

WHEN GRAVEYARDS YAWN
The Apocalypse Trilogy: Book One
G. Wells Taylor

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WILDCLOWN MYSTERIES

Email: books@wildclown.com

Website: www.wildclown.com

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For Mary Cushnie

Part One: Changeling

Chapter 1

The dead man looked at the clown and smiled. The clown was draped over a chair and desk across from him in a semi-intoxicated state of contemplative repose and was too busy studying his reflection in a hand mirror to notice the nervous gesture. The clown's small black eyes studied the image in the mirror with something like the concentrated discipline of an astronomer. They squeezed into tight whirls of flesh and pondered, peering at the silvery surface from cavernous sockets in a right then left canted head as though such contortions could help him fathom what the eyes saw.

A hazy border of greasy fingerprints obscured the issue more giving the reflection a dream-like quality. The clown could easily make out the dark spiky hair that grew to his shoulder and the tip of his nose painted black. By lifting his chin he revealed a wide grin scrawled across his white-powdered cheeks, by dropping it he showed scripted eyebrows swooping up and over the tall forehead in exclamation or terror. They wrinkled, gleaming with sweat. Perhaps they posed a question.

An ill-fitting coverall hung on the big man's frame with all the sophistication of an oily tarp thrown over discarded car parts. The apparel was decorated with faded colored spots that vied equally for notice with stains of various sorts. His boots were black and heavy, better suited to combat than office work. They were crossed on the desk, and threatened to upset the telephone where it had been pushed with a pile of papers and overflowing ashtrays.

“What?” The clown drifted from his reverie. His gaze fell evenly on the corpse that sat across from him. “What?”

“We was talking,” said Elmo, always reluctant to prompt his boss, “about the Change.”

“Oh.” The clown’s eyes did an inward turn, pupils flashing for memory. He dropped the mirror in a desk drawer, slammed it. “You remember the earthquakes, Elmo!” He leaned back in his chair with an air of authority, but a thin quaver in his voice denounced it. “Airplanes fell from the sky. There were riots and civil strife! And that millennium bug...”

“True,” rasped the dead man, exhibiting a rare display of assertiveness. “But could’a been coincidence, could’a been anythin’.” He gingerly nibbled a yellowed fingernail. “Could’a been the ozone, or the greenhouse gases!”

“Rumors of war—nation rising up against nation! And all that cloning...oh that was bad!” The clown suddenly animate lurched forward, pounding the desk. “It’s not coincidence! It’s all there in the book, that Bible! John saw it didn’t he? And it wasn’t any hothouse effect!”

“But the Bible talked about seals and lambs and such. I ain’t seen no lambs nor seals.” Elmo’s hands shook, almost overwhelmed by his own bravado. “I seen hardly any animals at all.”

“That’s where we let ourselves down. It’s not going to happen like a TV show. The world won’t end after the closing credits or following a commercial break.” The clown swept his legs back onto the desk as he tapped his forehead with index finger. “We’re going to have to think about this one, Elmo. Think about it! A lamb might not be a lamb, so to speak. Could be a man or a thing. Could be a lamb.”

A stream of derisive air shot from between Fat Elmo’s pursed lips. “Still ain’t convinced,” he hissed. “Nations is always rising up against nations. And a lamb is always a lamb where I come from! And seals, I ain’t driving to the coast just to see them.” He drew a curtain of silence as he crossed his arms.

The clown silently studied the dead man. His partner’s head was round and the black skin on it was drawn tight over the exposed crown. What remained of his hair was fair, almost a strawberry blonde, and long and lanky. Elmo had pressed or ironed the kinks out of it. It could have been the bleach he used that pacified the ancestral convolutions. Large dark eyes sat in a very thin face with a broad broken nose splayed across it. A long skinny moustache trailed over thick lips. As always, his clothing was impeccable. Even with the frayed cuffs his dark wool suit was head and shoulders above the clown’s ensemble. He even had matching silver tiepin and cufflinks. The slack sag of skin against cheekbone hinted at Elmo’s need for re-hydration.

Suddenly, the clown’s eyes burned with revelation. Leaning forward on his elbows he barked, “For Christ’s sake, Elmo. You’re dead!”

Fat Elmo shifted nervously in his chair then rolled his eyes at the ceiling as though a suitable rebuttal might be written there.

“Course I am!” His eyes dropped beneath loose lids. “Still don’t prove it. Just ‘cause I’m dead...”

“The dead rose up from their graves...” the clown started, but Elmo was saved from this difficult position by the annoying rattle of the telephone. Glaring, the clown scooped the receiver up and wedged it between his chin and collarbone. “Yeah.” His inky black

eyes darted back and forth. He wrinkled his eyebrows then picked at something under a thumbnail.

“This is Wildclown Investigations,” the clown whispered, as the dead man across from him strained his leathery ears toward the squeaky chipmunk voice on the phone. Elmo’s eyes were otherworldly in the extreme shadow of the office, bordered as they were by sooty black skin. The inconsistent lighting from the street was sending flashing bars of lightning through the blinds—the lamp on the desk flickered as another blackout loomed. Madness nibbled at the edges of the scene.

“Yeah, I’m him. I’m *Tommy* Wildclown,” the clown repeated, drilling a bony finger into his nose. He made a flicking motion, and then gestured for a cigarette. With creaky deliberate movements, Elmo produced a pack and tossed one to Tommy, who lit it with a match.

“Yeah,” he said as Elmo noisily slurped water from a glass.

Tommy continued like this for some time, chanting his approving mantra. “*Yeah.*”

The dead man passed the time lifting and flexing his thin legs where he sat. He hoisted a foot up to chest level by gripping an argyle-covered ankle and held it there a few seconds before repeating the process with the other leg. The post-mortem aerobics produced creaks, snaps and rubbery thrumming sounds from the dead muscle and connective tissues. Irritated, the clown pressed a petulant finger to his puckered lips. Elmo stopped stretching, cowed, but continued to shift uneasily in his chair. All dead people had Elmo’s problem. The joints froze up with extended inactivity.

“All right!” Tommy growled as he crashed the receiver into its cradle. Elmo’s eyes snapped wide. “Goddamn, son-of-a-bitchin’ Christ!” The clown leapt to his feet. “Damn if I’m not going to have to work.”

Elmo’s face made crackling sounds as he worked up a grin. “Got a case?”

“Yeah,” said Tommy pouring two four-finger whiskies. “Seems some lawyer got himself whacked, and he’s pissed right off. *Shit.*” He raised his glass and smiled. “He’s coming over which means money, Elmo. No more of this sitting around, this senseless fucking arguing.”

Elmo declined the drink offered opting instead to fidget noisily in his chair.

Tommy drank. He sauntered to the window, made scissors of his fingers, cut a hole in the blind and peered out at the flickering lights. A big Packard sizzled by on the rain slick street—its retro-fenders glistening like wet blisters. It was a dark afternoon. The sun hadn’t broken the cloud in years.

The clown’s teeth clinked against his glass. He wiped whiskey from the corner of his mouth. Quivers ran from his shoulders to his hands as he downed the rest of the drink at suicidal speed. He glanced back at Elmo, creases of fear marking his painted cheeks. The dead man watched him calmly.

I watched the scene from where I floated near the ceiling. Tommy’s nervousness had nothing to do with the fact that Elmo was dead or the impending mayhem inherent in any criminal investigation.

It was me. I was about to possess him and he didn’t like it. Every time he got a case, I stepped into his head and like Pavlov’s slobbering dogs; the clown was conditioned to expect it.

Not that I was a goblin or a devil. I had no interest in making him vomit, levitating his bed or forcing him to speak in tongues. When I took over I worked. He didn’t like it

because he couldn't remember anything that happened when I was in charge. That bothered him. And so his reluctance to enjoy the work on the rare occasion that it came. I guess it would bother me too.

I was in no rush to take over just then. It had been a while since our last case and I spent the time between them in my invisible, odorless state. The longer I did that, the more complicated my love-hate relationship with corporeality became. I enjoyed my time in Tommy Wildclown's body, but I had a habit of getting hurt when cases came up and I was no fan of pain. Neither was the clown and he was the one stuck with the bruises at the end of the day. But understanding it didn't make me stop.

Chapter 2

I walked to the desk, set the empty glass down and refilled it. Elmo fidgeted across from me. His eyes were fixed in a slack-lidded stare unaware that anything had happened to his boss. I pushed the glass against my lips—ran its cold pucker over them for a moment—then drained it. A good drunk was always tempting in the first giddy moments of possession. There is nothing like drinking as deep as a fish and feeling it when you spend most of your days hanging around ceiling fans with cigarette smoke for company. But as usual, Tommy was running at a fair intoxicated clip already and I had to be sober enough to handle the interview with the lawyer.

I had an impulse to knock another one back anyway, resisted it for a second and then gave in. That's the way of it. I'm not back in a body for five minutes and I'm all impulses. I could argue that the booze kept my host sedated wherever he lurked at the back of his mind. But the truth was: I became addicted to sensation at the first itch.

"Elmo," I said, pleased with the sound, pleased with the sight of the dead man—even pleased with the bite of the fiery hemorrhoid that dictated terms to Tommy's nether regions. "When this lawyer gets here, I want you to keep a close ear to the door from the outer office. I never trust a dead man. Present company excepted."

"Sure, Boss. I'll keep an eye out for him." Elmo nodded and climbed to his feet. No offense was taken.

He left to take his seat by the lamp in the waiting room where he kept a pile of yellowed newspapers and tattered magazines. I had told Elmo the truth—I didn't trust dead men. They had different motives. Things outside of normal human experience governed their actions. I couldn't figure Elmo. He worked slavishly even though Tommy was a good six months behind on his paycheck.

I couldn't figure *me*. I made the claim that I hated injustice, but there I was taking over another man's body. What could be more unjust? Of course, justice is a word and any word can be conveniently lodged in a web of semantics. I also made the assumption that I was dead so it could be argued that the words required definition before the debate could ensue.

So my unique perspective made me a little protective of Tommy Wildclown. It's not that I liked him but he was my only doorway to the land of life and limb and though the rigors could be painful, I knew that to remain in my incorporeal state—devoid of sensation—would drive me mad in time.

I raised the refilled glass, finished it off in one lusty bite and then slid the bottle back into the lower right hand desk drawer. I stretched and flexed my borrowed musculature.

Tommy stood about six-one when he didn't slouch. His shoulders were heavy with long arms made strong from lifting whiskey bottles and chronic masturbation. Yes, they broke the mold before they made him. He had an almost constant erection. As always it was urgently present beside the .44 automatic that was thrust through his pink skipping rope belt. For a moment, I imagined Tommy's warped and buckled soul residing in that particular part of his anatomy during possession. It wouldn't surprise me—of course, nothing does.

I yanked open the top drawer and pulled out his mirror. I studied what I could see of my purloined face. The eyes struck me right away. They were painted black and sinister as though drawn on by the devil himself. I noticed the makeup was smeared on the left side and mended it with pancake and greasepaint from the desk. I had tried to remove the stuff the first time I had possessed Tommy, but his psyche had bucked me off like a bronco at the very idea. I had been poised with cold cream and towels when without warning he appeared as a memory of rage. I was flung from him like a sneeze.

Life is full of compromises. The deal was I could inhabit his body to do my detective work, but I would have to do it dressed like a clown. *Oh joy.*

Tommy lived life simply, slept and ate at the office and wore functional if austere clothing. He kept another spotted white coverall draped over the coat rack in the waiting room, and one in the trunk of his car. Fashion free and painfully utilitarian. I had made the mistake once of thinking the others were clean. Tommy went to the airing out school of laundry.

I carefully re-drew the tall false eyes on my forehead. *When in Rome, right?* Then, I put the makeup and mirror back into the drawer and closed it, before sitting and kicking my big black boots onto the desk.

Elmo poked his head through the door. "Client's here, Boss."

He disappeared with a snap of skin and was replaced by a tall thin gentleman in the early stages of death. His face was a mottled blue and gray hue with stains of dark purple shadowing each eye. It took a long time for oxygen to leach out of blood when it happened from the inside out. It made for some startling skin tones. From his complexion, I judged him to be recently deceased.

His almond-shaped face was crowned with an expensive fedora that hung low over his brow—I immediately liked the hat. A crisp gray sharkskin suit showed off a lean and angular form. His large wool overcoat was draped across thin shoulders.

I rose and reached out to shake. The dry skin on his extended hand tickled the hairs on the back of mine and I giggled reflexively. I quickly covered my hypersensitivity by coughing and gesturing to the chair I kept across from me for clients. He set himself into it like a jeweler would a prized gem in gold. It was common among the dead to act like that for a while—all eggshells.

I returned his gaze across the desk.

"Mr. Wildclown?" His voice was not so thin and reedy that it couldn't carry the tone of genuine disbelief. He looked at my painted face with something like horror.

I nodded, then said: "and you're..."

“Conrad Billings.” He screwed up his eyes, and then tilted his head from side to side. His chin dipped, lips forming an ugly triangle. Carefully, he lifted the hat from his dead head with his dead hand.

A ragged hole sat high in his forehead about the size of a penny. By the shape, I figured it was the exit wound from a low-caliber bullet. Apparently he had decided to charm me with the sight of it because he set his hat softly in his lap.

“I’ve been murdered!” His words knifed out at me.

I pulled my bottom lip. “Looks like the bastard shot you from behind, too.”

Billings made fists of his dead hands and pounded the arms of the chair. “I want him!”

Chapter 3

“All right,” I said. “How’d it happen?”

Mr. Billings looked uncomfortable as he squeaked around in his seat. I knew the look; he was about to be fairly dishonest with me.

“You must realize the importance of—confidentiality.” His eyes did a conscientious little roll of self-possession until they came to rest on me again, quivering and uncertain like bad actors. They were indefinite and restless on either side of his hatchet nose. Perfectly unconvincing so far.

“You may not believe this, but under all this makeup, I’m a goddamned angel,” I sneered. “Besides, there are few people who take my word seriously.” I flashed him a quick idiot grin.

“May I ask?” The dead man nervously pulled out a package of cigarettes and lit one.

“The makeup?” I cut him off. “It’s none of your business.” In truth I only had vague suspicions myself. The clown’s thoughts, public and private, were only dull impressions to me. I reached into the desk drawer over my knees and pulled out a photostat of my license. I had three copies. One I kept in Tommy’s egg-shaped plastic change purse, the other in the Chrysler’s glove compartment. I threw the license across the desk. Billings leaned forward, studied it for a minute then pushed it awkwardly out of the lamplight with his numb hands.

“Very well.” His face held an uncomfortable, chastised look. “I’ll have to trust you.”

“Yes, you will. Besides, even if I am just another asshole who thinks he’s a detective and happens to dress like a clown, you could use me to get whatever’s bothering you off your chest. It’s free for the time being.” I could feel echoes of Tommy’s psyche rise angrily within. I released the ire through a pair of clenched fists. I squeaked my chair. I liked the sound of it. Mr. Billings screwed up his face. He didn’t.

He began: “I was visiting a friend—er, a specialist, she’s a massage therapist who treats me for a back problem...”

‘*Bucking hips syndrome*,’ I thought, and grinned at the idea of a dead man trying to cover up his living tracks.

