

PROLOGUE

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Ronald Reagan had lost his way. Identical corridors splayed through the Hotel Last Frontier like spokes on a wheel, and none of them seemed to lead to the Ramona Room. One spoke led off to the Gay '90s Bar, where the Kirby Stone Four were setting up for their midnight-to-dawn gig. Another cut through the 21 Club Casino, whose rows of ravenous slot machines were clacking away like castanets. The hall to the left emptied into the Carillo Room, a tony watering hole for the after-show crowds, and past that to the Chuck Wagon, its wood-paneled pub. A fifth spoke descended to a subterranean passage known to hotel guests as the Marine Room, offering underwater glimpses into the deep end of the pool. The Ramona Room, for all Ronald Reagan knew, might have been located on Mars.

He stood at the hub, deciding which way to turn, like a piece on a game board. The wrong move would make him late for his own opening night.

The Last Frontier had pulled out all the stops for its Ronald Reagan showcase. The hotel's nightclub was known for its top-flight entertainers, but rarely attracted Hollywood stars. Most actors steered clear of Las Vegas engagements, fearing its seamy aura would tarnish their fame. But Reagan, whose own aura of late had dimmed, had little choice.

He was forty-three and experiencing what he referred to as "some rough sledding," a Hollywood euphemism for a career on the skids. His contract at Warner Bros., where he'd been a studio stalwart since 1936, had ended in a whimper of lowly scripts and lower box-office receipts. Freed to work for any studio, he hadn't fared much better. He made, in his words, "a couple of turkeys"—*Tropic Zone*, an unimaginative action yarn, at Paramount, even though he "knew the script was hopeless," followed by *Law and Order* at Universal, based on a stale, B-western formula. Since then,

he'd rejected every dismal script, setting off a six-month drought. It was the longest layoff of his professional career.

Throughout that career, Ronald Reagan had been a reliable if unspectacular movie star, with a body of solid roles to his credit. Pictures like *Knute Rockne*, *All-American* and *Kings Row* had elevated him from feature player to marquee prominence. His agent, Lew Wasserman, was a powerhouse, the *capo di tutti capi*, with the clout to keep Reagan gainfully employed. In 1947, Reagan had been elected president of the Screen Actors Guild, a position that bestowed prestige even as the parts failed to measure up. And his new wife, Nancy Davis, ten years his junior, attractive and smart, was what Hollywood called a comer. Together, they spent nights dancing at the Mocambo and Ciro's or in their booth at Chasen's, breaking bread with the Dick Powells or the Jack Bennys or the Bill Holdens—Hollywood royalty. On the surface, Ronald Reagan was similarly enthroned.

But in the film business, the surface was usually make-believe. Reagan was still handsome, still virile, still radiantly charming, but he was too old now to play the lead in a romance or action flick, he didn't sing or dance well enough to do musicals, and he wasn't the subtle kind of actor who might get parts in more nuanced fare. So at the moment, the Reagans were in a real crunch.

Money was tight. Having gone for a while without getting his standard \$75,000-per-movie fee, Reagan had been dipping into savings to cover his myriad necessities. There was child support to his ex-wife, Jane Wyman, and a new, unexpected baby, Patti, his first with Nancy. He was paying off two homes—a new hideaway in Pacific Palisades and a 350-acre ranch, Yearling Row, in the Malibu Hills—that together required three mortgages. The ranch, in particular, was a financial black hole: \$15,000 in new pumps to make the water potable, veterinary care for fifty steer that had contracted pink eye, unanticipated fees to ranch hands. And taxes. *Taxes!* They were enough to send Ronald Reagan's blood pressure soaring. The federal government had him in a chokehold. He had made a serious tax miscalculation that plunged him into debt to Uncle Sam. During World War II, when Reagan served in an Army Air Force stateside unit, he took advantage of a serviceman's right to defer taxes until after the war. Reagan had heard that servicemen after World War I had been forgiven their tax debts, and he gambled on a similar gift the second time around. Gambled—and lost,

bumping him into a predatory tax bracket that left him \$18,000 in the hole. To make matters worse, in addition to his screen layoff, there had been a freak accident—a broken leg sustained in a charity softball game—that sidelined him for another long stretch, as hospital fees in the five figures piled up.

“I’m living from guest shot to guest shot on television, and an occasional personal appearance,” he complained to a friend who had recently thrown him a bone of a role: to narrate a public service film for North American Rockwell, the military manufacturing behemoth, that would pay him scale, around \$240.

