

MISFITS **Country**



Also by Arthur Winfield Knight

Blue Skies Falling

Johnnie D.

The Secrete Life of Jesse James

MISFITS

Country

A Novel by
Arthur Winfield Knight

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*For Kit, and our Chardonnay afternoons
in the high plains.*

*"I think for some uncertain reason
Mercy will be shown this season
To the lovely and misfit
To the brilliant and deformed"*

—Tennessee Williams

"All history is fiction."

—William S. Burroughs

Marilyn

*N*ow I lay me down to sleep, I lay me down, I lay. Sometimes she thought she'd slept with every man she'd ever met, but actual sleep seemed impossible.

Marilyn had been in bed for hours. She could hear the thrumming of the air conditioner, but she was sweating and the sheets stuck to her skin.

She'd taken two Seconal capsules, perforating them with a pin before she'd washed them down with a bottle of champagne after she'd said goodnight to Arthur. Politely. They hadn't been that nice to one another when they were in love. It was all a matter of convenience now.

They avoided each other as much as possible, even though they were still married and seemed to live together. It was just business. Making the movie.

A woman photographer, Inge, had been in their suite earlier. Inge had taken a picture of Marilyn's back as she gazed out the window, overlooking Reno, while Arthur watched her from across the room, a cigarette dangling from his lips. The late afternoon light filtered through the curtains like smoke from some dying chimney. It was the way they lived. Separate bedrooms, separate lives. Misfits, like the characters in the film. The photograph was symbolic.

Marilyn got out of bed, slipping a knee length negligee over her head. She looked like a character in a play by Tennessee Williams—she could have played Carroll Baker's role in *Baby Doll*, could have, should have—but she was stuck playing two roles: the playwright's wife and Roslyn, the part Arthur had written for her.

Since they'd been married, everyone referred to him as Mr. Monroe, so she supposed he wasn't any happier than she was. The whole thing was tragic. Originally, they were going to save each other.

Dazed, she went out into the hall, standing in front of the elevator on the twelfth floor. She and Arthur shared the penthouse suite, but they didn't share anything else. She counted. One, two, three, four, five. Watching the hands on the elevator. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Waiting for nothing. The doors to the elevator opened, and she stepped inside.

She had the feeling she was sinking, going down for the last time, but the doors opened again. She'd almost stopped breathing. She gasped for air, swaying, in the neon light.

An old lady with blue hair was playing two slot machines simultaneously, yanking the handles, and Marilyn could see Huston, across the room, wearing a bush jacket, standing next to a crap table. He was a notorious gambler, but he claimed money didn't mean anything to him. She wondered what did. Maybe horses and women. Anything he could ride. But that was cruel. He'd given Marilyn her first decent part.

She thought she was going to faint, leaning against the wall next to the elevator, listening to quarters spew out of a slot machine. The sound echoed in her ears, and people seemed fragmented in the neon light.

There were no clocks on the walls. It could have been 3 a.m. or mid-afternoon. She felt nauseous, dizzy. Things came in and out of focus. She took a step, another, holding her arms out as if she were dowsing for some precious mineral. She didn't know where she was going.

Someone wearing a gray flannel suit stopped her. He was tall and he looked down at her, smiling. She wondered if he thought she was a prostitute, since she was almost naked, but he seemed gentle. He had long, narrow fingers, like a woman's.

"Can I help you?"

"I don't know," she said. She seemed to be whispering.
"What do you have in mind?"

She didn't have the key to her room. Didn't even know what room she was supposed to be in. One looked like another, but she supposed people said that about blondes. She didn't even have her driver's license since she wasn't going anywhere.

She stared at the tall man, at Huston, at the lady with blue hair. She wondered if he knew she was Marilyn Monroe.

"I can't seem to find... the way back to my room," she said.
"I think I'm lost."

Clark

He knew she was nervous, about doing her first scene with him. She'd told Clark she'd imagined he was her father when she was growing up. Marilyn said her mother had taped his picture to the bedroom wall, pointing at it, saying, "That's man's your father. He's a big star. Someday he'll come back, and you'll meet him." But Marilyn admitted the man in the photograph might have been someone who resembled Clark. A man with a thin mustache and large ears. Now they were supposed to be lovers in the movie.

He'd been warned she was always late, so he waited for her in the bar at Harrah's Club, where they were shooting the scene between himself, the character they called Gay, and Roslyn. He drank double shots of whiskey, resting his elbows on the bar, lighting one cigarette with the tip of another.