He continued: “It happened in the older part of town—the Downings—47th Street. I met with her for a treatment and must have fallen asleep. I woke up around three a.m. and I guess I was dreaming, because I thought I heard a baby crying. I was up, so I decided to

go to the washroom. I went—the washroom adjoins the bedroom—and when I was through I heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

“There must have been another blackout because I tried to turn on the overhead light. When nothing happened, I felt around on the bed and found my therapist. She was in a deep sleep—we’d shared a bottle of gin earlier, so I grabbed a candle from the nightstand—lit it—and walked out into the living room. The candle didn’t throw much light. I took about six steps, felt a minor pressure at the back of my head...then it was B-b-bl-blacktime.” His newly deceased tongue machine-gunned the word. ‘*Blacktime*’ was the catchphrase for the amnesia dead people experienced in the moments between life and death. The length of it varied from person to person.

“How long were you out?” I asked.

“I don’t know, you’ll have to understand my condition, having just been shot, I was rather frantic. Though I do not remember the moments immediately following my waking, I know it was morning. But the impressions I have of that time are funny—fuzzy.”

I nodded my head, lit a cigarette of my own. “So your therapist found you.”

“No, I was alone. I can remember wandering downstairs...it was a horror! I spoke to someone then, a little fellow—the night clerk, I think...”

“So,” I said, “what happened to your therapist?”

His face drooped like someone had yanked the bones out of it. “I’m afraid that is a problem. She disappeared.”

I clicked my tongue and felt adrenaline prick the hair on my scalp. The prickling caused a distracting shiver to itch quickly down the length of my back. “How long?” I drummed fingers on the desk—enjoyed the feeling.

“You must understand, that being newly deceased, my mind was preoccupied with many details. I spoke to Authority, told them what had happened. They’ve investigated, I’m told. My wife had to be notified...it was a very strange time.” He studied his fingernails like they were unfamiliar to him. Maybe he was realizing they would never grow again. Billings would soon find out there were varnishes on the market designed to thicken and preserve them. “They told me about you though.”

“Who?” I tried to imagine a single Authority Investigator who hated his career enough to recommend Wildclown Investigations.

“You were recommended to me by an Inspector Borden. He interviewed me later, after the initial questioning.”

“Don’t know him. When were you killed?” I snatched a notepad and pencil from the desk, wrote *Borden*.

“It was two nights ago, Thursday, the first,” he said this in hushed tones, as if we were at a funeral in the rain. “The Authority Investigators said they tried to question my therapist, but she has simply vanished. They’re still investigating—said they’d contact me if anything turned up. Jan Van Reydner is her name—my therapist. She hasn’t been seen since that night. Left her valuables and everything—apparently.”

“It will cost you a hundred a day to find your murderer, plus expenses.” I murmured, jotting the therapist’s name beside Borden’s.

The dead lawyer smiled and shook his head. “I was told you worked for two hundred dollars a week on your last case, Mr. Wildclown.” I could tell that for a moment at least he was feeling like his old self. “Nevertheless, I’ll pay you seventy-five dollars a day to

get my killer. Authority is too big and clumsy; they're investigating too many murders now—others that are more—more important. I'm at the back of the line. 'Be patient,' they said. Patient! It's not right! It's not right! I've been murdered, and they ask me to be patient!" He rose to his feet, dead voice alive with rage. He shook his thin arms at me.

"Well, I'll show them patience! I want my murderer dead! There's a ten thousand dollar bonus in it if you make sure he experiences...that he feels what it's...only his death is good enough for me!" he rasped—his face was strained and oily in the lamplight. A last wave of anger caught his fists and pounded my desk.

"Be careful." I gestured to his fists, then the desk. "You've got to learn to take things easy. You don't heal any more." I spotted Elmo's face peeking in the door. I shook my head—he vanished.

I lit a cigarette.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Billings. I can't guarantee I'll kill him, but I'll find him for you. Killing is still illegal in the eyes of Authority, and I don't want to experience one of their jails. I'll find him." I smiled. "I'll need your massage therapist's address and a number where I can contact you."

Billings fumbled in his vest pocket and produced a business card. He scribbled something on the back. It skimmed across the desk, hit the phone.

I read the address. "The Morocco Hotel?" I looked at him. "That's where she lived?"

"No. That's where we got together." Billings' eyes trembled under the weight of disclosure. "I first met her at the gym I belong—*belonged*—to." He paused, saying goodbye to another facet of his life before continuing. "She convinced me to try one of her treatments."

"How long did you know her?"

"About three months." He looked away.

"She didn't have a phone number?" I put the card on the desk.

Billings deflated. "Jan called me to arrange treatments. I assumed she was married too." His hat had fallen to the floor as he had risen. He shuffled over, bent to retrieve it. From my vantage point, I could see that his left buttock was indented like a punched pillow from a wayward spring in the chair. It looked like Mr. Billings was in need of a lot more re-hydration therapy.

He cocked an eye over his shoulder as he set his hat over the mortal wound in his forehead.

"You'll contact me," he whispered like he was exhausted.

"Yeah," I said and watched his back go out the door.

Elmo came in and took his seat opposite me. His face looked anxious, but it was always hard to tell what was really going on in his head.

"Warm up the Chrysler, old boy. It looks like we're working again." I grinned through a cloud of smoke and watched him leave the office.

Seventy-five bucks a day wasn't much, but it would buy us a few more of these dismal days and—what did Tommy say, more senseless arguments. *A lot of whiskey!* The phrase floated up through my mind from the depths where Tommy's spirit lurked.

"It *will* buy a lot of whiskey," I agreed then pulled the bottle out of the desk and took a barefaced snort from it. I relished the burning pressure in my throat and the cool slap on my face and neck where I spilled it. I took another belt and smiled wildly at my reflection

in the door's dimpled window. I put the bottle away, checked the action of my gun and left the office with a cigarette clamped between my teeth.

Chapter 4

"Sleazebags will be sleazebags 'til the end of time," I said, gesturing to a pimp who counted money in the dim light of a flickering street lamp. Two foxy lady corpses in tight red skirts leaned provocatively against the front fender of his mint-green Cadillac. I lit a cigarette.

"No kidding," muttered Elmo nodding his knobby head. His hands moved in swift practiced motions on the wheel. "The way I see it," he continued. "Everything's going to be everything 'til the end of time."

"Just my luck." I chuckled at the absurd humor and flicked ash out the window. I imagined an eternity playing mental leapfrog with a loser who dressed like a clown. "No thanks!" I sneered at the idea and blew a thin stream of smoke between my teeth.

Our sleek retro 1965 Chrysler Newport roared past a group that stood on the crumbling curb. A gang of dead youths with spiky hair and pierced faces dressed in studded leather and chains made threatening gestures as we passed. The light from a truck they'd set aflame had the pavement at their feet glowing, illuminating a body there. The tires of the Chrysler hissed like cobras over the damp streets, still wet with rain. Dark alleys yawned on either side of us and passed quickly like gaps in the giant bars of some terrible cage.

I caught glimpses of figures moving jerkily in the amber light of bonfires. They were silhouette monkeys clambering through a grim jungle of twisted steel and night.

In the air, there was the thick scent of oriental oils dead men used to keep their skins supple. Burned rubber colored the reeking breeze black. A group of pariah dogs quarreled over something that waved a walking stick. A shot echoed out of an alley.

This was Greasetown after dark. The city's original name was left behind with the world it belonged to. Greasetown had been adopted soon after the Change and it stuck, it was said, because after a walk down one of its streets, you got something on you that wouldn't come off.

A graffiti sign three stories tall screamed *DOWNINGS*. The letters were painted in neon orange on the wall of a burned out warehouse. The residents of this fair neighborhood had put it up for reasons of their own—either as welcome or warning. Authority had little influence in this section, which was good, because it gave a guy like me freedom I never had in the controlled parts of town, like New Garden.

Authority, which was all that remained of law and order after the Change, had reprimanded me a few times about my occasional excesses. I usually just shrugged like a bad little boy and kicked my heels whenever I was dragged in.

For the most part my cases were nickel and dime divorce stuff, lean on the odd creditor—nothing worth mentioning. After all, I knew they needed guys like me. Poor slobs who bust their knuckles and cheekbones because they think they know what's right and don't have the sense to become newspaper reporters or social workers.

Guys like me who did the dirty work: bush beaters.

The car fishtailed silently through the puddles, and I had to lend Elmo a hand on the wheel. It was no trouble. The force of his turn had put me into his right hip pocket.

“Thanks, Boss,” Elmo chattered as I inched back to my seat. “That was one wild mother corner.”

“Just keep her between the curbs, Fatso.” I stared hard out the window and tried to unclench the muscles in my back and shoulders. My spine felt like a rusted spring. Elmo had a tendency to be a little brasher than other dead men I’d known. The majority of them walked around on tiptoes, trying to keep from scratching a body that wouldn’t heal.

As one dead acquaintance, Smilin’ Riley, had told me, “A hangnail on a dead man. Fuck, you might as well sew a zipper on!”

I chuckled at the memory and vaguely wondered what had happened to him. Smilin’ Riley got his name because he had thin lips. Death had shrunk them to the thickness of a rubber band and stretched them back to his ears. I looked at Elmo’s full lips and knew he was one of the lucky ones—of course, he had to take care not to bite them. I watched him from the corner of my eye.

He was a mystery. I knew only that Elmo used to be grossly overweight, and went by the uncomfortable nickname *Fat Elmo*. I suspected he worked as a detective or private eye at some time because he behaved more professionally than I did. I couldn’t prove it because the dead man’s memory was hazy and in some places blank.

Since my time in Wildclown’s body was limited, Elmo’s full pedigree was a puzzle I didn’t have the leisure to investigate. I believed that Elmo and I were brothers in a sense. It was my assumption that like him I was dead. Our major difference being that he had a body; I did not. As a result I was forced to hitch a ride on Tommy’s square-wheeled wagon.

I had few clues to where the two of them had met and they, true to form, shared the ignorance—or were reluctant to discuss it. I had hoped that casual conversation elicited by me, and eavesdropped from my place near the ceiling would fill in some of the pieces of the puzzle; but they seemed to be disinterested in the past in any way other than how different things were now in comparison to it. I was in business with the pair for about six months before I quit trying to find out. Now, two years had passed. I was still pretty sure that neither of them knew I existed.

Elmo slammed on the brakes and I took a mouthful of dashboard. I came up cursing and spitting and looked out at a long roadblock that stretched burning across the street. Poisonous black smoke billowed from it.

“Queens!” Elmo shrieked in a voice that would have shamed a choirboy.

My gun was already in my hand.

“Back it out!” I barked before throwing my head around to see a truck had been pushed across the road behind. The cab was burned out—the windows were black and puckered like scar tissue.

Against the flaming barricade before us, strange shapes suddenly began to appear. Except for a few short squat forms, the majority of these Queens were tall and burly. They wore pink silk panties and black leather chaps. Brassieres cupped muscular chests while skirts of chiffon and taffeta curled and licked at the smoking wind.

I stifled a giggle. I could feel Tommy’s hidden mirth tickling at the back of my mind. True, they were as dangerous as hell, but they looked like assholes. Elmo began to chatter to himself—frightened. He knew the stories of Queens dismembering the dead as climax

to their experiments in the necromantic arts—heavy on the *romantic*. I casually patted his arm with my gun, hardened my nerves, and stepped onto the street.

The pavement was greasy under me as I glared into the whiskered faces of the hormone freaks. The Queen leader stepped forward. He was huge, made taller by a mountainous blonde Afro. He completed the picture by sporting a leather pantsuit with studs.

“Fucker, you...!” He shouted through thick painted lips, and then twisted his face in recognition. “You’re that Wildclown asshole.”

“Unfortunately for you,” I growled. “You’ll never see the real McCoy.” Inside me, Tommy’s spirit tittered wildly. My hand clenched the gun nervously. “You all look lovely tonight. But why don’t you girls find something else to amuse yourselves; go do your nails.”

I was about five feet from the car. I could sense the approach of other Queens behind me. In all, I think I was facing twenty of them. The only thing keeping me virtuous was the .44 automatic that was plainly visible where it snaked around in my hand. Still, I only had ten shots in it and would never get another clip in. If these guys were glueheads or PCP freaks they might make a rush for me.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Wildclown.” The head Queen had a very good growl of his own. “I hear you’re crazy as a Varsol drinker.”

I smiled beneath my painted grin. “You girls and your gossip.”

The Queens had gathered in a thirty-foot ring around the Chrysler and me. Their leader moved smoothly toward me letting his spiked hormones work for him. His face was obscene.

“I’ll tell you another thing, my sweet-assed clown. I’ve heard that you like it like a woman. I bet you’d beg for it if we spanked you hard enough.” He drew nearer. “I’ve heard about your hard on, boy, I know you like to use it.” I noticed that as he approached he was slowly inching his lace panties down. He was now close enough that I almost choked on his cheap perfume. It smelled like turpentine and sweat. “I heard you like fuckin’ like a bird likes flying.” He dipped his whiskered chin and looked at my gun. “I also heard, my sweet baby boy, that you don’t kill people.”

“One thing you pasties have to learn about gossip...” I stared at the garish false eyelashes over his sick eyes. “It’s never a hundred per cent true.” I fired a single shot into his chest that lifted him off his feet and dropped him six feet away.

I spun on my heel and jammed my back against the car. “Next one of you sisters that moves gets it—Blacktime!” I waved my gun at them. “I don’t play games like your dear leader, so whoever wants to be the runner up in the dead queen contest, step forward!”

Elmo gunned the engine. I swung the automatic around, trying to give them my ‘I eat nails for breakfast’ face—not easy in clown makeup.

“Go! Now! Run away!” I yelled. “This isn’t the real world any more.”

I fired a slug and tore open the thick calf of a bearded Queen in perverse yellow tights. He dropped shrieking. “Eight of you can still take the death walk!”

They turned and ran as a unit, taking their wounded comrade with them. Their ridiculous hairy asses bobbed beneath thin silks. My eyes glared after them then fell on the dead Queen. He lay in the street like some ill-fated Hollywood starlet. All he needed was a bouquet of withered roses and a shoebox full of yellowed love letters—maybe a princess phone, receiver off the hook. I felt like I’d done the world a favor.

I slid into the car next to Elmo. The engine roared hungrily.

“Sorry, Fatso,” I said.

“That’s okay, Boss. I never seen a man needed killing more’n that one,” Elmo muttered this as he drove onto the sidewalk and dragged past the barricade with a scrape of painted steel.

As we moved through the scene of death and destruction, I could feel Tommy’s soul glowing within. It was as though he were happy for the first time in his life.

“The Morocco Building,” I said, and began to wrestle with thoughts of my own.

Chapter 5

The street lamp buzzed and sawed overhead like an angry bee. Sparks leapt from the naked bulb. The Morocco Building was constructed of dirty red brick. About fifteen stories up, a wood and neon replica of an Arab minaret hung awkwardly from its moorings on the roof. It leaned over the street menacingly.

I watched as people instinctively darted from beneath its shadow.

Candles colored the building’s many windows with an interior orange light too warm for this neighborhood. That light belonged in the hearth of some long ago home—not here on another godless night in Greasetown. My eye caught movement in a window, and I watched as a slack-breasted woman stripped with skinny arms. I turned away and nodded to Elmo.