Money was so tight that he shopped a radio series based on the hijinks “of a Hollywood couple, an Actor and Actress who go into ranching,” but no one bit. Then came the biggest blow. Just before Christmas, Reagan accepted a part in a picture called *Prisoner of War* to begin filming at MGM in the spring. But the script, about American captives during the Korean War, was a feeble piece of work designed to take advantage of recent headlines. When Reagan accepted it without so much as a hiccup, Lew Wasserman palmed his client off on a second-string colleague, more or less scuttling their longtime relationship.

Reagan’s new agent, Art Park, scrambled to come up with something lucrative. Broadway beckoned, but Reagan was adamantly opposed to moving to New York. Television, still in its infancy, had become a viable option, where an actor of Reagan’s particular stature would feel right at home. He had nothing against TV; some of his best friends wound up there. But a *series* . . . just didn’t feel right. He was convinced that after two or three years playing the same one-dimensional role—say, a masked man with an Indian sidekick or a father who knew best—it would be difficult for producers to see him as anything else.

When Art Park proposed doing a Vegas nightclub act, Reagan didn’t immediately reject it. Yes, it was preposterous, well beneath his standards, but the money Park mentioned was too good to dismiss. Reagan could make as much in two weeks as he could over several months on a picture. And it was easy work. Over the years, as a popular emcee on the mashed-potato circuit—a backdrop that included meetings, rallies, and charitable benefits—he’d introduced hundreds of acts with humorous patter. He was a natural at it. That was all that would be expected of him in Las Vegas.

Billed as “Ronald Reagan Presents,” he’d introduce four or five acts each night—a couple of singing groups, a comic, a dancer, whomever the hotel had booked—tell a few jokes, maybe join in a skit with the featured act, nothing he’d be uncomfortable with.

Reagan thought it over. It didn’t demean his dignity, it wasn’t humiliating work. In essence, he saw himself “as sort of an impresario,” like Ted Mack or his old friend Louella Parsons, in whose traveling review he once appeared. That experience, in 1939, had been pretty much of a hoot. “Louella Parsons and Her Stars” crisscrossed the country, playing to packed houses everywhere they landed. He loved cavorting in the skits with Joy Hodges and Susan Hayward; it’s where he fell in love with Jane Wyman, another member of the Parsons cast. With the right material, he’d feel at ease.

Reagan’s agency, MCA, had deep roots in Las Vegas. Its beginnings in show business, booking talent into nightclubs and ballrooms, gave the agency the kind of primacy that packed Vegas showrooms with its clients. MCA had relationships with every hotel in town. All it took was a phone call to book the Ronald Reagan Show.

The El Rancho was the obvious choice. It was the first resort on the Strip and boasted the largest casino in Nevada, where no less than Howard Hughes was a regular at the blackjack tables. Its lounge, the Round-Up Room, was a Vegas institution, whose recent lineup of headliners included Buddy Hackett, Vic Damone, Nat King Cole, Hoagy Carmichael, and Joe E. Lewis. If one’s reputation was determined by the company one kept, Ronald Reagan had nothing to fear.

The deal was negotiated in a matter of minutes, and fell apart in almost as little time. The El Rancho’s owner, Beldon Katleman, insisted the show run over the Christmas holiday, which was a deal breaker as far as Reagan was concerned. Christmas with the family was sacrosanct and unfit for Las Vegas. The coup de grâce, however, was the headliner, Lili St. Cyr, one of America’s premier strippers, “who left almost nothing to the imagination when she stepped dripping wet out of her onstage bubble bath.” Reagan was having none of it, and directed his agent to cancel the deal.

Within minutes, another offer materialized at the Last Frontier, just down the Strip. The Last Frontier held more promise than its name. The hotel was part of a vast resort complex just off US-91, the Last Frontier

Village, one of those kitschy tourist attractions designed to resemble an abandoned ghost town from the Gold Rush days. Guests could visit the Old Trading Post or head over to the stables, with its collection of antique stagecoaches, or ride the bumper cars. The Shooting Gallery boasted a \$100,000 collection of guns and pistols. There was a museum of mechanical pianos, and a miniature train traveled around the entire grounds. After a day's sightseeing and with the kids tucked in bed, adults gathered in the hotel's casino and showroom, where a who's who of entertainers played to sellout crowds—Xavier Cugat & His Latin-American Orchestra, Dorothy Lamour, Señor Wences, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Howard Keel, Abbe Lane, and the Liberace/Phil Foster Show. In August, the legendary Dorsey brothers, Tommy and Jimmy, were reunited onstage after twenty years of leading competing bands. The only hitch came when Dorothy Dandridge, the first black actress nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress, performed. As a condition of her residency, she was warned not to go anywhere near the swimming pool, which was still strictly segregated. When she hinted she might “stick her toe in the water,” the pool was suddenly “under construction” and closed to everyone for the duration. Had Ronald Reagan known about the treatment of Dandridge, he might have balked, but that little tidbit had been carefully concealed.

