicken having a seizure.

"So, little brother, wait till I take you on out to Riverside and see the development we've got going out there. We've got the first 25 houses of a 50-house development going. Bulldozers moving ground all over the place, it's really something. We're going out there on Wednesday to meet with some bankers and show them around. We've been having a little trouble recently with these guys. Can't trust a damned banker these days. Sonsabitches are pulling out of deals left and right, because the interest rates are going up so fast. That's one of the reasons I've got you down here — to help me, little brother. I could use some help right now."

"But I don't know anything about the business, Harris. Not yet."

"You're no dummy," he said. "We'll have you up to speed in no time. I want you down at the office with me in Pasadena, first thing tomorrow morning. Just follow me around everywhere. I want

you to soak up everything you can." He looked over at me in the hot tub. The bubbles covered up our nakedness.

"I'm sure glad you're here, little brother. You're in the big time now. There's no going back anymore." He raised his glass in a salute to me, and I raised my bottle of beer.

"Look around," my brother said. "This is something, isn't it? Look at the view. We're in paradise up here. Riding high on top of the world."

He took a long pull at his drink, and there came one of those odd silences that I never knew how to fill with small talk, even with my own brother. Maybe because our worlds had been so vastly different until then.

"Did you see those guys in the three-piece suits in the video?" he asked.

"Yeah?"

"Wearing hard hats out on the site? All smiles and everything, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Looked real friendly and official, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did."

"They were just out there for the free lunch, the bastards. I'm suing them. They backed right out of a huge deal we had going. They'd already signed a letter of intent and everything, the bastards. Too bad."

His gaze floated out into the Hollywood night.

After a time, I said, "What's with Freddie?"

"God, I'm glad you're here, Robbie. God! It's great we're together again, you know? It just feels so good to have you down here. It's been getting strange, sometimes. I feel like I've got to watch my backside all the time around here, you know? Believe it or not, I really need you here, Robbie."

He tried to focus on me, but I don't think he could. I thought maybe it was because he didn't have his glasses on.



"Let's see . . . Oh, yeah . . . Freddie," he said. "Freddie just started in the business, more or less like you. You two will be taking real estate classes together."

With that said, it seemed like he started nodding off. He shook his head after a minute or two, and struggled to get out of the hot tub.

"Ah, shit, it's these pills I'm taking," he said. "Picked up a touch of hepatitis-A on our trip down to Mexico. Got to get to bed. Got to be up at the crack of dawn. Coming?"

"Hepa . . . hepatitis? You're kidding!"

"It's not the bad kind," he said, "but it makes me tired once in awhile. Every now and then I go lie down and take a cat nap, that's all. Got to cut back on this booze a little more. I'll be all right. Just got to work its way through the system."

"How the hell did you pick up hepatitis?" I didn't know very much about the subject.

"In Mexico, I told you!" he snapped. He could develop a real temper if you weren't careful, just like my dad. He didn't like being questioned. "Look, forget I said anything about it. All right? I'm okay. Really, Robbie, everything's going to be okay, now that you're here to help out. I know I can trust you."

I didn't say anything right then.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Okay."

"Good," he said, "Now, let's get to bed already. We got a day and a half ahead of us tomorrow, and I want you around to see the whole operation. I'm depending on you, little brother. Damn, I can't believe it! The luck! Damn, I'm glad you're here!"