“Wait in the car,” I said, got out and then hurried under the shadow of the derelict dome. It was Saturday night, around eleven—thirty minutes after I had killed the Queen. Rain continued to fall in an oily drizzle.

The double door hung from mismatched hinges with dirty light creeping out around it at odd angles. I grabbed the handle; it crawled under my grip. I pulled the door open and was slapped in the face with the reek of urine. I wiped my palms over my coveralls, and then moved them up to the gun at my waist. It felt two bullets light. I cursed my carelessness and then did a quick inventory.

Bullets had grown too scarce for such haphazard killing. Authority was doing their best to enforce their ban. But as always, the Black Market picked up any slack the legislation created. The Black Market loved a ban—it drove the price.

I walked over creaking floorboards to a front desk that resembled a battered truck fender. Just behind it was a ruddy balding head with a mixture of black and gray hairs straggling from it like dying weeds.

“Good evening,” I said to the cranium.

A pair of eyes peeked over the counter that were so deep and dark that they seemed blurred, as though hastily sketched on with a felt tip pen.

“What?” drawled a voice of gargled glass.

“Interesting how you can cut through all the semantics and see the pure essence of the matter,” I replied glibly before continuing: “I’m looking for a woman—a massage therapist of the carnal kind, I believe. Her name is Miss, Ms. or Mrs. Jan Van Reydner. For that matter she could have been a Mr. with a taste for women’s hormones and clothes.”

“Gone!” growled the eyes before they looked away.

“Gone...” the voice grumbled.

“I can see they don’t pay you by the syllable.” I smirked behind my face paint.

Suddenly the eyes whipped toward me and flashed angry little egg-rings of white. A distant rumbling began. The eyes rose, followed by shoulders the size of an ox. His deep chest was covered with bear fur and heaved like an asthmatic’s. He stood for a moment looking at me. The face perched high above me was scarred and dented. A baseball bat in one hand smacked the other with a dead meat abattoir sound.

“Fuck off!” he bellowed. My hair curled behind me in a garlicky breeze.

“I’m a detective,” I said, watching the results of years of steroid abuse climb up and down his arms like Swedish mountaineers.

“Okay, fuck off, *detective*.” I noticed for the first time that he had mastered the art of eye socket dilation.

“I want to talk to her,” I insisted.

“Did ya hear me, shithead? Or do you want me to cut you another ear. She ain’t here.”

“Excellent use of the rhetorical question, very good.” I leaned toward him. “My name’s Wildclown.” I wasn’t afraid, but for some reason my testicles were rattling around in my lungs.

He paused for a minute and clenched his craggy face. He was not beautiful. Under an ambiguous cherub nose was a scar where someone had tried to carve a smile across his cheeks.

“Wildclown...” he muttered, scratching his head with a bratwurst finger. “I heard’a you. You in good with Authority?”

It was a question with dubious implications. For all I knew it was Authority who had decorated his face. I gambled. “No. If Greasetown were an asshole, you’d put cream on Authority.”

His face blanked while tremors churned his muscular arms. The bat, which had been tenderizing his palm, stopped with a final thwack! My hand slid along my belt nearer the gun.

He smiled and flung the bat behind him, then reached out a mammoth paw. “Fuckin’-A, Man.”

I slipped my hand into his and let him squeeze the marrow out of it.

He gave it back and started talking. “Yah, fuckin’ Authority!” He laughed. “You’re okay, Wildclown. Not bad for a little shit in makeup.”

He leaned heavily on the counter. His callused elbows were rough enough to cut glass. He rammed a finger in his nose in introduction. “I’m Douglas Willieboy, man. I’m from down south.”

Now that he was using more than one syllable, I did detect a slight twang.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Willieboy. Can you answer a few questions?”

He laughed and slapped the counter. “Oh shit yah, for a price, Mr. Wildclown. There was a murder in her room up there, you know.”

Usually, when a mountain tells you this, you prepare to part with a sizable sum.

“How much?”

He looked me up and down. “Authority is looking for that Van Reydner broad. They got her room closed up tight. I think I’d have to break a law to get you in.” He rubbed his chin. “How much you got?”

“Forty?”

He laughed, “I’d a done it for twenty,” Willieboy guffawed; his laugh was incongruously high and ladylike. “Forty it is!”

I pulled out Tommy’s annoying plastic mouth-purse and after a short struggle, produced the forty dollars.

Willieboy cackled with glee after he had cast an eye over me. “Shit, you even got a gun, Wildclown! You’re one soft touch.”

I grinned along with him. Beneath my consciousness, I could feel an instinctive pang of anger from Tommy. Apparently *his* pride was wounded.

“Okay,” I said as I watched the forty disappear forever, rolled into one of the sleeves of his T-shirt. “Where’s her room?”

“I’ll take you,” he grunted as he wrenched up a section in the counter top and moved his bulk toward the stair. Keys jangled from a chain at his thin waist. His battered denims, with the remnants of bleached out numbers at the cuff, told me of a Southern jail less one prisoner.

“C’mon.” He gestured with a large hand. “The elevator’s fucked. We’ll have to hoof it!” He walked to a wide stairway covered in moldy purple carpet—he began to stomp up.

I stomped after him. “What floor?”

“Twelfth,” he mumbled, laughed and then lit a cigarette.

“Twelfth,” I echoed, searching my pockets for my own.

Chapter 6

I was gasping and claustrophobic beneath my makeup by the time we reached the twelfth floor. Tommy didn’t get to the gym very often.

Upon arrival, Willieboy daintily removed the strip of Authority caution tape from the doorframe. He smiled as he did it. Then he wrestled with the lock and key.

“C’mon, bastard,” he growled. The name-calling worked because the door swung open with a hollow warped sound. Willieboy clawed and slapped at the inside wall until a light flicked on. A single dim ceiling lamp lit the room. The light from it etched a dirty yellow star above us.

“There, man.” Willieboy gestured for me to enter with a quick snap of his head.

I walked onto dull brown wall-to-wall that had long since forgotten its original color. Two armchairs framed an ancient television and a tattered sofa bisected the room.

“Thanks,” I said. “Mind if I look around?”

“Nah,” he grunted. “Just don’t take nothin’. We’re holding her stuff until she comes up with the rent she owes.”

“Did you know her?” I asked, idly gazing around the room. My guts jumped as I made out a large dark stain in the middle of the rug. I moved toward it.

“Nah,” he mumbled as he flung the chain of keys from hand to hand. “I only saw her the once or so. Great lookin’ piece with red hair. Her tits was out to here!” He made an exaggerated motion with his hands. I hoped he was exaggerating. “I just started here a couple of weeks ago. She dressed real fine and had an ass she could roll cigarettes with, I’ll bet. She was kind’a snooty though—didn’t have the time of day for me—or nobody else who didn’t pay.”

“Didn’t pay?” I said as my fingers probed the sticky darkness that smelled of must and old pennies.

“Sure, she was a go-girl, you know. Oh shit, she might’ve said she was a professional massage therapist or whatever, but I know she was a PRO-something else.” He winked. I think he winked. I couldn’t tell. His eyes were two bony caverns in the overhead light. I winked back anyway. It was one of those man-things.

“She just left?” I said absently, peering into a doorway that opened at the back of the room. There was a bed in it.

“Yah, so far as I know—course, I didn’t see her go. I was off that night. Hard to figure her leggin’ out without her silkies and stuff. Anyway, if you wanna talk more, see me at the desk. I been havin’ a shit-load of trouble lately with dead punks in the neighborhood. Jesus, those fuckers are hard to kill and they think they own the place!” His bulk moved from the doorway, a glassed picture of a schooner glinted on the wall outside.

“Lock up when you’re done!” He barked over his shoulder.

I nodded and walked into the bedroom. The bed was unmade and I could just detect the sour reek of baby oil. I moved to the closet—the door hung open.

On the floor, a small travel bag grimaced at me with brass teeth. I pulled my mini-flash out of my pocket and quickly probed the floor with its fairy light. Beside the travel bag, a rectangle of wheel marks on the dusty carpet told me a larger companion suitcase was missing. Farther in, shoes, purses and belts: the normal tangle you find on the floor of a woman’s closet. My flash winked across the shoulders of a line of dresses. I brushed them. They swayed like the Supremes.

Van Reydner was about medium height, if the dresses told me anything, and she wore a particularly flowery perfume. There were enough gaps on the rack to make me think a dress or two could be missing. I shrugged at the heaviness growing in my shoulders, then pulled the chair out from under the vanity and sat on it. I had to be careful now that I had been in Tommy’s body for a few hours. There was a tendency to get overwhelmed by sensation at first, followed by bouts of anxiety and introspection as the emotions piled up.

What in hell was I doing? It just wasn’t like the old days. *What old days?* I couldn’t remember them, any better than one remembers a childhood dream. Memories did come at me like shadows sometimes; but they were familiar feelings without a narrative, unrecognizable faces and places, nothing more. I just knew that life had been simpler then. Bodies stayed dead, and detectives possessed their own bodies.

Impulsively, I tried to remember a time before I knew Tommy, before my death if that was what had happened and immediately felt the usual sharp pain. It always happened. For some reason, what was left of me refused to remember what I was before.

The only thing I knew for sure about myself was that I was a detective. At least that was something. I had to get up, get working, and get moving. That was something too.

I pulled the chain on the lamp that rested atop the chipped enamel surface of the vanity. It didn’t work which didn’t surprise me. Nothing worked any more. Instead, my mini-flash’s dollar coin light scanned the wrecking yard of new and used makeup and creams scattered around it.

In an ashtray was the crumpled black nub of a cigar among a host of lipstick-stained cigarette butts. It was a cute little thing really—nothing big and Cuban about it. I pulled it out. It smelled like coffee or Irish Cream. I pocketed it, then opened the single drawer

and snooped inside—more makeup—a card for Simpson’s Skin Tanning Salon for the Deceased.

I almost thought that was strange, but matches of the kind were common. Advertising for afterlife products was an aggressive business. Flipping the matchbook over I found five numbers written in a strong hand. I put that in my pocket too, and then rummaged a little more. She must have had an appointment book. Of course, if she were on the run, she would have taken it with her.

I froze when the floor creaked in the outer room. I clicked off the flash and whipped out my gun. Dropped to one knee; I waited. Another board creaked, followed by the sound of cloth rustling. Edging forward quietly, I pushed a sliver of my eye around the doorframe.

Three dead men fidgeted in the doorway—the hall was a curtain of black behind them. One of them carried a double-barreled shotgun. He was very old and decrepit. His skin looked dry and cracked, and was heavily stitched with green shoelace around the jaw. Hair like weak spider webbing trailed at his shoulders. From his movements, I could tell he was the leader.

The other two were in equally bad shape and dressed the same, in filthy knee-length overcoats. One had dark green lichen or mold on the left side of his head; the other was missing a shoe. A mangled foot showing yellow bones protruded from his ragged pant leg.

I listened.

“Dis da’ room, now dammit. We do wadda boss wants. Dis da’ room I knowed it,” the leader hissed. “Horley, got da jooze man?”

Automatically, I ran an inventory. They were obviously derelicts—the smell that tortured the air in the room gave that away—likely hired on a one-shot deal. I was positive all three were dead—which was bad. Eight bullets wouldn’t guarantee a take down on any one of them. I knew I could take the head off the leader, but that would leave me with a scratch and claw finale with the others.

My guts told me the dead men wouldn’t respond well to a calm discussion. I watched the machine-like clasping of their withered hands. Their muscles would be like woven leather—hard to rip or cut. I took a bead on the leader’s head.

“Okey,” he garbled in a guttural lipless slur, teeth clicking like typewriter keys. “Doot!”

A flame flared in the hands of one of his cronies and a glass bottle of gasoline appeared in the hands of the other. The rag atop the bottle burst into flame and for a moment they stared wide-eyed. The dead feared fire. Their bodies go up like tinder.

I knew this. With all the preservatives and oils they used they burned like torches.

I’m glad I knew this because when the dead leader took the bottle and raised his arm to pitch the cocktail, my gun roared once. The bottle disappeared in a ball of flame—so did the dead men. The shotgun blazed, and the wall came away over my head.

I glanced in and saw all three doing a fiery dance. They were screeching, staggering and rolling—setting the whole room on fire. The outer doorframe burst into flame along with the hallway outside. They must have splashed a lot of gasoline around. In a moment, I knew the whole building would go up.

I turned. The only way out was the window.

Twelve stories down—no net.

That was the flaw in my plan. I slipped my gun away, and tore the sheets off the bed. I caught a glimpse of myself in the vanity mirror. In the eerie red light, I looked like some terrified clown in Hell. I knotted together the sheets and a blanket, then kicked the window out. Above me, I could see the fake Arab minaret hanging drunkenly over the street. It was about fifteen feet above me, but its wooden supports looked inviting. A quick climb up onto the roof, and down the fire escape.

Easy.

The dead men were silent, and the heat of the flames was growing intense accelerated by the tough old flesh and ratty clothing. I turned back to the room to attack the vanity chair.

In moments, I had it apart and had fashioned a crude grappling hook from its chromium legs. I knotted the sheets to this and leapt to the window. The flames were already licking the frame of the bedroom door. I glared down at the street below. News of the fire had traveled fast.

A crowd had gathered. They chanted, “Burn, burn, burn!”

I tested the weight of the hook in my hand and swung it upwards. It lodged in the wooden framework on the first try. Doing my best to grin like Captain Blood, I tugged twice on the sheets and launched myself into space.

There wasn't even a single sound of protest as the whole structure came off the building. Not a creak of wood, no groan of tortured nails, it just came off of the building like it had been balanced there awaiting the exact addition of my weight to upset its ancient equilibrium.

I think I screamed once as I fell toward the street with the strange, crumbling structure. I clung tight to the sheets. I really didn't have anything else to do.

I remember a sharp, searing jolt to my shoulders, and a powerful tearing of wood. Then falling again. Then another jolt, a wild swing and a tooth chipping slap into bricks.

More falling.

I tasted blood—there was another crash of wood and bricks and human—then a darkness that was complete. Which was strange.

Chapter 7

I awoke with a dizzy, sickening sensation. Strange, because since I had become what I am, incorporeal, a spirit, whatever, I had never lost consciousness. In the two years since my emergence from utter blackness, I had never felt any sensation that could be termed physical when dispossessed. I could hear and see—nothing else. Now nausea. I floated over Tommy's body where it sprawled across the backseat of the Chrysler.

“He g-going to be all right...” Elmo's muttered to himself behind the wheel. His worried eyes appeared in the rearview mirror. “Yeah, he going to be f-fine.”

The closest thing I ever had to sensation when in my nonphysical state occurred during the process I used to prepare for possession. To take over, I had to link up with the pleasure center in Tommy's brain. I don't know if that's what really happened, but I seemed to have some ability to excite his lower brain functions and trick him into an internal world of fantasy.

I would begin by broadcasting provocative sexual images until I felt or saw their echoes mirrored in the nervous activity of his brain—tiny motes of light appeared like fireflies. At the right moment whatever force separated us seemed to disappear and the vacuum created sucked me into the driver's seat. The odd time I could sense Tommy's soul flit past me like a shadow before it disappeared. Most often I experienced nothing more than a moment of transition, of null space and it was done.

As I struggled with this impossible nauseous echo, I listened.