His father had always told him "acting's for sissies," but his father had never waited for Marilyn. It had been more than an hour now. Two hours. Since there were no clocks on the walls, Clark looked at his watch. He pushed the brim of his Stetson back, glancing through the glass doors that led to Virginia Street, squinting. He was 59, and his vision wasn't what it used to be. Not many things were, but he was going to be a father in a few months, and he was the highest paid actor in the history of the movies. Not too bad for an old "sissy."

Marilyn must have been followed by a dozen hangers-on when she finally arrived, her blonde hair glistening. She might have been the only person in the room. Her mouth seemed larger than life from too much lipstick.

She was breathless when she spoke to Clark. "I'm sorry, I'm *so* sorry, I just can't seem to get organized before noon, I have trouble sleeping, trouble getting up, I hope you understand, I don't mean to cause any trouble, it's just all the pills... I take. Sometimes I don't know if I'm coming or going." She smiled, as if she'd said something funny. "I really am sorry... I'm late."

She was probably the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, although he could understand the actor who became so frustrated by her lateness, by all the retakes, that he'd claimed, "Kissing her was like kissing Hitler."

Clark smiled back, touching her hand lightly. "You're not late, honey." He'd always been a good liar. It was what actors did best.

Marilyn turned to the people standing behind her. "Mr. Gable likes me. Ask him if I'm the temperamental person I'm supposed to be."

Then Huston yelled, "Now that we're all so happily introduced, let's get the goddamn picture underway. We've got a film to make, people."

Monty

What the hell is Marilyn's problem?" Clark asked, but it was a rhetorical question. He and Monty stood on the small bridge overlooking the Truckee River. Divorcees threw their wedding rings off the bridge. Someone claimed there was more gold in the water than there was in the Klondike. Clark lit a cigarette, breathing hard, as if the act of smoking tired him. "Goddamn it, I like the girl, but she's so... unprofessional. I damn near went nuts waiting for her to show up this morning."

Monty lit a cigarette, too. He and Clark could get lung cancer together. The "girl" was 34, but Monty supposed age was relative.

The archway over Virginia Street glittered in the dusk. RENO—THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD. Monty said, "Marilyn told me she threw up before meeting you on the set. You're an icon to her." He wasn't sure Clark knew what the word meant. "Larger than life."

"Jesus Christ," Clark said. "I'm just a man."

Monty knew what Marilyn meant. He never thought he'd be standing on a bridge talking to Clark Gable.

"Yeah," Monty said. "A man." He was supposed to be a cowboy in the movie, a stud, but he'd been living with another man in New York before coming to Nevada. "Marilyn told me

I'm the only person she knows who's in worse shape than she is. Talk about left-handed compliments."

Clark looked old in the twilight, but Monty knew he didn't look so good either. He'd ruined his face in an automobile accident four years ago, and he'd bruised his nose when he'd helped a cowboy climb onto the back of a Brahma bull in Pocatello last month; Monty had been preparing for his role, learning what it was like to be a cowboy. It was hell, not being one thing nor another.

"Well, you have more in common with her than I do," Clark said. "I just hope she shows up on time tomorrow."

John

It was neither morning nor evening in the surreal light of the casino. Marilyn still wore the dress she'd had on earlier, sitting next to John at a blackjack table. He wondered if she ever changed clothes.

A woman named Veronica was dealing. She was a tired looking brunette with large breasts and dark circles under her eyes. He'd never seen anyone more bored. They might have been in separate rooms, like Marilyn and Arthur.

"I'm not sure I can do it, John."

"Don't be silly. Roslyn was written for you." It was as if he'd intuited what she'd meant to say.

"The part was written for Marilyn Monroe. There's a difference."

"Is there? Maybe you should tell Arthur that." He took a hit, busted, and watched Veronica take his chips.

"I can't tell Arthur anything. You ought to know that. There's a difference between the myth of who we are and who we are... *really*. I keep remembering what it was like to be Norma Jean Baker. To be young and poor."

"Marilyn, you shouldn't think so much. It isn't what you do best." He was always saying things that sounded cruel, although he never meant them to be. The words just came out wrong.

Probably he was too blunt with people, especially for a director, but he'd never been good at coddling people.

"Should I be offended?"

"You can be anything you want." He told the dealer, "Hit me."

"I used to think I was a failure at everything, that I'd never be successful as an actress, but men always assured me I was great at sucking cocks. I think I gave some of my greatest performances... on my knees." Marilyn may as well have been discussing the weather. "It might seem strange, John, but that always gave me hope when I was depressed."

John looked at his cards absently. "You never sucked mine," he said.

"That's because you believed in me. You were convinced I was an actress that first day I auditioned."

"Yeah, well, we all make mistakes," Huston said.