MCA wanted him focused on the showcase, certain he would be scrutinized by tastemakers for future work. It was a demanding routine—two shows a night, three on Saturday, each running a little over an hour and a half—showbiz lite, placing it somewhere just north of vaudeville. He would top-line a bill featuring four frothy acts: the Continentals, a veteran male quartet that mixed barber-shop songs, soft-shoe, and knockabout schtick; the Blackburn Twins, with Evelyn Ward, a glamorous Broadway showgirl and mother of future pop star David Cassidy; the Honey Brothers, a trio of dancing acrobats; and the Last Frontier Dancers, nicknamed the Adorables, who high-kicked their way through a chorus line, dressed in skimpy peekaboo costumes.

It was a fast-moving show, with a number of tricky entrances and well-timed choreography, all the more difficult for a nightclub novice who, according to critics, was “no singer or dancer and could scarcely qualify as a comedian.”

Ronald Reagan had worked hard to nail down his part. In January, he

and the Continentals had set up shop on a Hollywood soundstage, rehearsing bits in sessions that often lasted four hours or more. Nancy sat quietly in a corner of the room, sipping ice water and scribbling notes on a legal pad. “She was a great audience for him,” said comedy writer John Bradford, “because she laughed at every one of his jokes.” At the outset, Reagan “was rough as a cob,” but he “was a fast study [who] must have worked hard at home in the evenings,” honing his part after those grueling workouts. “By the end of the first week, he was moving like the rest of us,” recalled Ben Cruz, a member of the group. In early February, they tried out the act at the Statler Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, spending a week polishing the routines in front of an audience, at the end of which they were good to go.

Las Vegas, however, presented a different set of circumstances. The audiences were larger—the Ramona Room was a hearty 600-seat theater—and more discerning; they could just as easily wander up the Strip to the Thunderbird, where the Four Aces were appearing, or over to the Sahara for Kathryn Grayson and the Sonja Henie ice show; the Desert Inn’s marquee advertised Jackie Miles, billed somewhat extravagantly as “America’s Leading Night Club Entertainer and Comedian,” while Tallulah Bankhead cavorted at the Sands “in a flimsy, see-through dress that shocked even Las Vegas.” The competition was fierce. Ronald Reagan had to be on top of his game.

Not wanting to cut things close, he and Nancy had arrived in Vegas a few days early. The surroundings were still pretty foreign to him. Reagan wasn’t a gambler or much of a drinker. He and Nancy kept to themselves and spent their days lounging by the pool with their noses in books. Still, he managed to make a few waves.

Reagan was still smarting from his Hollywood woes and had expressed as much in an interview with Bob Thomas, who covered the movie business for the Associated Press. In particular, he resented the decline of the studio system, forcing bona fide stars—like himself—to freelance in other media. “This business was built on the basis of offering the public stars they could see nowhere else,” he argued. If John Q. Public can encounter you in places like the legitimate stage or on TV or in Las Vegas, he “will certainly think twice before paying to see a movie with a star he has seen so often” elsewhere.

Reagan also lit into what he called the “benefit bureaucrats,” who put

the squeeze on actors to appear for free at charity functions, especially telethons, where “the net return comes to something like a nickel a head.” He’d done a slew of them himself to no real effect, and it disturbed him to see screen idols like Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart herded across a stage, while only the producers of the events profited from their appearance.

But Reagan knew the score. Only a year earlier, he’d told a group of Kiwanis, “If you didn’t sing or dance in the Hollywood of my day, you wound up as an after-dinner speaker.”

Bob Thomas knew he could count on Ronald Reagan to provide some juice for his column, comments that strayed beyond simply promoting the Vegas opening. In Hollywood, Reagan had always been a columnist’s dream source. He was eminently approachable, an actor who didn’t shy from the press or buckle to the dictates of studio publicists. Thomas had often relied on him for quotes that were thoughtful, even somewhat flammable, as did those irrepressible yentas Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper. This issue of actors working for free was a case in point. It was a persistent plaint in Reagan’s repertoire of workforce grievances. Publicity for the Vegas debut offered another forum in which to air his opinion.