"Jesus, Boss, that was somethin'—shit!" He glanced quickly over his shoulder. "Swingin' down like a j-jungle man."

I looked Tommy over and saw that he was breathing; though his body was peppered with cuts and bruises. On his left temple, an ugly gash oozed pink into his makeup.

"Holy Moses, Boss." Elmo almost hooted. "You're the luckiest man I ever met. If that p-power cord didn't slow you down—you'd be as dead as me—but flatter!" His laugh was like dry leaves rustling.

Tommy moaned menacingly below me.

"Shit—sorry, Boss—ress, ress!"

As Elmo focused on driving, I tried to concentrate on my problems. I'd been possessing Tommy's body for about two years now and had never lost consciousness. The closest I came to that was a strange hallucinogenic trance I experienced in the wee hours of the morning. I thought of it as sleep, but the images I saw in these trances occurred within my field of vision, overlapping reality and would cease the moment I wanted them to. In the past, if I got into a scrape and Tommy was knocked out, I was simply expelled from his body. There was some slight disorientation of transition, but nothing more.

Transition. That was the way it always happened.

I looked down at Tommy and chased all thoughts of possession from my mind. I had no desire to feel his pain. Egocentric of me, but I had to think. Who had sent the arsonists? They were looking for the room, so either they were there to get *me*, or just the room. I couldn't imagine that it was an old score being settled. No one could have known I was there. If they came to get the room then Billings' murderer had hired them to hide evidence. Unfortunately, there would be nothing left of them to question after the inferno.

Elmo took a corner at about seventy and Tommy slid headfirst across the backseat into the door. He muttered and moaned—snatched at his belt—there was no gun—then at his head. He looked at the hand that came away red. He struggled upright, and for an uncomfortable moment his head entered the space I was occupying.

"Where the hell am I?" he grunted, leaning forward. "Fuck, what a dream!"

Silently, he watched the road, forehead wrinkled, mouth moving like a sleep talker's. Elmo answered in his dry-lipped lisp.

"Took a fall, Mr. Wildclown. Course the fire was already lickin' yer b-boots when you made like the jungle man."

Tommy's face looked quizzically at Elmo, then he burst out. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

It was Elmo's turn to stare. His dead eyes were cue balls as he gaped over his shoulder.

"The Morocco..."

While these two conversed, the car took the opportunity to drive off the road, crush the fender of a parked truck and bend a street lamp forty-five degrees before Elmo could wrestle it back under control.

I was glad Chrysler made big cars.

“Christ!” scolded Tommy, hands clutching Elmo’s headrest. “Would you watch what you’re doing?” His fingers dropped to the skipping rope at his waist. “Where’s my gun?”

Elmo related the story of going to the Morocco Building and waiting in the car while Tommy looked over the murder scene for clues to Van Reydner’s whereabouts. Tommy listened blankly; giving no impression that he heard anything at all. Elmo ended the tale with an enthusiastic narration of Tommy’s escape from the fire—his incredible jerking, jarring descent as the old minaret fell with him. A thick power cord bolted up the front of the building slowed its fall. I tried to imagine the ridiculous thing lit up like some Islamic casino...but was cut off by Tommy.

“Great Elmo, great, but this Van Reydner chick what was I gonna do, fuck her or what?”

Elmo started to retell the story from the beginning. This time Tommy became excited.

“Right, right—we were having a drink right!” He sat back, rubbed his chin—then blurted. “My gun!”

“Here Boss.” Elmo handed the .44 over the seat. “I g-grabbed it off the sidewalk after I pulled you out of that wrecked Arab thing.”

Tommy snatched the gun and slid it through his belt. He pressed its cold black length against his groin with a satisfied sigh, but the reassuring steel could not chase all the doubt from his dark eyes. Tommy spent the rest of the trip to the office silent smiling weakly as he stroked his gun.

I continued to float overhead. I wanted to talk to Mr. Willieboy.

Chapter 8

The phone was ringing as Tommy shouldered open the door marked *Wildclown Investigations*. He muscled through the next to the inner office and snatched the receiver from its cradle.

“Yeah,” he started in monosyllabic glory as he targeted the office chair and fell into it.

I contented myself with floating overhead. That’s what happened when Tommy moved around, I got dragged along about a foot from the ceiling like a disgruntled balloon. Possessing Tommy was the only action I could initiate in my vaporous form. It was galling, voyeuristic and frustrating, but such was the down side of our relationship. It could also be downright unsettling as I got pulled from place to place without apparent regard for doorframes and low ceilings. Whatever my story was, what remained of me passed through solid matter like it wasn’t there.

Before I could overhear what the caller was saying, Elmo distracted me by entering and sliding onto the business chair in a riot of springs. He was wiping his lips on a handkerchief. The dark skin on his forehead and cheeks had a lustrous, oily sheen to it. He must have re-hydrated in the outer office. Elmo kept a mixture of cod and mineral oils

in a carafe beside the water cooler for just such a purpose. He applied it to himself internally and externally—a process I had witnessed and didn't want to see again.

It was just one of the problems with being dead in the New Age. They had to keep well oiled and cool if they wanted to stave off those desiccating effects that remained after *the Change*.

That's what most people called it.

There were other terms for the strange new circumstance the world found itself in: the rapture, happening or Armageddon, but as the years passed people just got used to calling it the Change.

I read about how it happened in back issues of the *Greasetown Gazette*. Fifty years ago a strange contiguous weather pattern of cloud and rain blotted out the skies of earth. The resulting disastrous downpour soon melted what remained of the ice caps and raised the sea levels enough to threaten if not drown every coastal city. Before that happened, about two months after the rains began, the dead rose from their graves.

Some inexplicable force animated all dead flesh. I once watched a pork chop twitch its way completely off its plate—which was an unsettling thing to see, and a warning against undercooking pig.

The scientists were caught between primitive wonderment and scientific horror because they couldn't explain it. Most of them were still stumped by the global rainstorm when the first corpse walked into an unemployment office.

Science soon determined that there had been a mass extinction of the majority of bacterial species on the planet. The cause was unknown, but it was soon understood that extinction had occurred on a scale that dwarfed the one that got the dinosaurs. It didn't get them all, yeast remained and certain cousins—which drew celebratory yelps from boozehounds the world over. But everything else died off.

The leap was taken from there to the fact that dead flesh no longer rotted—or if it did, it did so slowly. There were certain bacteria and lichens remaining that fed on minerals and proteins in the flesh, and there were molds that could cause a slow break down and raise a stink. Dead flesh was still subject to physical damage and dehydration but with careful cleaning and maintenance, and if they avoided flies, the dead could preserve what they had indefinitely.

And it seemed to go for the spirit too. Anyone lucky enough to die with his or her brain intact, retained all or most of the mind. It further frightened the scientists to discover that even individuals whose brains had been sloppily replaced after an autopsy retained much of their awareness. Research finally determined in quite unscientific fashion that a dead individual retained his personality if he had something like a pinch of medulla oblongata and a tablespoon of cerebellum or cerebral cortex.

“Yeah.” Tommy's hand signal for drinking brought me from my reverie. Elmo pointed to the desk.

“Yeah, oh yeah. Really?” Tommy breathed into the phone as he pulled a near-empty office bottle from the desk. After draining it he flung it angrily into the wastebasket and scowled at Elmo.

The dead man pointed to the chair Tommy was sitting in and mouthed, “emergency bottle.”

“Yeah, uh...” Frowning Tommy dropped the receiver into its cradle. I could just make out a quiet babble as the caller was cut off mid-sentence.

“What emergency bottle?” Tommy glared. Elmo pointed a nervous finger at the chair. “Th-the one you keep in the back of your chair.”

Elmo was talking about *my* emergency bottle. I had hoped to keep it a secret from Tommy, and had managed to; except for the time he lucked on it one dark night, but had been too drunk to retain the memory. He now dug into the space between the arm and the seat cushion. The mickey was half full in his hand when he pulled it out. The clown uncapped it and pressed it to his lips smiling. He gulped a couple of times before setting it down quarter-full. He gestured to Elmo.

“Got a smoke, guy?”

“No,” said Elmo. “We smoked the l-last on the way here...” He stammered, agitated, “Who was on da—th-the phone?” He gently cracked his knuckles, then rolled his eyes, embarrassed by the slip of his dead tongue.

Tommy’s features raged, incredulous. “Some Willieboy-bastard—no cigarettes, Elmo! Shit what kind of organization is this? I mean we can speak all the way around the world on wires, but we don’t have any smokes!” He shook his head, rose and circled the desk until he stood in front of his partner.

“Just another layer in the conspiracy, my friend. But, they won’t get me. No.” He leaned forward whispering, “They can take away my privacy with mini-cameras and microphones. They can take my office chair, my desk and my lamp. But when they come for my drink and my cigarettes—then it’s *personal!*” Tommy straightened and smiled, his mood lightened by the eruption of paranoia. “Let’s go get some. I’ve got this wild feeling to pile them high tonight.”

“But Boss—the c-case?” The dead man was shocked.

“Excellent thought, Elmo. A case of beer or two would add just the right amount of grease to the old chatter box.” He stabbed his temple with a finger. “I got to do some thinking.”

“But we should f-follow up that call?” Elmo was wide-eyed. He looked like he was about to quote from the Pinkerton book on Detective do’s and don’ts.

“All in good time, my dear Elmo! All in good time.” Tommy drew close to him, and rubbed condescension into the dead man’s shoulders. “We have to fight back the only way we know how.”

Elmo seemed to pale, if that was possible, before standing and moving reluctantly to the door. He knew the score.

Whenever Tommy started talking conspiracies, he usually sank into a drunken depression that lasted days. I knew I had to take some of the blame. Tommy’s mind was unbalanced in the first place. When I started a series of possessions his link to reality deteriorated rapidly.

But I had no choice.

Acting quickly I began imagining the most revolting sexual images I could come up with. I imagined them with close-ups and all. Tommy froze, his hyperactive mind suddenly sizzling with neurotransmitters.

A firestorm of nervous activity flickered across my field of vision. He was receptive but not entirely sold as my psyche crashed into his. The transition was not simple; the clown struggled feebly. There were a few awkward seconds of overlap. I saw chains and padded rooms. I felt plastic bristles scrub my cheeks. Anger surged through me, and pain

lanced my—Tommy’s—heart. I staggered and fell to one knee. Embarrassment and outrage howled through every nerve. Pain jolted my skull. I doubled over.

I’m not sure if it was Tommy or me who sobbed.

Suddenly, the world clarified. I lurched up onto unsteady legs and turned to Elmo, saw two of him, then the double vision passed. The only thing that registered on his face was open-mouthed, but vague surprise.

His boss had had a strange seizure that was all.

I could feel a dull throbbing from the gash on my temple. It was cold and raw to the touch. The palms of my hands were scored with fire, the knuckles swollen. I rubbed my shoulders. They were stiff and achy, overextended and fatigued. My back was strained and bruised. My guts felt smashed and broken. No wonder Tommy wanted a drink.

“Elmo, you go get some whiskey and cigarettes.” I could feel my face whiten beneath the paint as I experienced my injuries. The world spun—I staggered against the desk.

“I have to follow up that call,” I mumbled, and dropped into my chair.

Chapter 9

Pain had moved in and replaced the muscle stiffness. As the injuries revealed themselves to me I had seriously considered vacating the premises for healthier days.

The act of touching up my makeup had been a chore, but it focused my mind on things other than bruises and retreat. I had cleaned the gash on my temple and bandaged it. Half an hour had passed since I had taken over. I had twice tried to find Willieboy’s number in the phonebook. The operator wasn’t any help.

Elmo had resumed his seat across from me looking around, relaxed in his own fidgety way. His boss was back to normal; he would get by.

The phone rang. I pushed the receiver to my ear and welcomed the familiar cool circle against my skin. I immediately recognized Willieboy’s voice.

“What the fuck do you think yer doin’, man? Hanging up on me—damn!” His voice had a humorless, tired edge to it.

“Sorry,” I drawled to the best of my abilities. “It’s this crazy thing I do sometimes—keeps it spontaneous. But I’m glad you called back.”

“Oh shit!” he growled. “I should’a turned you into Authority. Fuck, I’m out of a job and jobs ain’t easy to find in the Downings. What’d you have to burn down the whole fuckin’ hotel for?”

“I didn’t.” It was my turn to flash ire. “Your goddamned friends nearly killed me!”

“My friends?” His voice registered genuine surprise. He paused, and then continued: “Look, like I said, I got something you might be interested in.”

“Something like giving your friends another chance,” I snarled.

“What the hell?” Again surprise. “I don’t know what’s rolling around in that bleached peanut you call a head, but if you’re curious come to my place and bring fifty bucks.”

“Let’s have the address.” I wrote it down, hung up the phone and glanced into Elmo’s steady gaze. I lit a cigarette and stared blankly out the window. The half-open blinds divided the scene into long thin strips.

The sky was a muddy gray, ghoulishly lit by the city’s inconsistent light; but I knew that the sun would soon be coming up somewhere out there behind the perpetual cloud.

Greasetown lumbered away from me like a dying elephant.

Buildings long past their prime sagged and yawned in a pathetic ballet of decrepitude. In the distance, I could see the fuzzy glow of fires burning down to coals. The streets were a hazy gray wash of fog. Vaguely, I counted the days and realized that I was looking out at a Sunday morning. I looked at the clock on my desk. Four a.m.

Sunday. Prayer books and hymns, spiritual eunuchs telling people about the way to live life. Hypocrisy out for a walk on a long leash. Endless lazy afternoons. A depression began to descend upon me in a steady drizzle and for a moment I let despair wash over me like a grim, black tide. Sundays were the worst, the end of one dead week and harbinger of the next. But I reveled in it. When the water gets deep—dive. Depression is a virtue. Only the holy find reasons to climb out of it.

Looking out the window, I could see no finger of doom, but I had the feeling one was not far off.

I fumbled for, and dragged the phone to my ear.

“Hungry Elmo?” I asked before dialing. “Oh, sorry.”

“That’s okay, Boss. I f-forget I’m dead myself sometimes.” The dead took liquids to keep themselves fresh, but they had no need for food.

I had a brief moment of realization. I was a dead detective possessing a lunatic’s body and having an early Sunday conversation with my dead sidekick. I forced the ideas from my mind and concentrated on the hot dogs and coffee I was ordering. It was an expensive way to eat junk food, but an all night diner down the street delivered anytime.

The only way to survive in Greasetown was to take certain things for granted.

All my reason told me I was dead and that I possessed another man’s body. For some insane reason he dressed like a clown. My companion, Fat Elmo, was dead as well, and a lot less fat. Desiccation had taken the smooth round shape of his belly and limbs. I could see how the stretched skin hung from him like sheets of thin black rubber. He was dead, but he was across from me smoking a cigarette. Something terrible had happened to the world that had driven reality insane.

Since I had no way of finding out what had happened, I tried not to dwell on it. That way was madness. All I needed to know was this: I was a detective, I tried to catch bad guys—I was on a case. Murder is still murder in Greasetown.

“Four hot dogs are on the way, Mr. Wildclown. Hot coffee too, sir! Boy will be right over.”

I cleaned and reloaded my gun as I waited.

