



THE GAME

They were playing five-card draw and Ward had dealt himself trash. Low cards in all four suits. He considered throwing in the hand, but he was betting last so he would wait and see. The pot so far was just the four white chips of the antes. They'd told him that the reds were worth five times the white and the blues worth ten.

The poker table was covered in green felt, and a naked lightbulb hung dead center about four feet up. The air was smoky from the cigar that Bill Clinton had just stubbed out. He sat to Ward's left, Henry Kissinger was across the table, and Anthony Fauci was to the right. Without his seat booster and TV makeup Fauci looked small and gray. He could have been a gnome. Clinton was jowly and splotched, and Kissinger looked like a corpse. He must have been a hundred years old. The others weren't far behind.

"Well. . ." Clinton said, nodding his head up and down as he studied his cards through his trifocals. All three of Ward's opponents wore glasses. Kissinger's were the thickest, and he wore a pair of hearing aids.

"Well. . ." Clinton said again.

"Will you bet already?" Kissinger carped.

Clinton smiled. "Don't rush me, Henry. Don't rush me."

Ward thought back to how he'd gotten there. He'd been in a dimly-lit service tunnel beneath the arena, on his way to a stairway that would lead up to his seat for the basketball game. Few people knew about the tunnel, and except for him it was empty. Then a door opened and threw a shaft of

light across his path. An old man stepped through the door. He stopped Ward, shoved a hundred-dollar bill into his hand and said, "Sit in for me, son, in there. Five minutes." Ward had no objection to making an easy hundred, so he agreed and the man hustled off.

"All right," Clinton said, finally. He tossed a red chip into the pot. "Factor Eight."

Kissinger adjusted a hearing aid and said, "Fact of what?"

Clinton spoke louder. "Factor Eight. The blood scandal from when I was Governor of Arkansas. I sold blood collected in our prison system long after we knew it was tainted with hepatitis and AIDS. I should have shut the program down, but I kept it going and killed . . . I don't know, maybe a million."

"I remember that," Fauci said. "Nasty business, but there's no way you killed a million people."

"Okay, but tens of thousands, if you count that Canadian hemophiliac group. A lot of the blood went to them."

"We don't play for such low stakes," Kissinger said.

"Then I'll add Waco." Clinton dropped another chip into the pot, a white one. "The Branch Davidian compound in Texas. I killed, what, eighty people there?"

Fauci shook his little head and said, "Still not enough."

"Aw, come on," Clinton whined. "Waco was choice. I killed men, women and children on live TV. Cooked 'em with that tank shooting napalm out its barrel."

"You're right," Kissinger said. "That was an impressive kill. We'll accept it paired with the Factor Eight. Now it's my bet, and I call." He tossed a red and a white chip into the pot. "I claim Cambodia. I helped put Pol Pot in power there and

he killed two million.”

Clinton chuckled and said, “I always liked that one. That crazy S.O.B. murdered a third of his population.”

“I thought the eyeglasses were a nice touch,” Fauci said. “He convinced his people that intellectuals were a threat, so they killed anybody who wore glasses.”

Ward watched all three men adjust their glasses as they laughed.

“Your turn,” Clinton said to Fauci.

Fauci studied his cards, then said, “Well, you may have killed people with AIDS-tainted blood, Bill, but you wouldn’t have had AIDS without me. Call.” He tossed a red and a white chip into the pot. “Not only did I help with the design of the virus, but I pushed treatments that weakened the immune systems of the infected. So they died from colds, pneumonia and other things.”

“Now you’re taking credit for deaths from pneumonia?” Kissinger said. “I object.”

Clinton reached over and gave Kissinger a pat on the shoulder.

“Chill out, Henry. This is a gentleman’s game. Let him have his AIDS.”

Kissinger grumbled but nodded his assent, and then the three men looked at Ward.

“So how about it?” Fauci said. “Are you betting or not?”

Ward wasn’t sure what to do. His cards were garbage and he didn’t know if the man who’d asked him to sit in would want to bet.

“Why’s this guy in the game anyway?” Fauci asked Clinton.

“Because Soros is even fuller of crap than usual tonight. He went to offload some, and he got junior here to sit in as a placeholder.”

“Is he in or out?” Kissinger snapped.

“It’ll cost you a red and a white,” Clinton said

to Ward. "George can afford it, and he's good for the body count."

Ward picked up two chips from the mound in front of him. He tossed them into the pot and hoped the men would shift their attention away from him. But they didn't. They continued to stare.

"Wake up and deal," Clinton said. "I'll take two."

Ward dealt Clinton two cards, Kissinger took one and Fauci said he didn't need any. Ward looked at his hand again and drew four. The new cards weren't any better than the old.