Ronald Reagan had never shrunk from expressing himself about the kinds of contentious issues that other actors went out of their way to avoid. He’d never been shy about speaking out, taking a stand. As a freshman in college, he happily allowed himself to be recruited to lead a student strike by upperclassmen. After school, his honeyed Midwestern voice drew listeners from five states to his nightly radio broadcasts of Cubs games and variety shows. And in Hollywood, he was elected by a broad consensus of his peers to head the preeminent Screen Actors Guild in a highly unusual perch for such a relatively modest screen star. He won the gratitude of his fellow actors for his efforts to wrest professional respect from tyrannical studio bosses and ease labor unrest and, more controversially, to fight against communist influence infiltrating the ranks. It was this latter concern—the spread of communism, of “Russian aggression aimed at world conquest”—that impelled Ronald Reagan to engage in public dialogue that extended well beyond standard union issues and to speak before Congress in an effort to root out radicals and extremists.

Along the way, he'd formed strong opinions he felt necessary to convey—about government, the economy, a moral malaise, taxes. Above all he could communicate. He was eloquent, plainspoken, convincing. President of the Screen Actors Guild was arguably Ronald Reagan's star turn.

But now Reagan was no longer SAG head, and his acting career seemed to be slipping away. Reagan knew the movie business was changing, the spotlight moving to younger stars like James Dean, Paul Newman, and Marlon Brando. Television was siphoning audiences away. Roles for plain-vanilla actors like Reagan were drying up; there were fewer opportunities, no guarantees for continual work. It was high time to rethink his career.

What he felt most passionate about was speaking out on issues that he believed in. He'd formed strong opinions he felt obliged to share. Politics? Friends teased him incessantly about a future on the political stage. He had a knack for politics, qualities that were perfectly suited to it, but he seemed to be getting further and further away from them. Here he was in Las Vegas of all places, introducing the Honey Brothers and the Adorables and giving an interview about a fairly minor issue concerning actors and freelancing. Was this all there was for him? He had a facility for something so much more than what he was doing right now. He wanted—needed—to be on a bigger stage.

Interestingly, another MCA agent, Taft Schreiber, had just floated the framework of a new kind of project. There was interest from BBD&O, the New York advertising giant, for an actor such as Ronald Reagan to serve as program supervisor for a new TV series—a dramatic anthology—that already had a sponsor in place: General Electric. There would be limited acting involved. Reagan would introduce each show as its host and occasionally function as a producer, and he could have first dibs on choice parts if he wanted.

At first, it didn't resonate. Ronald Reagan was a hardcore skeptic where television was concerned. Even though this new medium was taking America by storm, "everyone of stature in Hollywood," he maintained, "was delicately holding their noses about it." His "personal interest in television was nil."

Still, there were incentives. Reagan would get equity, a small percentage of royalties that could add, over time, to a generous salary. He'd have

creative input, help select scripts—and court his Hollywood friends. The show was already attracting major stars; Cary Grant, Bill Holden, even Jane Wyman had already performed, and Reagan's old pals Bob Hope and Jack Benny were slated for the new season. Plus, it was a family affair—produced by none other than Revue Studios, a wholly owned subsidiary of MCA, two entities Reagan was familiar with. Taft Schreiber dangled an even more delectable carrot: GE wanted its new host to spend a quarter of his time offscreen, touring the plants in its corporate empire, speaking to assembly-line employees. He'd be a traveling ambassador, exchanging ideas with regular folks.

He'd been thinking it over, weighing the pros and cons. The new places it might take him. The things he'd learn. It was an odd way to jump into public life, backed by corporate money to express a point of view, certainly not a traditional route, but it intrigued him. Instead of, say, running for the city council or state legislature, and instead of getting bogged down in the nuts and bolts of minor political issues, this might be a way to gain prominence and hone his political views. All of this was on his mind when he finally found his way to the Ramona Room and took the stage.

Ronald Reagan was a pro, a natural the moment the spotlights hit him. He clicked right into his onstage role, the affable, aw-shucks charmer who drew audiences in by his presence alone. People *liked* the Ronald Reagan they encountered, the all-American image he presented. They felt they could relate to him as someone like themselves—not flashy, not glib, not in a Fred Astaire kind of way—just a man of the people, which is what he gave them that night in spades.

Reagan's only nod to fashion was the streamlined, pocketless, black gabardine tuxedo he'd designed himself for the occasion. When the Continentals introduced him twenty minutes into their spot, the Ramona Room buzzed. He looked stunning as he ambled into view. He was tan, trim, suave, glowing: a movie star. He commanded the stage. The Continentals had lukewarmed up the crowd, singing corny old chestnuts like “Donkey Serenade” and “Flight of the Bumble Bee” accompanied by sound effects, but Reagan turned up the heat with a rat-a-tat attack of self-deprecating jokes.