Chapter 10

The hotdogs were still fighting when we pulled up in front of an ancient rooming house. Commanding the front lawn was a crude fountain that had been formed of bleak gray cement. Constructed, no doubt, to help justify the exorbitant rent people would have to pay to live behind it. Water trickled out of the top, adding to a sick brown pool clotted with leaves and smelling of dead rats. The whole thing looked lovely in the weak light of morning.

I belched ground hotdog, whiskey, onions, and coffee. I was tired and hung over. Nausea rippled through my system from epiglottis to the unseeing eye. I had the distinct feeling I had swallowed a sick python.

A chill raised the hair on my neck. I looked over into Elmo's eyes.

"Christ Elmo, remember to blink would you," I muttered and lurched out of the car. I leaned in the window. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

As Elmo lit a cigarette, I turned toward the house. Chavis Street was balanced on the edge of the Downings District and Gritburg. Gritburg was about an inch above the filth of Downings and about nine miles below most of the Authority controlled sections.

Downings was becoming overcrowded with the dead. They didn't have anywhere else to go. Right after the Change, the dead had been embraced as a welcome if somewhat unpleasant novelty. Since they retained their personalities, they were people that living people knew, and so there was a festive aspect of reunion to things. But they kept coming. And the longer the living had to think about it, the more unsettled they became.

It's one thing to have to look after an aged parent, quite another to have to oil up a dead one and live with its sleepless pacing. The dead didn't eat so they were relatively inexpensive to keep but their expressionless faces raised primitive hackles amongst their survivors.

The dead claimed to experience varied levels of sensation from pain to pleasure; but each case was different. Everything was different.

Psychologically, at least, they seemed to act on similar impulses to the living. There were dead dancers, romantics, rapists and thieves. But the more lifelike the dead behaved, the more the tension grew between the groups. Life was tough enough without having to compete for jobs with people who did not tire or sleep.

So most municipalities passed bylaws restricting the actions of the dead that would have contravened the rights of the living. The dead represented a large gray area that public opinion could exploit. And so, as the dead were oppressed, they began to strike back. There were incidents and riots; people were killed. The dead were burned and dismembered.

Unofficial *regulators* were brought in to suppress the uprisings, and then disbanded for excesses and abuse.

Eventually Authority stepped in and forced a truce between the groups. Dead people were free to travel in living sections of town if they were gainfully employed. So even in death the poor got poorer. The others were forced into derelict sections of town like Downings where the resident living people were already downtrodden enough not to care. In Gritburg it was slightly different. A dead man could walk down the street but he could not live there.

I snagged the toe of my boot on an uneven crack in the sidewalk and stumbled on my approach to the house. A faded picket fence circled the yard. Its gate was open forever, entangled in overgrown weeds. There was something nice about it.

From the lowest step of a broad front porch an old native woman hacked and gurgled until she spat chunks of lung onto the uncut lawn. She swilled down the remainder of her beer while two old men sat watching her with lust-glazed eyes. The old coots were stripped to the waist in the heat—their fat white bellies gleamed like fine china. The old woman was also bare-chested; her breasts hung slack like a couple of oranges in panty hose.

“Good morning,” I greeted the woman. “One hot bastard isn’t it?”

She looked at me like I was a mirage.

“Rot and socks you Microsoft—rot—rot!” Her smeared brown eyes coalesced for a moment to sharp black points that spewed venom at me, then oozed back into their natural shapeless state. She grunted, and then sucked her lips past toothless gums.

I smiled pleasantly and continued up past the old men perched on the top step. They didn’t make a move and could very well have been formed from the same cement as the fountain. I imagined them set out on the lawn with fishing poles and funny red caps.

The door had no knob and swung open with a slight push. Inside, I saw a battered old pay phone in the hallway. The dial was missing, the receiver was gone, and someone had gutted the body looking for change.

There were two doors—rooms one and two. Dirty tiles crackled underfoot as I made my way to a stairway shy a banister. On the way up, the odd wooden strut poked out of the blackened carpet like a rotten tooth. At the top of the stairs, I found room five. Its doorframe was chewed and chipped from a thousand break-ins.

I stood to one side of it—knocked, then heard a grumbling sound within. A metallic rattle followed as someone fumbled with the lock. The door swung open. Harsh yellow light was diffused by the dim gray morning of the hallway. I could see the illumination came from a single uncovered light bulb in the ceiling over Willieboy’s head.

He glared angrily with his deep-set eyes. His mouth moved as though filled with gum. It was apparent that in this petulant state, a logjam of nasty words had formed behind his lips that his tongue hurried to sort out.

“You’re early,” he said finally with great restraint. I could tell by the swollen veins at his temples that he had other things he would like to say.

“You called late,” I grumbled back as I stepped over the threshold onto matted orange carpeting.

Douglas Willieboy led a humble life. A hot plate and miniature fridge occupied a small five by five space in the corner that had been wallpapered with bright sunflowers to more resemble a kitchen. Food-encrusted plates were piled in a small sink that dripped and dripped. Willieboy’s bed was a pullout couch that occupied the space opposite the door. It was pulled out and its gray sheets rumped. I had to be careful of banging my shins on its metal frame as I entered. There was a funky smell of moldy cats in the room, but I resisted the urge to mention it.

A box of crackers lay open on a table in a pile of crumbs. Mayonnaise and peanut butter mini-sandwiches were dinner if the empty jars on the floor told me anything. In front of a door, I suspected was the closet, was a large iron bar loaded down with weights.

“You better watch your diet, Mr. Willieboy.” I pointed to the remnants of his supper. “Mahatma Ghandi ate that stuff, look what it got him.”

Willieboy was wearing nothing but his denims. He showed off an enormous musculature in chest and shoulders. “Shit man, am I ever wasted.” He went to his fridge, and pulled out a little stack of pre-cooked beef patties that were glued together with a mortar of yellow grease. He peeled one off and ate it noisily as he spoke.

“Did you bring the fifty?” His lips smacked with a waxy sound and his yellow teeth champed like a horse’s.

“Of course I brought the fifty,” I snarled and took a seat in the crumbs on the side table.

Willieboy pulled up a chair that had been obscured behind curtains. I noticed an angry red welt on his neck and back.

“If you didn’t know the dead guys who set the fire, then how did they know where I was?”

“What dead guys?” His forehead wrinkled.

I told him.

He made a fist of his face and shook his head. “I’m tellin’ you, Wildclown, it must’a been a set up ‘cause after I left you, I found six dead punkers waitin’ for me downstairs. Jesus, I was mixin’ it up good with them when the fire started!” He gestured to the injury on his back.

I pulled my gun. I didn’t point it at him—just fiddled with it, sighting along its length and hefting it like it was new.

“Not the best excuse I’ve ever heard, Mr. Willieboy.” I continued to play.

He froze, mouth full of hamburger, and then began nodding his head and sputtering. “There—there! Give a guy a goddamned gun and he gets tough every time. But I’ll show you, you bastard, nobody fucks with Douglas Willieboy.”

“Unless he has a gun, right?” I grinned.

“That’s right,” he laughed. “You’re okay, Wildclown—did you bring the money? I’m tired of eatin’ like a blowfly!”

“I’ve got the money, but it’ll take a good story to squeeze it out of me. I fell twelve stories last night—and I’m a little cranky.” I leaned back against the cracker box and wall.

Willieboy started talking. He punctuated each sentence with squishy hamburger noises.

“All right, I knew her better than I said—the Van Reydner broad. I mean I knew her in *that* way, you know. Shit, who wouldn’t—she was gorgeous. So, I was a little bit involved with her, which I said I wasn’t. It wasn’t true love or nothin’, but it was fun. Not every night, but sometimes she’d phone down for *room service*...” He leaned back and laughed. “That’s what she called it. Well fuck, who wouldn’t go along?”

I couldn’t think of who wouldn’t and I said as much.

“So that went on for about a month, until she left.” He smiled a great idiot grin.

“Congratulations, Willieboy,” I grumbled. “But that’s not worth squat to me. I hope you enjoy your memories.” I stood up to leave.

“That’s not all,” he said this very shrilly for a man his size. “I knew she was going away. I was there when she packed her bag.”

“Go on.” I lit a cigarette, offered Willieboy one and took my seat in the crumbs.

“It was about six days ago—Tuesday night. She said she’d be leaving soon, but she wouldn’t be away long. Asked me if I’d be sweet enough to let her go without a hassle. She owed money. See, I was kinda suckered, but fuck, what the hell... It wasn’t my hotel.”

“Do you know where she went?” I drew in on my smoke—there was no protest from the hotdogs. I felt like belching anyway.

“No, she just went. Course, the night she split—Thursday, no Friday morning—I didn’t know that lawyer had been shot up there. He came down when I was going off my

shift at six. She had already left, around 3 a.m.—nailed me in the back room for being a good boy!” he cackled knowingly.

“Did Authority question you?”

“Funny that, a little shit from Authority came in before I even got a chance to call. I just figured someone else in the building got ahold of them.”

“What was his name?” I leaned forward.

“I don’t know, shit—I’m not a secretary!” He frowned.

“Did you tell him what you told me?” I started glaring.

“Hell no, they’d have framed me like a Vangoff. I’d be eatin’ rats in their cellar right now.” Willieboy wiped a hand across his mouth.

“Okay,” I said. “You haven’t told me much worth \$50, give me some more, or I’ll leave you to your filet mignon.”

“All right, don’t get your shorts stretched out of shape. See, she got a few calls from this guy, Simon—he never gave a last name. I’d work the switchboard you know, and he’d call up from time to time. Always late. Shit, I always figured she was full of it on the massage crap ‘cause I only saw her with the one client. What did I care, right? That lawyer he had lots of folding money, understand? He can look after himself.

“I listened in from time to time, when they’d talk, her and that Simon guy. I ain’t proud of that but it’s a boring late night shift anyway. His voice was always kind’a scared like he knew I was listening. Well, they’d talk and I’ve never heard more boring talk. He’d only mention the weather. He’d say that the clouds were going to break soon. He wondered if she were ready for some sun. I kept wanting to break in and scream that they’re both boring and could they talk about some sex or something.” Willieboy sat back, his face a mask of introspection before continuing. “The only time it was interesting was the night the lawyer got whacked. This Simon guy calls her and says it’s time for a change in the weather. She said she was getting really tired of the clouds and would be glad for a change and tonight would be good. Boring shit, still maybe, but at least it was something different. He sounded like a real pin-head.” Willieboy smiled as though he’d just opened a treasure chest.

“Great Willieboy, he was a pin-head, big deal. I could have guessed that. It sure as hell isn’t worth fifty bucks. A name, *Simon*, talked to her. Wonderful.”

He kept grinning like a fool. Finally, he leaned forward and pulled a stained envelope from his back pocket.

“I wonder what his phone number and a picture of Van Reydner would be worth?” He wagged the folded envelope between his fingers.

I began digging for Tommy’s annoying plastic mouth purse.

Chapter 11

I could tell from the first ring that I had a bad connection. The phone line rattled and clicked like a drunk unlocking a door. Decay. I was just glad the lights were on. Blackouts would soon become a daily occurrence, like the rain.

This was another fringe benefit of the Change.

Just after the rains started but before the dead rose up, telecommunications the world over went on the fritz. Some of it made sense, too. Cell phones and other satellite

dependent technologies like the Internet and television were immediately impaired. The continuous ceiling of cloud could be blamed at least in part for interference. But the Change went beyond that.

It was as if the complex system of communications satellites had simply ceased to exist. Signals could not reach them and no explanation was forthcoming. Scientists wanted to blame the residual effects of the Millennium bug, but that concept was too laughable to bear.

Instead, the shuttlecraft *Declaration* was prepared for launch to investigate the anomaly. It blew up on the ground killing everyone onboard.

Computer scientists had warned NASA about that, since it was no secret that computers and networked systems had also begun to behave erratically if they worked at all.

But NASA went ahead, boasting a breakthrough in computer system shielding technology—one of the theories at the time was that electrical systems were being compromised by enormous bursts of electromagnetic radiation from increased sunspot activity.

NASA ignored reports that information stored digitally was growing more difficult to retrieve and a program stored might not open completely, if it opened at all. The crash investigators later blamed the computer responsible for firing the solid rocket boosters. Its program designed to control this process fired only one of them, which ripped open and ignited the main fuel tank. Similar computer-related accidents the world over soon gave credence to the theory. Information saved on computers was being garbled and made irretrievable by causes unknown.

And there followed an all-encompassing devolution of sorts. Computers were too undependable so they were yanked out of everything: planes, boats, clocks and cars. Everything. Just about any device using post-1970 designs was scrapped and the world entered a retro phase. Simple old-fashioned internal combustion engines were embraced—wind-up clocks reappeared. Companies dug through their archives for designs and started working on the *old reliable*.

You could get a '57 style Chevy that would look like an original if it did happen to have heavier, rain-resistant—perhaps bulletproof—options available. One company offered the Millennium-T with crank motor. I'd actually seen one on the highway—smoother lines but just as ugly.

The new rule seemed to be *simple works*. So progress took a couple of steps backward.

Since microwave relay towers were useable but flawed, communications companies were forced to revert to more dependable landlines. Computers and the Internet were unstable, and so the public went back to typewriters and telegraphs. For some reason, electricity itself had begun to behave in an erratic and unpredictable fashion that scientists were still at a loss to understand.

Military leaders were made increasingly paranoid by the revelation that all electrical systems were behaving as if they had been subjected to the magnetic pulse released by a high altitude nuclear detonation. But since the whole world was affected, it was unlikely that any independent country could be considered *that* hostile.

With every surprise the Change brought came a matching conspiracy theory. It soon degenerated to a whole lot of ignorance shooting in the dark as a crowd of walking dead formed around the experts.

Pakistan and India nuked each other outright, the Middle East wiped itself off the map and a small but dirty atomic device lifted the Vatican to heaven. Luckily the mass destruction stopped there. Genocide raged through its familiar haunts in the Old World, and in southern parts of the new, but the nukes fell silent.

I had left Douglas Willieboy's room an hour before and was back at the office trying to look busy. A chirrupy woman's voice finally answered: "You have reached the office of Richard Adrian, President of Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased." A recording. "The offices are closed." She spoke quickly, as though she had consumed all the coffee in Colombia. "Our business hours are..."

She rattled out the regular Monday to Friday, nine to five routine. "If you are calling from a touch tone phone." I hung up. I had no interest in leaving a message. The receiver shrieked as I set it in its cradle.

It was Sunday. Of course their office was closed. Some still held with the old observances—this company could afford to. Economic powerhouses like Simpson's owned enough of the market to be nostalgic. Most everyone else had to work whenever and wherever they could, continuing the spirit numbing grind set out at the end of the Millennium with the Merging Monopolies, the World Economy and New World Order.

Out of one of my plentiful utility pockets, I pulled the business card from Van Reydner's room. The logo was on front, under that the business office number for appointments. I flipped it. The five numbers on the back were different, but matched the phone number Willieboy had given me.

I looked at the photo of Van Reydner. It was old, but a good color image.

Her hair was red, shoulder-length, and shimmered like blood in the sun. Willieboy had not exaggerated about her chest by much.

It *was* out to 'here' forming a porch you could hold the company picnic on. Her pose had a Mae West kind of bend to it, all breasts and hips. Her liquid blue eyes trickled right out of the picture and dribbled into my lap. She wore an evening dress, and the lighting was perfect. The photo had a professional, staged look to it, like something you might find in a model's portfolio. Beneath my consciousness Tommy's psyche began to grow, as did his erection.