"Okay now," Clinton said, "back to business." He studied his cards, picked up a blue chip and tossed it into the pot. "Yugoslavia," he said as he settled back in his chair.

"Yugoslavia," Fauci repeated. "Remind me what you did there."

"What I did was I bombed the hell out of them. They were expanding, making some money, even manufacturing a car that was catching on around the world. Those crappy little Yugos. The World Bank wanted me to do something about it, so I got NATO to bomb them and start some civil wars. And now the former Yugoslavia is just a bunch of pissant little countries that hate each other and have to borrow to get by."

"Thanks for the history lesson," Fauci said, "but was your body count an increase over Kissinger's in Cambodia?"

"Yeah. I'd say so." Kissinger raised an eyebrow and Clinton said, "I mean it, Henry. I stirred up lots of fighting over there, with all the little wars and vendettas. Those things add up."

"Yugoslavia," Kissinger muttered. "Fine. You can have it, but it's nothing compared to what I did when I was Secretary of State." He tossed a blue chip into the pot and grinned maliciously at Clinton. "The Vietnam War, Bill. You remember

that, don't you? The war where you dodged the draft."

"N-n-now hold on there!" Clinton sputtered.

Kissinger laughed and said, "Ah, Vietnam," like he was relishing an especially fond memory. "No telling how many I helped kill there. Millions. And then there were the Americans. Fifty-six thousand dead troops, according to the official tally."

Kissinger smiled, looking into the past, then he looked at Fauci.

"It's up to you, Tony. Try to top Vietnam."

Fauci returned the smile.

"That won't be a problem, Henry. And because you're acting so smug, I'm going to raise."

He threw three blue chips into the pot. Everybody called the bet, but Kissinger looked worried.

"What is your strategy here?" he asked Fauci. "You can't possibly beat what I did in Vietnam."

"Yes I can. You're stuck in the past, Henry. You need to get current, so I have a new word for you. It's new, it's improved, it's . . . Covid"

"I call BS," Clinton said. "There's no way you can prove any numbers on Covid. Not any honest ones. We all know you had a hand in creating the virus, but it's not that deadly."

"True," Fauci said, "but it's not the virus that's doing the real damage, it's the shots. Half the world has taken the Covid shots now, and that half will die before their time. Blood clots, heart attacks, organ failure. Those are my deaths, gentlemen. Half the world."

Clinton and Kissinger looked at each other, and Clinton shrugged.

"I hadn't thought of it like that, Henry, but he's right. I saw the drug companies' reports before they rolled the shots out, and I wouldn't take one on a dare. He's got us beat."

Fauci threw down his cards and reached for the pot.

“One moment,” Kissinger said. Fauci stopped and looked at him. “We must follow the rules, Tony, and our fourth player hasn’t told us yet what he plans to do.”

“Our fourth player?” Fauci leaned back and scratched his little head. “What the hell are you talking about? Our fourth is a dummy. A placeholder until Soros gets back.”

“But he’s met all the bets,” Clinton said, “so Henry has a point. Our guest is in this hand just as much as any of us.”

Fauci snorted and said, “This is an act of desperation, guys. He couldn’t possibly have a claim on the pot. He has no body count. And he’d need permission to use George’s.”

“How can you be sure he has no body count?” Kissinger asked, then he addressed Ward. “Do you make any claim on this pot?”

Ward wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Have you ever killed anyone?” Clinton asked.

“No,” Ward said. “Never.”

“You never killed Canadians like I did, or bombed a car factory at shift change?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Ward said.

Kissinger asked about Cambodians. “Or Vietnamese. Have you ever killed them by the millions?”

Ward was about to answer when Fauci said, “What about a deadly virus? Have you ever made one in a lab? Or injected people with poison?”

Ward shook his head and Clinton said, “Well we’ve done all of that, and more. We’re famous for how many we’ve killed.”

“I’m sure you are,” Ward said, “but I haven’t really followed your careers. I watch sports on TV, not the news.”

The others stiffened in their chairs. After a moment Fauci said, “Soros.” The S sound at the end of the name stretched into a hiss. “That greedy

bastard brought in a ringer. That lousy piece of . . .”

Kissinger raised a shushing hand and said, “Let’s not jump to conclusions. This man may not be a threat.”

“Let’s find out,” Clinton said, then to Ward, “Have you ever protested any of the stuff we’ve been talking about here? Written a letter to the editor, or talked to your congressman?”

“No. I don’t even vote.”

“Damn it!” Clinton exploded. Kissinger cursed in German and Fauci beat his little fists on the table.

Ward said he didn’t understand.

“You won the hand,” Clinton said.

“I did? How?”

“Because you sat by while we killed people. That makes you an accomplice. You get a piece of all our kills.”

“To quote Edmund Burke,” Kissinger said, “‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.’ Pick up your chips.”