He opened with one of those a-funny-thing-happened-on-my-way-to-Las-Vegas bits, claiming that he was magically transformed from Hollywood typecasting as a briefcase-wielding house-husband into “a joy-boy.” In fact, his stodgy screen image was so ingrained, he said, that his last leading lady, a woman older than he, called him “father.” Seamlessly, he lapsed into a joke-filled routine that required a playful Irish brogue.

Later in the show, after dispatching the Blackburn Twins and the Adorables, he returned for another workout with the Continentals, this time sporting a straw hat and cane. Reagan sat on a makeshift chair formed by the legs of two group members pretending to shave his cheeks while singing the barber-shop quartet mainstay “Sweet Adeline.” This was followed by a beer-garden skit in which he wore a Pabst Blue Ribbon apron with the legend “Vos vils du haben?” scrawled across it, danced and sang, and murdered the German language to howls of laughter. The evening ended with the star standing solo, center stage, sans props, delivering a meditation called “The Definition of an Actor,” by Irvin S. Cobb, noting how actors weren’t quite like doctors or lawyers, they didn’t do regular work, but they still left the world a better place.

Leaving the world a better place. Was he doing enough to leave the world a better place? He’d been mulling that over for the past couple of years, how he could do something about all the issues—the everyday battles confronting hardworking Americans—that had been gnawing at him. It wasn’t too late to start doing something about it. He’d made a name for himself in a superficial business, but it gave him the kind of visibility that could wield influence beyond stage and screen. His mother always told him how important it was to help others, to put the needs of those who were disadvantaged ahead of one’s own. Once, when he was in high school, she hosted a Women’s Missionary Society meeting whose topic was “The Large World—My Neighborhood.” Didn’t that just about say it all?

Las Vegas, he knew, wasn’t the answer. The nightclub act did relatively decent business—good enough to prompt an offer for a return engagement—and was well received by the critics, for the most part. But the experience left Ronald Reagan unfulfilled. He made only \$5,500 a week, not the windfall he expected. And the city itself was a strange place to work, even more of a fantasyland than Hollywood, if that was possible.

After the shows, when most performers hit the casino or checked out an act at a neighboring hotel, Ron and Nancy went back to their room, where they spent the time reading, talking, and thinking about the future. “The nightclub life was not for us,” she recalled.

This gave him time to think about broader issues. Reagan had become disillusioned with the direction the country was taking. The newspapers he combed through each morning were full of stories that disturbed his sense of right and wrong: the federal budget was seriously out of balance, forcing postponement of the tax reductions President Dwight D. Eisenhower had promised; Nikita Khrushchev was saber rattling; the Supreme Court had heard a case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, that threatened to upend how Americans sent their children to school; the Communists had stepped up their aggression in Southeast Asia; and taxes were keeping Reagan himself trapped in an 87 percent bracket.

Where did he figure into “The Large World—My Neighborhood”? Not too long ago, he’d been clearer about it. As a lifetime Roosevelt Democrat, he’d embraced the New Deal coalition, especially FDR’s efforts to encourage labor union growth and his promise to reduce the size of the federal government and cut the budget. He loved Roosevelt’s view that common people can have a vision that included all social classes for the good of the country. All of that had made perfect sense. Reagan had even supported the election of Harry Truman, whom he admired. But, lately, he’d become disillusioned with the Democratic Party and its penchant toward “encroaching government control.” Reagan deplored “the problems of centralizing power in Washington,” which he felt took inalienable rights and freedoms away from citizens such as himself. To him, it seemed the party’s liberal faction also went to great lengths to defend the shady Hollywood clique that had romanticized and dabbled in communism.

All this served to redirect Ronald Reagan’s political antennae. He’d become more agitated in the past few years, more impatient with the country’s direction, more clear-cut in his feelings about right and wrong. When it came right down to it, he’d been gravitating toward a conservative philosophy, siding with Republicans on issues concerning the economy and the spread of Soviet influence, military strength and smaller government, law enforcement and tax reform. His closest friends—Dick Powell, Bill Holden,

and Bob Cummings—were steadfast Republicans who had tirelessly drawn him to their side. And he'd gone for Ike in 1952, the first time he'd ever voted for a Republican candidate.

Ronald Reagan spent the rest of his Las Vegas engagement turning everything over in his mind—how a nightclub career didn't suit him and his movie career was very possibly over, how his new wife and new daughter gave him the kind of emotional anchor he'd never had before, how he might transition to a smaller screen where his ideas and opinions would have more of an impact (and help dig him out of debt), how his convictions and talent for airing them gave him entrée onto an entirely different stage.

These things were all starting to coalesce as Reagan returned each night to his hotel room, making his way through the mazy corridor of the Last Frontier.

Yes, Ronald Reagan had lost his way—but he thought he had found the path back.