I had to fend off the sick images that leaked across the barrier between our minds. I'm not a prude, few of the thoughts were alien to me, but having Tommy's presence leak through was like finding out your boarder has been filming kiddy porn in his bedroom.

Van Reydner's face was pale, as redheads' usually are, but there was something dark in her gaze.

I kicked my boots onto the desk and leaned back in the chair. It was about three o'clock. I could hear the occasional scream echo up from the streets below. More zealots lamenting their fate.

I still remembered the twitching dead thing I had found crucified on the telephone pole behind my building one afternoon—it might have been a Sunday too.

The poor bastard had been nailed up during the night. Worse part was when I tried to help him down he nearly chewed my hand off. He started screaming proverbs at me. He told me he was doing this for me. I could remember the insanity in his eyes. The flesh

around them was creased and stretched from inhuman devotion. I told him I would look out for my own sins, went into the office, and phoned Authority to come scrape him off. They managed to do so with the minimum of frenzied screaming.

I kind of hardened after that.

Whatever had happened fifty years ago had knocked the holy wind out of quite a few religious sails. The true believers were caught napping—the ones who believed and loved the idea of believing. After it, strange sects had sprung up all over. Fanatics stepped out of the woodwork spouting new dogma for a new age.

It turned out that just about every religion had an Apocalypse mythology written into it. So waking up one day to find dead people wandering away from mortuary tables was too much for many.

The idea of Apocalypse and *Revelations* came to the minds of most—even the unbelievers. Hell it had been drilled into every waking moment by the media at the end of the Millennium—a phenomenon that had escalated from chasing fire trucks to setting the blazes.

The Internet hummed with stories about government cover-ups and notions about the U.S. Army bioengineering a flesh-eating form of influenza. Stories circulated about lights from the heavens, holy men disappearing, Elvis was playing Vegas, but none of the tales were ever verified because people had grown used to gathering information without requiring proof.

The *Hype* Age was mystified by the Change because the first rule of Hype was that none of the dire predictions ever came true. But what happened was worse than they had ever imagined. People had been primed for trouble whether something happened at the end of the Millennium or not. When something as strange as the Change *did* happen, the world just lost its mind.

The jury was still out on whether it was going to be temporary insanity or not. I really couldn't tell much of a difference. Except for the obvious strangeness, it felt like the same world to me.

I lit a cigarette and rocked gently in my chair.

So, we had a dead lawyer killed in a missing woman's apartment. I had looked for Van Reydner's phone number already, and found nothing. So maybe she never existed before, or she lived at the Morocco and that was that. Still, from the picture, she didn't seem like the type of woman who would make her home there. She looked like someone who was used to being treated well.

Regardless, in the weeks before she disappeared and my client got whacked, she happened to have a strange set of conversations with a man named Simon who was somehow involved with a skin tanning salon for the deceased—and used the company president's phone. Billings died, and Van Reydner disappeared. Now the hotel burned down.

I could already smell the incense burning.

Since the Change there had been intense competition among establishments for preserving dead flesh. Funeral parlors were the first into the competition. They easily adapted their embalming equipment to offer formaldehyde baths, skin tanning, leather preservation treatments, plastic wraps—there were lotions and creams—all of it. Death was a growth industry. Since you suddenly 'could' take it with you, the world found itself with a lot of extremely rich dead men who wanted to keep their earthly remains intact.

Time was of the essence. The hearse had taken on a new role as a kind of high-speed ambulance for the dead.

And the dead were organizing. There was a rich dead industrialist and former senator William King who had dumped tons of his money into preservation techniques. Dubbed *the King of the Dead* by the media, he did what he had to in the name of research, and was so wealthy that he was allowed to hold his court in a neighborhood set aside for the living. It was rumored that he would stop at nothing to fulfill his quest for immortality. Certain individuals I knew had made veiled half-frightened observations about the King's underworld connections.

And there was Captain Updike, a messianic figure who appeared with the first of the dead and who orchestrated the Great Resurrection and Rebirth. This living former military chaplain took it upon himself to resurrect the dead. His group financed and orchestrated a reclamation program that saw the exhumation and rehabilitation of the buried dead. Updike's organization was fast becoming enormous, though its objectives remained patently nonpolitical. His followers simply wanted to release their brothers and sisters from the prisons their graves had become.

I had read that there were chapters in South America and overseas.

Live like Life was one of the skin shops' slogans. The rules of this New Age were simple, if you could stay in one piece it seemed you could have immortality. A couple of Egyptian kings were still around involved in precedent setting property battles. Supposedly they had wandered away from museums. Walt Disney's inheritors were exhausting the appeals process to keep old Walt on ice citing 'living death is not a cure for what killed him.'

And word circulated that the elder Disney had only had the foresight to freeze his head anyway.

Come stay at the coast, where the salt sea air will give you years of afterlife.

My phone rang. It always does when I'm thinking.

"Hello..." I followed this with a yawn. I had been pushing Tommy's body too hard. Soon, soon.

"Hello," came a clipped reply. I recognized it as the lawyer, Billings', voice from the snooty edge to it. "How are you today, Mr. Wildclown?"

"Fine," I said. "I don't have a wooden leg."

There followed a grating, bubbling sound that was either laughter, or a hamster drowning in oil. I laughed along too. There was no point in crying.

"Oh yes," I added. "I burned down that building—the Morocco—yes, the one you were murdered in."

He stopped laughing.

"I didn't actually do it by myself, but I was there when it happened."

"Then all the evidence..."

"Is gone." He was silent. I let him hang a second. "But, I think Van Reydner knows enough to find your killer. I'm two phone calls away from finding her." I lied. He wasn't paying me enough for truth.

"You think she knows who did it?"

"I think she had a hand in the 'didding' of it."

"Never." His voice nearly broke. "She and I were..."

“Not an item you can’t buy for a dime a dozen.” I decided to push him. “Listen, you walked out that night looking for someone in the living room. She could have left the door open for a friend. Also—” I could hear his stuttering indignation. “She has contacts with the only people who could profit from your death in this day and age.”

“But who?” he blurted.

“Since people don’t stay lying down dead, killing isn’t the best way to keep their mouths shut. So I doubt you could have known something that someone wanted to keep quiet. If you did, you’d have been put in a blender; your head would have been missing, or something. There was another motive, I’m almost sure.” I hesitated. “Where are you going for your preservation treatments?”

“Simpson’s Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased. They come highly recommended and timing is crucial to the process. I purchased one of their policies before I died. But I don’t...”

“I’ll know soon,” I cut in. “Of course, I’m still going to have to look for something concrete. That’s why I need Van Reydner. Did she tell you about the Simpson’s Afterlife Policy?”

“Come to think of it. But she just mentioned it in passing...” His voice held the first hard notes of realization.

“Don’t worry about that right now, all I’ve told you is a couple of pieces of a theory. I need evidence. Did you have any contact with Van Reydner outside of your therapies?”

“No,” the lawyer said, voice lowering. “She and I had an arrangement. Since I was married...well you understand.” He fell silent. I did understand. I didn’t like it, but I understood. “We agreed never to talk about our personal lives.”

“Okay,” I said. “Are you familiar with the term ‘conjecture?’”

“Of course.”

“Well, that’s all I’m talking about. Believe me, I’d like to tell you something really romantic like; she died protecting your fallen body. You never know, I might still find something like that.”

“When will you know?” His voice quavered.

“Tomorrow, maybe the next day, but not today, I’ve already done too much work today. It’s Sunday for Christ’s sake!” I was standing up now and beginning to pace. The phone’s short cord had it sliding around on the desk after me.

“Of course,” the lawyer added hastily, “you’ll call as soon as you know?”

“Yes.” I hung up, grunted, and slipped my gun into the desk. I leered at the photo of Van Reydner once more before I put it in the filing cabinet, and then walked out past Elmo to lie on the couch in the waiting room.

My head felt heavy against the greasy black leather armrest. Tommy’s mind was nearly asleep. I could feel the pleasant REM state so close to me. The soothing nervous energy surged like spring water. I released my hold on him, floated toward the ceiling and began hallucinating immediately.

Chapter 12

I snapped out of my trance at the first harsh rap on the door. Latent images of people and places whirled before my perception, flickered and were gone. If I’d had a tongue,

their names would have been on the tip of it. The second knock brought movement from the inner office. Below me, I saw Tommy stretched out on the couch. His breathing was deep from fatigue and whiskey. He personified the sonorous roar. Fat Elmo shuffled out of the inner office with newspaper in hand and opened the door.

Two leather-jacketed Authority Inspectors stood there.

Elmo stepped back, his mouth slack. He rattled the newspaper at them, like he'd find words in the sound, and then froze when an Enforcer's bulky form appeared behind them. Twin eye-slits glowed with infrared light from a steel visor sculpted into the shape of a human face.

Authority psychologists had designed the trademark Enforcer Kevlar and steel helmet. Their studies showed people lost respect for authority figures when they identified too much with them. Similarly, the public responded negatively to a faceless authority—riot helmets and tear gas masks tended to provoke more mobs than they calmed.

In an attempt to tie these disparate issues together, the facemasks were designed into the helmet. Later, for fashion's sake a fedora was added in a final effort to completely humanize and dehumanize Enforcement Officers.

The glaring steel face poised a foot above the Inspectors' hats was a composite of features that included two presidents and one cowboy movie star. The final result was a terrifying apparition of a hard, emotionless man covered with armor carrying enough weaponry to tear a building down. The Enforcer in the hall was motionless, the wide, armored shoulders spanning the doorway. His rubber and steel trench coat touched the floor. The long-faced inspector in front of him gave Elmo the once over.

"We're looking for Wildclown, Jellybean, where is he?" he muttered between paper-thin lips. His eyes were severe slits in shadow beneath his hat.

Jellybean was just one of the cute little nicknames for the dead. Necrophobia had been given new life with the Change bringing unusual twists to the time honored tradition of prejudice. All other definitions sloughed away with the coming of death. You were a Jellybean, a Bone Bag or a Zomb; it had no relevance whether you were white, black or East Indian. The fact that you were dead was all that mattered. I had a hard time understanding those feelings.

We were all just one bullet away from the club.

"He's sleepin'. Been sleepin' for a while," Elmo stammered, then pointed to the flyspecked window. "It's nighttime."

"I don't need some zomb to tell me that. Besides, it only just turned nighttime. It's seven. We want to talk to your master." He peered over Elmo's shoulder, eyes squinting through the darkness at Tommy. "That him?"

The Inspectors casually shouldered Elmo out of the way.

Their shadows slid across the floor like snakes. The other inspector, a short and squat gorilla, chewed at a brass toothpick he clasped between his teeth. His eyes bulged like a fish's behind glasses. He licked his thick lips nervously. Apparently he was of a mean little disposition because he kicked the couch near Tommy's head.

The clown mumbled an obscenity, cupped his genitals and curled into a tighter fetal shape. I had been trying for the last few seconds to arouse Tommy enough to let me into his head. For some reason he was safe from me when in the REM state. I had tried before.

The Enforcer's bulk muted the light from the hallway. He remained unmoving—a fortress of pain in his reinforced steel and rubber trench coat and body armor. An auto-shotgun jumped around in his hands. I knew those weapons held enormous circular magazines of thirty solid rounds that could chop a Sequoia in half.

The squat Inspector flicked on the lamp by Tommy's head. The clown's makeup was smeared and oddly arranged over sleep lines. A good amount of it had wiped off on the arm of the couch, and that had migrated into his hair.

Grinning, the Inspector looked over at his partner. "Get a load of this ugly mug. Christ, I thought they were pulling our leg down at HQ. We got a fucking meteor jockey here."

The tall intruder leaned over and started talking. "Get up you sick son-of-a-bitch. We want to ask you a few questions about a fire. Let's be nice about this. We can run forever with sugar, or we can give you a taste of Meat!" He gestured to the Enforcer with a quick thumb.

Tommy answered with a few snorting sounds before finishing his rebuttal with wet sucking noises. I made another fruitless attempt at possession.

The tall inspector hissed, then stepped back flicking a look at the Enforcer who responded like a trained elephant. He tramped forward and raised a hobnailed boot over Tommy's midsection. A quick nod from his short superior and the boot whipped down and up in a single pile driving action.

Tommy was suddenly on the floor trying to throw his guts up on the rug. His chest heaved like it was wrapped in iron bands. Muscle stood in cords along his neck.

"Shit," he spat, mouth full of vomit. "Shit."

Elmo had been standing by the door. He now started inching his way toward the inner office. As Tommy wretched, I attempted possession again; but ran into a wall of nausea and anger. He was mad, not close to one of his blind rages, but he was angry.

I could hardly blame him. I continued to try to take over.

The Enforcer made a noose of his gloved hand and jerked Tommy to his feet with it. The clown was held out as the tall man approached.

"I'm Inspector Hale, Authority CrimDiv Squad. Inspector Cane and I would like to question you concerning a fire at the Morocco Building—Downings District—Saturday night. Witnesses put you at the scene."

"Tell this, tell this ape to back off!" Tommy gasped, struggling in the Enforcer's iron grip. The Enforcer grunted, surprised by Tommy's strength.

"Sergeant Dimitria, allow Mr. Wildclown to relax, please," Hale breathed nonchalantly. Dimitria threw Tommy onto the couch with a flex of a thick arm.

I watched the clown's hand grasping along his belt. He didn't have his gun because I'd put it away for him. Elmo continued to inch his way along the wall unnoticed. I hoped he wasn't going to do anything stupid. It was a well-regarded rumor that Authority had special rules for dealing with the dead.

I again attempted possession and failed. If pushed far enough anger gripped Tommy's entire being—soul, bones and all. He *became* anger at such times. I had to gain control fast. He was going to get himself killed and I'd be stuck doing swamp gas impressions. I had to calm him down.

Inspector Cane's face had a gluttonous roundness to it that inspired revulsion. He licked his lips with a thick gray tongue, dragging the thing over tombstone teeth. Cane had a

nervous tick beside that—grinning spastically as he talked. It gave me the feeling he had a hunger he could not satisfy. Most power freaks do.

“What were you doing there?” he hissed, licked his lips and grinned.

Tommy sat for a moment with his hands clasped over his battered stomach. “I was working a case you fucking swine.” He spat the words like new forged nails. “Fascist!”

“Tough guy...” Cane shook his head. “Ever had your legs beaten to pulp? It sounds impossible, but it isn’t. It’s really something to watch.”

Tommy laughed like a drunken hyena. “You’d be doing me a favor.” His face contorted with rage. “You Authority shits got your nerve—you’ll never regain control of this ruptured world with this Rue Morgue stuff...only complete redemption will save it. The Lord works in mysterious ways, but he doesn’t blackjack people. You bastards will learn...”

It was Cane’s turn to laugh. “Shit, you are insane. Your record says so, and here you are.” He looked to his partner then back to Tommy. “What case were you working on?”

“A baby crying...” Tommy absently licked his fingernails. “Like you don’t know.”

Both inspectors guffawed.

“Jesus,” panted Cane. “Down on your luck are you, Wildclown?” I noticed a forced tone to his humor. “Working for one of *those* newspapers?”

