

CHARLES COLEMAN FINLAY

A Game of Chicken

GRAVEL CRUNCHED UNDER the car tires as Ed pulled off the country road beside the big iron gates. A few placid bison grazed on the green slopes behind an electric fence. An old white farmhouse, bright red barn, and drab prefab research buildings rested on the hilltop. The sunset turned the clouds into hues of pink and blue, like cotton candy at the circus.

And there's the freak show, Ed thought as he spied several cat-sized shapes pecking at the grass beside the driveway.

He parked the car, got out, and buzzed the gate, waving into the little camera like an idiot. He never thought of himself as such, but he'd come out here without knowing why he'd been invited. Still, how could he pass it up?

The gate swung open and he decided to walk up the long driveway, just to stretch his legs. And to take a closer look at the famous chickens.

Yes, they certainly were four-legged chickens all right. Amazing and amusing. They strutted awkwardly, as if always falling forward. The front legs looked too short, at least compared to the pictures he'd seen online.

"Ah! There you are!" cried an enthusiastic voice.

Ed glanced up. A tall, fit, silver-haired man in a polo shirt and khakis lunged toward him, hand outstretched. Ed thrust out his own hand in self-defense, had it gripped, and shaken.

"Walter Griffin," said the man, introducing himself. "Guess you could say I'm the rancher hereabouts."

"Edward Bango. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Griffin."

"Griffey. All my friends call me Griffey." He grinned conspiratorially as he removed a silver card holder from his pocket, and offered Ed his business card.

Ed took it, even though he'd probably misplace it before he could scan it into his rolodex.

Griffin Farm Products "Growing For The Future"

That's all it said, plus the usual address information. It was made of some fancy brown paper with bits of seed and grass in it, and printed in maroon ink. Looked handmade. Ed shoved it in his pocket.

"Thanks. So these are the chickens you invented?"

"Yes!" cried Griffey, still wearing that unexplained grin. "Though invention is too strong a term. We take research from other fields and find commercial applications for it. With the chickens, it was a simple modification to gene Tbx4."

"This came out of some medical research?"

"Correct! Holt-Oram Syndrome. Where other people saw a birth defect, we saw opportunity! Twice as many drumsticks, and easier to care for."

"Well they can't fly the coop, that's for sure!"

The smile on Griffey's face disappeared like ice in a deep fryer. "Actually, that's one of our selling points. We have chicken producers lined up to buy them, if it weren't for the protesters. You think that they'd see us for what we are -- a pro-environmental business."

Ed sighed. People thought that just because he published a magazine, he had some kind of arcane power over public opinion. "If you think I can help you with "

Griffey waved his hand, and the smile came back again. "No, wouldn't dream of it, Ed. Can I call you Ed? I invited you here to get in on the ground floor of our next venture."

Ed looked out to the fields, where the bison grazed. Maybe they'd invented real buffalo wings. Which would be interesting, although he couldn't imagine eating them. "And that would be?"

"Let me show you. We'll start with the end product, so you can judge the quality, then we'll look at the production process."

Griffey led him past the Norman Rockwell farmhouse to the functional research bunkers inset into the hillside. Even though he knew better, Ed still half-expected to see Frankenstein's laboratory inside.

