

The Gentlemen Thief's Guild

Jack Willis had been raised on the code of the Gentlemen Thief's Guild: *Steal with intent and if you must lie, make it a good one*. Bankers and politicians would lie to steal, but it took a certain caliber of thief to steal from a person to their face. He was a thief, no bother denying that. But he was a gentleman thief.

On the dark streets of Pennington Way, Jack searched for the familiar dark, iron gate that marked Number 14. A clever person would have known that there was no Number 14 Pennington Way. Technically speaking, Pennington Way ended about three blocks earlier and turned into Kings Street. Still, the gate proudly proclaimed it was "Number 14 Pennington Way" and there was no point in correcting an iron gate. Most people walked by without even noticing, but that's how members knew they were in the right place. Traipsing through the gate and hopping up the steps, Jack knocked on the door. A panel popped open and a pair of eyes, wrinkled and dark brown, stared at him. "Password?"

"Dogged 'til the day I die..." Jack grinned with a certain amount of pride. The panel popped closed with a click and the door opened.

"Welcome back, Master Willis," the doorman shuffled over, his bushy, white beard moving as he spoke. "Productive day, I assume?"

"Ah, always healthy pockets over on Windsor Avenue, Westly," Jack said, handing his coat and cap to the doorman. "Have the others arrived?"

"Just settling in for the meeting, sir," Westly said, shuffling away with Jack's things. Jack smiled and sauntered into the room where the others were sitting and talking.

Flames crackled in a white, stone fireplace and filled the air with an eerie light. Other members of the Gentlemen Thief's Guild were sitting around on plush, leather couches or

standing by a table filled with drinks. The walls were lined with pictures, but not of others in the room. The black and white photos were of ancient grandmother's long gone, men in pressed suits and top hats, ancient family portraits that could never be recovered or replaced. It was a low thing to steal, but Jack thought the photographs added a certain level of class that the place would have otherwise lacked. Jack caught the eye of a tall man across the room and grabbed two glasses of something burgundy and cold from the table without losing a step.

"Not a bad pinch," the tall man said, taking the glass Jack offered, "but hardly what I'd call the work of a guild master..."

"So, would you not like your wallet back, then, Henry?" Jack asked, holding up the folded leather billfold at the tall man's eye level. Flustered, Henry grabbed the leather fold and stuffed it back into his pocket. "You always were a troublemaker, even to your friends..."

"I'm touched you consider us friends," Jack smiled tapping his glass to Henry's with a grin. "Have you heard any chatter?"

"Well, your name is still being passed around like free peanuts at a baseball game," Henry said. "There's also been talk of Nick taking over, on account of making off with half the silver from the Police Chief's table—"

"Well, like the Police Chief's maid, the Guild would have poor taste in men if that was enough to get the guild master status."

"Like I said, whisperings... a lot of people are talking about Nancy Harrington."

"The streetwalker?" Jack asked, looking at a small cluster of women by the fire. Nancy was a beautiful woman with dark hair and wide, green eyes. "She's barely been here a month and they want her promoted?"

“She’s made off with more men’s wallets than anyone in the last month. Her career has been short, but what man is going to say he was robbed by a prostitute? I say, she’s got a better advantage than you...or me, for that matter.”

“Guild master or not, you are still the finest cat burglar this side of Bell’s Tower, true story.”

“I’m not one of the ones who decides whether or not you’re a guild master.”

Jack grinned and looked around the room. Most of the other participants who were trying for guild master were there: Tom Trusset, Willy ‘The Wit’ Provost, Elliott Driscoll. If the police were ever smart enough to uncover the Gentlemen Thief’s Guild and happened upon a meeting, Jack wondered if their head would explode from all the arrests.

Before Jack could finish his first drink, the current guild masters stood before the fireplace. Gruff and serious looking, Jack knew that these four were not the joking type and did his best to be serious around them. Joe Green, a big man with a loud voice and one eye that always looked bruised, stepped forward.

“Gentlemen Thieves, I welcome you all tonight to our home. Tonight, is a rare night that we have all gathered here to discuss the since the death of their oldest member, the late Tim ‘Ticker’ Humphrey.” A few men bowed their heads and agreed. The guild masters had been arguing for a week about who should take the open position. Well, that was only partly true. Most of the time had been spent deciding who would take over as Head of the Gentlemen Thief’s Guild with diversions of who would fill the empty position.

“It is with that sad reminder that I will cut to the chase...” Joe Green said. “We have not decided who will be taking Old Ticker’s position with the guild masters—“

“Well, this was a waste of our time,” Henry whispered to Jack.

“—However!” Joe said, regaining control of the room and dampening the whispers. “We have come to a decision of how we will decide. Each of us has chosen someone represent our candidacy to Head of the Gentlemen Thief’s Guild. The Gentlemen Thief who commits the greatest caper will not only be admitted to the guild masters, but also earn their sponsor the position of Head of the Guild. Guild masters will no choose their competitors.

“Elliott Driscoll,” a man said, stepping forward and pointing at a man with arms as thick as Jack’s legs. Elliott Driscoll joined the guild masters.

“Arthur the Ghost,” another man said. A thin man in a deep hood seemed to materialize out of the crowd and stood next to his sponsor.

“Jack Willis,” Joe Green grinned. Jack took a deep swig from his glass, handed Henry his empty and walked up to the fireplace.

The last guild master grinned. “Nancy Harrington.”

The room filled with murmurs quickly. It was no surprise that some members of the G.T.G. had been hesitant to allow streetwalkers into their ranks. But Nancy standing beside the other competitors was as close as a woman had ever gotten to a guild master’s rank...beyond the scope of the G.T.G. as far as Jack knew.

“You four will each have one week,” Joe Green continued, “to plan, execute and get away with a theft. There are no restrictions as to what other than you must have evidence that you were the one who committed the crime and you must not be accused by our dear friends in law enforcement.”

Jack looked at his other competitors. Elliott Driscoll looked pleased with himself, The Ghost was hard to read and Nancy looked like a scared doe surprised by hunters. This wasn’t how he’d expected tonight to go.

“You have one week,” Joe Green smiled. “May the best thief win.”