“I’ve been offered a grand to prove the phantom baby exists!” He leaned back, then with strange new confidence, pulled a cigarette out and lit it. He burped painfully.

“Who hired you for that one?” Hale snarled.

“Why all the artifice?” the clown sneered. “I know what Authority’s doing. I know what you’ve been doing all along. You must have enough on tape to hang me or you wouldn’t be here. And you know I can’t divulge the name of my client even if I wanted to.”

Cane started silently pacing the length of the room.

I spent those few moments in shock. Tommy’s lie had caught me by surprise. Baby? I tried to piece it in. Where had he picked that up?

“Let’s say you were doing what you say you were doing. Why the fire?” Hale leaned over him.

“I didn’t light it. It was just a coincidence that I was there. Probably a couple fucking self-righteous Sons of the Firebuggers from the Sungod Savior Order. It could have been Grannies for Armageddon, for all I know. If any of your witnesses told you, I didn’t exactly walk out of the building. I’ve come to believe that I’m insane, but I wouldn’t torch a building without a way out. I’m into masturbation, not suicide. You goddamned authority types, all muscle... no brain!” Tommy fumed, crossing his arms and muttering. “Like you don’t know.”

Cane’s face drew near, puzzled. His jaws worked like he was physically shaping the words between his teeth. “All right, Wildclown. Your record speaks for itself. You’re an asshole but you’ve given Authority a hand before. Frankly, I don’t care if a building burns in the Downings—just another Zombie hotel if you ask me...” He jerked his eyes around. “Hey, where’s the raw meat?”

He had finally missed Elmo. The dead man peeked through the office door.

“Here sir!” His teeth chattered.

“Leave my wife out of it!” Tommy commanded as he crossed and uncrossed his legs. “You’re talking to me.”

“Take my advice,” Cane said as he signaled the others to leave. The Enforcer’s bulk swallowed the light in the hall, and then he was gone. “There’s a lot of shit going down in that district and if you have an ounce of brains you’ll keep out of it. If I were you, I’d take a long vacation.” He got close.

“Keep joking about babies, Clusterfuck, and I can guarantee you’ll get more than a warning next time. There is an Authority investigation under way. Stay out of it! Or next time your license is up for renewal you might find yourself changing careers.” He just about turned away, when a strange twist of his features turned his eyes back on Tommy. “If you’re stupid enough to ignore my warning, you’ll be smart to let me know about any developments. If I don’t know where you are, you might get caught in a crossfire.” He grinned, licked his lips. “Yeah, you can bet on it!”

Tommy said nothing. He didn’t look at Cane, just stared at the floor between his feet. Cane followed Hale out.

Tommy started fondling his groin. He muttered something about fascists, and then curled up on the couch.

“You see that Elmo? You see that? It’s all part of it. That’s what happens in the world that man built. They got their nerve. I can see it, but no one else can.” He looked over his shoulder at the door. “Like they don’t know.”

Elmo said, “Sure Boss,” then crossed the room to lock up. As he returned to his seat in the office I saw the dull weight of the .44 in his jacket pocket.

I began to think. There was something strange about Tommy. Apparently, during the last possession he had been more aware than I thought he could be. Was he referring to the baby Billings had heard? Had it set him off? Or was it random madness. When he went into a manic phase, he spewed information faster than *he* could understand.

Phantom baby! Everyone knew there were no such things as babies. Below me, Tommy sighed. I had the distinct feeling that our relationship had changed.

Chapter 13

I entered the clown’s body while he was still groggy with sleep. It was the easiest time to do so because his mind was full of naked pictures from an active dream life. Yesterday’s injuries made the body unpleasant to put on at first, like a tight suit, but a few stretches and yawns loosened it up enough to wear.

The sleep had done it a world of good. There was even a bit of bounce in its step as I wandered down the hall to the washroom to perform my morning ablutions and again as I returned to the office.

I made Soya-eggs, plankton-sausage and a pot of coffee on the hot plate I kept in the filing cabinet and ate it at a small table and chairs I kept in the outer office for that purpose. It was spectacular.

Breakfast can be like a wet kiss from God to the disembodied. There was simply nothing like having a tongue to taste food with. Even if the exigencies of the Change had made the meat parts of the meal synthetic.

The Change had been far reaching in its effects when it started all those fifty years ago. The same force that animated dead flesh gave life to luncheon meats as well. Ham, sausage, chicken and steak when undercooked went through the motions of being alive.

The muscle tissue contracted and expanded, often despite the various methods of preparation. Meat could be eaten if properly cooked.

It was possible to avoid the embarrassment of the Thanksgiving turkey flapping its wings. The problem was, the amount of cooking involved usually spoiled the texture and flavor and made it hard to justify the expense.

After the appearance of the walking dead, earth experienced the Great Stillbirth. Every pregnant mammal spontaneously aborted and seemed to be unable to conceive again. The same process was later found to affect birds, most fish and reptiles. Their eggs or offspring were not viable. Meat was expensive now; it was worth its weight in gold. And so, none but the rich could afford to eat irreplaceable cows—not even cloning would work—and the price skyrocketed. Eating real meat had become a fond memory to the average Joe.

There were always rumors of a calf being born, or a lamb; but science discounted this as obvious hoaxes or mass hallucinations created by the remnants of a meat eating culture. As a result meat had been replaced in the diet with a vitamin-enriched paste of seaweed and plankton that could be spiced, formed and colored to order. When I ordered hotdogs I was really ordering plankton and seaweed dogs. They weren't bad with mustard and onions—let's say they weren't worse.

Also driving the price of meat and farm produce was the change in the temperament of animals. It became apparent that they were not going to tolerate associating with human beings any more. The first hint that I had found was a news story written six months into the Change of a Chilean farmer and his family being eaten by pigs.

This was followed by other reports.

In Wisconsin a family dog killed its owners while they slept. An old woman in Brooklyn had her eyes torn out by her fifteen-year-old cat. A flock of ravens ripped a Brazilian postman to shreds.

Then the big one, Lazy Lodge, a retirement village in Florida catering to Canadian retirees fell silent one Saturday evening. Alerted by panicking relatives, police investigated the following day and were ambushed by over one hundred alligators. It was so bad the army was eventually called in to mop things up. Investigators determined that the slaughter occurred the previous evening when the sixty-two victims had congregated in the recreation room for a dinner dance. The evidence was plain: the animals had acted together.

As the reports escalated, so did the governmental response. Initial recommendations concerning pet and livestock control soon became orders for all out extermination. Since animals were also affected by the animate death, this was a difficult process. Many animal lovers, often missing fingers and hands by the end of their action, whisked the creatures away and freed them in the countryside. This practice when linked with the wild animal populations already out of control soon made the countryside unsafe, and there began a general exodus to the cities.

I finished my breakfast then good-morninged Elmo where I found him sitting motionless in my office. He was entranced by his umpteenth sunrise. Odd, because the eternal cloud cover allowed only a gradual lightening of the constant gray.

"Tell me, Elmo," I asked, skirting the desk and flopping into my chair. "Don't you ever get bored?"

He shifted uneasily for a few moments, with embarrassment. While he rummaged through his opinion box, I busied myself with makeup and mirror.

Wasn't I the prettiest little clown?

"Well, Boss, it's strange being d-dead. Least ways it's sometimes strange." He searched for a cigarette, found one, lit it. "There are days when it's almost fun, you feel like you cheated death—like you're n-never gonna have to take the big step over—I used to be religious...and some ideas is—are—hard to shake. Then there's other times being dead is like being in line at a bank in the summer. The air conditioning's broke down, there's a hundred people in front of you and someone's slit your wrists. Times like that you know that death has cheated you." He fell silent.

I paused in the middle of drawing on my right eye. "Jesus, Elmo, that doesn't sound any different from being alive."

He nodded. "I said it's s-strange." Elmo's head dropped, as though saddened. "Most days I'd like to r-ride a roller coaster."

"That explains your driving," I laughed and smudged my left eye. "One day, we'll drive down the coast to Vicetown—see what we can see. You know, Elmo that's what we need: a vacation."

Elmo pointed a lifeless finger. "That's what it's like being dead."

I grinned, pulled out the office bottle. "How about we pickle ourselves instead."

Elmo laughed with a sound like crumpling cellophane. I poured two drinks and Elmo took one. He had told me it sometimes made him feel numb, and it kept his guts clean. I kicked my feet up then grabbed the phone and started dialing the number that was closed on Sunday.

"Time, Elmo?"

He looked at his watch. "Nine-thirty."

Over the line, I heard a tiny rattling sound like a tin cup full of stones at the bottom of a well—another bad connection.

Mrs. Caffeine answered in person this time. "Hello, Mr. Adrian's office, Lori speaking," she said this in one syllable.

"Hi Lori," I said. "I was killed recently and would be interested in seeing what services you have to offer."

"Well, sir, you should phone the business office. Mr. Adrian is far too busy to handle clients personally. One of our New Life Hosts would be pleased to speak to you if you would call..."

"It's rather urgent." I cut her off. "I was given this number by a friend. I'm Gingold the Sublime. You might have heard of me, a mime. You see my death involved a corrosive substance, and I'm afraid of what a delay might do to my remains." I tried to introduce an artsy trill to my voice since I tended to talk out the back of my head.

"I understand, sir," the receptionist said after a pause. "But this is not the business office. For appointments..."

I cut her off. "I was told by my friend, Jan Van Reydner, to ask for Simon. She said I'd get a little better treatment."

There was an eerie pause. "Just a moment." She was gone. In her place was a recording of some joker on a panpipe. She was back before I became suicidal.

"Mr. Gingold, you may come in at five o'clock. A New Life Host will be here to greet you. Do you know where we're located?"

“I’ve got your card,” I said, thanked her for her help and hung up. I turned to Elmo. “You’re not gonna be happy about this...”

Chapter 14

I headed west along the elevated highway. Elmo had elected to stay behind to man the phone. I had been pretty sure he would. If crossing the Landfill was not a treat for the living, it was a nightmare for the dead.

The day was gray, like every day in Greasetown. It was also its usual cool, damp, and smelly. The perpetual cloud seemed to hold in every belch of exhaust, every breath of collective halitosis. The highway was practically empty.

Since the Change, a drive in the country had lost its appeal.

I looked at my watch—four-thirty. It had rained hard six times already. The wipers squeaked and droned. The road rose on pedestals forty feet above the rolling countryside. It stood as monument to the inevitably recurring shortsightedness of humanity. I chuckled in reverie.

As the dead started showing up on unemployment lines, at banks and bars the scientists had rushed to study the phenomena. They couldn’t find any sensible reason for anything, but they could at least weigh and measure, describe cause and effect.

The dead retained their personalities and most of their senses depending on a simple equation of gray matter. Basically, they were dead people with the same desires and needs as the living—as long as they retained the minimum amounts of brain tissue. It didn’t even have to be good brain tissue, dried, pulverized or pureed would do. Not scientific, but it was something.

Ignoring all the scientific queries it begged the obvious question: What happened if a dead person didn’t have enough gray matter left?

The eerie landscape below me was the answer. I knew that if I pulled the car over, and peered down, I might chance to see strange hulking shapes and body fragments lumbering, crawling or slithering through the shadows.

Authority had tried the landfill idea with the dismembered and decapitated bodies that started showing up in a progressively violent world. It soon became obvious that those in power didn’t have a clear idea of life or death after the Change, because Authority Internment Facilities were crawling with pitiful dead people parts after only a few years. Since animals were similarly affected their remains also joined the undulating mass.

Add to that the wild wolves, coyotes and packs of feral dogs, living and dead, that terrorized the landscape, it became too dangerous to keep the Internment Facilities clean.

Dead tissue, once carefully buried, was now dumped with less ceremony than garbage once received. Decent folks complained about the hellish scene the countryside had become, and Authority reacted by building walls around cities and constructing a network of elevated highways connecting them.

Everything else was left to the wild and the dead.

Like most of the cities that remained, Greasetown was insulated around its inland perimeter by a thirty-foot tall barrier. This allowed the good citizens to worry about their own doomed existence without the distraction of thinking about the great living graveyard growing at their backs.

The Landfill was rumored to be a haven for Authority fugitives and groups of reassembled bandits. Rumored among the dead was the tale that these lands held hope and promise for the future. One day a call would come, and they would go.

I understood that these lands held the future for the human race. It was simple enough to me. We would all end up there someday—sooner or later.

Another one of the perks that came with the Change was that the living didn't grow old. Or if they did, it was at a rate too slow to be detected. Scientists—fast becoming the brunt of most jokes—couldn't explain that either.

Staying alive meant apparent immortality, but sooner or later, the longer you lived, the better the chances of dying a violent death. Then came the ignoble end—the shambling, withered fragments of a once proud species.

I sighed. Thoughts like these were inevitable while crossing the Landfill. That's why I always traveled over it with a bottle of whiskey clamped between my legs. Visions of undead lungs howling at the moon danced in my head.

I pulled on the whiskey and let the hot bite in my throat burn my mind onto different tracks.

If this Simon fellow were at the treatment center he would know that someone knew something about Jan Van Reydner. Mr. Adrian, as president, was not likely taking calls for Simon, so I was pretty sure he was the same man. I'd soon see.

In preparation for my role as Gingold the Sublime, the dead mime, I had smeared gray makeup onto my hands until they were sufficiently ghoulish. I had also done my best to introduce curlicue crispness to my clown makeup—an understated nuance of the 'avant-garde'.

It screamed Paris; it screamed France.

At four forty-five, I pulled off the highway onto an elevated track that ran into an opening in a huge stone wall. This surrounded a gigantic black stone mansion that rose many stories into the cloudy sky on a natural granite promontory. I supposed the wall was to keep peace and quiet in and the discord of the dead out. I listened for the howl of the wolf.

I stopped in a parking area beside a pair of great iron doors. Far below me, I knew that gray, twitching worm-shapes inched their way around the base of the wall. I shuddered against such macabre unreality. My hair tried to stand on end. I felt Tommy's psyche titter wildly. I let my ears roam over the silence until they fixed upon a distant clicking, whispering sound, like a surgeon's hand in viscera. I took another snort of whiskey, and fumbled for my cigarettes.

Imagination was not always an asset.

The iron doors before me opened suddenly. A long black truck, windowless, except for a slit in its bulbous nose, drove silently by on solid rubber wheels. It reminded me of the old super chief trains I had seen in pictures. The truck picked up speed and left me alone at the closing gates.

I imagined the happy dead customers inside, all pink-cheeked and fresh from the Simpson special treatment. Once home they'd begin their regimen of self-maintenance to wait for the madness that would come for them. I could understand the lack of windows. It just would not do to expose clients to the sights of the Landfill. Insanity would arrive without prompting.

I felt a chill go through me as I contemplated the reason Simpson's was located in such a neighborhood.

I slipped my gun into the glove compartment and got out of the car—then began my dead man act. It wasn't hard; I just stiffened my muscles and moved mechanically, and tried to blink slowly and methodically. Watching Elmo every day did more than remind me of my own mortality.

There was a brass panel marked 'guests' fixed with a large red button. I pressed the button while crushing my cigarette beneath my heel.

I felt eyes looking at me. Set in the enormous gates was a people-sized door that popped open automatically. I walked in wondering what could cause such corporate paranoia, as to build these formidable gates. I doubted it was fear of Landfillers.

Competition was stiff in the death business.

I entered and was met by a tall, thin man in a black uniform. His jacket had a high martial collar. A white with red-trim shirt blazed underneath. He smiled with pink lips that were puckered pining for mother's breast. I was amazed at his youthfulness. The skin on his peanut-shaped face looked soft, and seemed to be covered by a light down. I tried to register nothing in my face.

"I'm Gingold the Sublime." I kept my voice flat.

"I am Tobias, welcome to Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased, Mr. Gingold." He smiled with small pearly teeth. I smelled formaldehyde on his breath and pronounced him dead. Simpson's did a real job if Mr. Tobias was an example of their work.

"I'm sorry I came in makeup, but..." I put fingers to my cheek. "My complexion underneath is so—well, disfigured."

He nodded, smiled sweetly under a Peter Pan nose, and then laughed with cherubic vigor. "Oh, I understand—I understand. I was in such a state myself when I first stepped over into my new life. Have no fear. Please, try to relax. You've come to the right place." He gestured to a small, motorized cart. "If you please, the courtyard is enormous. I'll take you to your New Life Host."

"Thank you," I said and followed him to the vehicle. We crossed a walled enclosure that housed fountains, gabled gazebos and wandering pathways over grass and garden. I wondered how they managed to keep the flowers in bloom. There was plenty of water, but no sun, and with the walls, the courtyard was that much darker. As I sat beside him I felt a pang for a cigarette—I wasn't sure if it was me or Tommy.

The mansion piled into the sky before us, castle-like with minarets and towers. Lights glowed in many windows, the occasional spectral shadow passed behind curtains. I growled silently, looking at it all. Finally business had found a perfect niche. Death created a steady supply and demand.

Chapter 15

I was shown through an elaborate lobby and lounge decorated with a thousand carved angels. Blood-red Persian carpeting covered many hundred square feet of floor and stair. Great leather couches and chairs held quaint positions under potted palm, or by the

roaring fireplace you could park a truck in. At the foot of ornately carved columns, corpses reclined in wheeled divans and chairs—a few had books or magazines.

Some were bandaged from head to toe; all had a thoroughly antiseptic smell about them. There was also the distinct aroma of money. Tobias led me past three dead people engrossed in a discussion about religion and up a broad staircase with gilt banister—then to a huge set of doors.

Embossed in the brass was an elaborate reproduction of Bruegel's, *The Triumph of Death*. I wasn't an art expert. This particular painting had become the rage since the Change. In it, people ran, terrified, through a scene not unlike my image of the Landfill. Mobs of skeletal demons performed imaginative butchery upon the living—a hanging here, a decapitation there, here a skull, there a skull—everywhere a skull-skull.

Everyone died in the picture, peasant, businessman, saint and king. No matter where the people ran, they died—none with dignity worth mentioning. Briefly, I imagined a figure in a clown's greasepaint dancing gleefully through the carnage. Tommy grew excited inside me. I felt his erection press the canvas of my coveralls.

"Beautiful," Tobias whispered when he saw my attention upon the doors. He fluttered hooded eyes. "Mr. Adrian is a collector of rare art. He had that made from the original." He gestured to the doors. "Morbid to the timid living, perhaps, but there is no shame in death; and we are all aware of the denial that life is." He pushed lightly upon the doors and they swung silently open.

"Mr. Adrian's office." He bowed slightly sending a shock of black hair over his brow.

I left him and entered the room. Its corners were lost to me in black shadows. I followed a tender glow from ceiling lamps until I saw the shape of a man behind a huge desk. It grew out of the darkness like an oil tanker. It was so big he would have to walk to the ashtray. I stood for a moment in feigned awe and studied Mr. Adrian in the soft light.

His head gleamed slightly over a synthetic tan. Hair curled in golden ringlets from an exposed crown. He looked at me with sharp blue eyes that were set close to a large nose. His shoulders were square and as he smoked, thick arms flexed beneath his trim-cut jacket. He wore dark green—odd—because everyone else I had seen who worked in the place was in black from head to toe.

"Have a seat, please." He sketched a line in the air with cigar smoke. As I pressed my buttocks against the thick leather cushion, I noticed a familiar aroma.

Adrian started talking.

"I don't know who you are, or the purpose behind that ridiculous makeup; but I've been in this business long enough to know a dead man when I see one. You're not dead and because you lied about that, I assume you're not really Mr. Gingold."

"And you're not Simon," I said, trying to figure out how to play the scene. "Mind if I smoke? I couldn't help but notice the scent of your cigar. Expensive?" I lit a cigarette and watched its smoke dance on my hand like a cobra. It swayed slowly.

"Not really, Dutch, Henry Winterman Cafe Cream Mild. I'm growing impatient." He seemed to have perfect control of his voice. He added just enough volume and emphasis to make it as much a threat as if he held a gun in his hand.

"Wildclown," I drawled, slowly puffing smoke in an effort to seem in control. "I'm a private detective."

"And the purpose behind that ludicrous outfit?"

“Detective disguise number 118. The dead mime costume, I’m surprised no one has used it on you yet.”

“Don’t be flippant, Mr. Wildclown. You’ll find I’m not predisposed to humor. I have friends with certain *authority*.” He smiled as he said “authority.” I began to feel like a rat in a barbecue.

“I’m not trying to be flippant. I’m trying to avoid being rude.” I could feel Tommy’s indignation growing within.

“Certainly,” Adrian breathed with a tangible change in tone before saying to himself. “Refinement before all else...” He looked at me evenly. “Would you like a drink?”

“I never met one I didn’t.”

“Scotch... Isn’t that the usual drink for detectives?” he said scornfully as he ordered two gins neat from the intercom, and then leaned back in his enormous chair to study me. I met his gaze with as much fire as I could muster without letting Tommy out.

A few moments of study passed before the silence was broken by the whoosh of a door opening, followed by an annoying tick-tock of footsteps. A secretary *clacked* in on high stiletto heels she would need a ladder to get into.

She had our drinks, gave one to Mr. Adrian, one to me. A twinkle of light, and I noticed a strange black and bronze charm hung from a red chain at her wrist. It looked like a swastika set in the oval part of an Egyptian ankh. I couldn’t place it. Her eyes were dark—her lips puckered and red.

I smiled.

She wrinkled her nose at me and left.

I looked at my drink, clinked the ice cubes a few times, and nonchalantly sniffed it. I couldn’t smell any poison. It tasted like gin. I looked through the glass rim and saw Mr. Adrian looking back at me through his. I dropped ash on the floor—muttered an apology.

“What do you want, Mr. Wildclown?”

“Oh, you know, run of the mill kind of stuff. For instance, did you hear a baby cry last Thursday night at the Morocco Hotel?” His eyes flared white.

I’m sure mine must have. I didn’t ask the question. Tommy had slipped it through all my personal defenses and placed it on the tip of my tongue where it couldn’t help but fall out. For a few moments I was aghast—afraid to speak.

This had never happened before.

“No,” Adrian said, his quick recovery almost hiding the trace of fear in his voice. “Of course not! That’s ridiculous. Everyone knows there are no such things as babies. Not since the Change.” He drew in a deep breath, set his glass down. “I believe this interview is over.”

“That’s okay,” I said. I could feel Tommy clamoring for release. “That was just a test question. What I wanted to say was...ask you...” I paused for a second to recapture my hold on Tommy. Sweat burst out and slid through my greasepaint. My heart pounded. “I wanted to ask if you know a woman named Jan Van Reydner.” My hand shook as I brought the glass to my lips. I saw the name register something in his eyes.

When he started speaking his manner was granite.

“Mr. Wildclown, I have already given you enough of my valuable time. I don’t know who this person is, and if I did, I certainly wouldn’t feel obliged to tell you.”

“Get off it!” I snarled. “You’ve already admitted as much. Why else would you allow a fictitious, dead mime to see you? Am I a fool or did you get all this wealth from being

sloppy? You knew I knew something about something you're involved in and you wanted to know what I knew—*know*." I paused to check my syntax. "You know what I mean. Grow up, Mr. Adrian, the only reason you let me in is because I mentioned those magic names. I know you're Simon and that you hired Jan Van Reydner to kill Mr. Conrad Billings. I understand he's a new client of yours." Adrian was motionless. "And where's Van Reydner? Getting more business, or did you decide she wasn't useful to you any more?"

"I don't know where Ms. Van Reydner is." Adrian dropped his gaze, picked up his drink and drank off the last of it. A childish slurp escaped him; he smirked, then leaned forward and ground his cigar flat. "She disappeared. Jan should have been in touch by now. I do hope she's well. We've been doing a booming business, she and I. She hasn't even been paid yet."

I suddenly got a cold chill. If someone starts to confess...

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wildclown, but I'm afraid I'm quite above any law, if in fact you represent anything resembling that. Mr. Billings is a new customer of ours, yes; and I assure you he is adjusting well to his situation," he said and paused. "Oh, have you had any luck finding Ms. Van Reydner?" He nodded and I was suckered. I actually disregarded his nod and started answering. I don't know how I could have missed it.

An elephant sat on the back of my head. Tremendous pressure—just as my skull was about to explode a wave of black covered me.

Chapter 16

We were in the Chrysler. Tommy's head lolled drunkenly; spittle hung in a slender strand from his lip. It swung and bobbed like a rookie surveyor's plumb. He was jammed in between two big thugs in cheap suits. They looked like poorly trained apes doing gangster impressions.

The Chrysler rocked and banged along an old road. The pavement was cracked and wrinkled like a bad tan-job. While the gangsters did their ugly best in the backseat, a round-gutted, pig-eyed dead man drove. He had a chest so deep it looked borrowed. A black leather cap with snap-up brim sat forward on his round head exposing a sweaty bald spot in back. Stubble, just short of a beard, colored his cheeks. He steered the Chrysler with skinny arms like stretched rubber bands.

"Don't worry, you chicken shits!" He sneered through rat teeth. "We just give him enough shots in the head, he don't come back like, 'sides..." He paused a moment to steer over rocks that protruded from the road. "We got the chainsaw."

One of the soldiers in the backseat nudged Tommy and grunted. "Yer fuckin' landfill now buddy." His friend seemed to enjoy the humor because he laughed around wide teeth in Paleolithic glee.

I was busy playing the friendly little cloud again, blowing in and around their fuzzy scalps. My attempts to regain control of Tommy had been frustrated.

When I was ambushed in Adrian's office, I experienced a few awkward moments of transition as I was ejected from Tommy's body. But from my new vantage point, I first saw the gangsters who now sat on either side of Tommy like Darwinian bookends. They had been lurking in the shadows during my interview and had stepped forward and nailed

me on the back of the head with a sap. The big mug that hit me raised his arm to finish the job but was halted by Adrian, who seemed agitated by the thought of having brains on his carpet.

He had ordered them to drop Mr. Wildclown piece by piece in the Landfill.

Regardless of his refinement, I didn't like Mr. Adrian.

They had carried Tommy to a service elevator, then down and along a winding poorly lit passageway. This finally opened into an underground parking garage that exited a hundred feet from where I had parked the Chrysler. They dragged Tommy to the car with me floating along overhead attached to the unconscious clown by invisible threads.

The little pig-faced corpse had been waiting for them, all spit and menace. They frisked Tommy for keys, and then took the car south along the highway toward the nearest Authority Internment Facility turn off. When they reached the gate there was a slight argument as to how to open it. Pigface had solved it with a few blasts of his auto-shotgun.

I tried to possess Tommy throughout the ride without luck. When we pulled to a stop, I noticed that the clouds were fast turning a deep gray in color. Somewhere up there the sun was sliding out of the greasy brown sky. Night was falling.

I mused over the last time I had seen stars.

It was at Tommy's sanctuary—a patch of grass and moss that grew on the rooftop of a building in a cleft formed by two abandoned skyscrapers. Three short cedar trees had somehow managed to root themselves in the gravel and refuse, and it was among them that I spotted stars one night peeking out between the clouds like naughty children at the cracks of bedroom doors.

The gangsters rubbed thick elbows in Tommy's guts bringing a groan from him. I tried once again to take him—but failed. He must have been hit worse than I thought. My sex pictures were not working.

I couldn't get them over a jagged wall of pain.

"We better be quick," grumbled the driver. "I don't want to use more light than we have to. The Landfillers come for lights."

He looked at his accomplices' crestfallen faces. "You bitches aren't afraid of a few creepy crawlies are you? Just remember to use your sticks!" He gestured with a stout wooden cane. "Whack the fuckers!" The gangsters sat silent and grim until the driver rolled his eyes.

"Shit, how'd I get stuck with you pansies? Call yourselves muscle? Bring him!" He shook his head and climbed from the Chrysler, his auto-shotgun tucked under one arm.

The ape on Tommy's left grunted something in opposition, but opened his door and dragged the clown after him. His partner followed, eyes flashing with terror.

I had to agree with them. I was not somewhere I ever wanted to feel comfortable.

Strange twitching, rustling noises filled the brittle brush that grew around the road. A mist-shrouded mountain of refuse and death rose darkly ten yards from the car.

The gangsters dragged Tommy through the grass to the left of the road. I suddenly caught a whiff of his nerves firing. The clown quickly pulled his feet under him, and then kicked the legs out from under the gangster on the right—who dropped immediately. Tommy collapsed with the other on top of him. He growled and spat. His teeth gnashed.

The auto-shotgun roared and the head blew off the gangster on top of Tommy—then his chest exploded.

Pigface had decided to resolve the dispute by dispatching everything within his range of fire. The gun butt was pressed against his dead hip. Evil malice shone in his lifeless face.

Tommy got his feet against the other gangster's torso and strained against the embrace. Just in time, because the auto-shotgun roared, and his dancing partner's face turned to pulp. Tommy rolled out of the carnage.

Pigface fired again. A good chunk of the Chrysler's left rear fender blew off as Tommy leapt for cover. He crouched momentarily by the right rear tire, his head snapping from left to right.

I floated impotently over him. There was little chance of possession now. His heart was beating madly; his system was flush with adrenaline.

The gun roared three times in succession, eating chunks out of the roof and door. The front window imploded in a shower. Pigface laughed like a machine gun. Saliva poured over his rotten teeth.

My gun was in the glove compartment, but I was the only one who knew it. I saw something limp and pale move near Tommy's right hip.

A severed hand, a woman's danced about in the confusion of flying glass. Tommy grabbed it and threw it over the car. The action was answered by a startled squawk. The clown felt around for another missile.

From my position I watched Pigface moving slowly around the car. I tried another frantic possession, but was dunked in a smothering wash of white-hot panic. Tommy's breath came in gasps. He threw a rock into nearby brush. A tree was blasted to twigs.

Suddenly, Tommy froze. He looked up. His eyes seemed unfocused, as though he were moving his attention from cloud to cloud. He stared directly into the space I occupied. Then he moved. He yanked open the passenger door. A quarter of it disappeared with a rattling roar. Pigface rounded the right front fender. Tommy dove into the car. In a motion, the glove compartment was open and the .44 automatic was in his hand.

Slowly, Pigface's footsteps approached. Rubber and grass met with a terrifying rustle.

He hissed, "Okay, fuck up, c'mon out for Uncle Death. It's Blacktime!" His face appeared pinched and oily in the fractured remains of the windshield. "Good night, sleep tight. Don't let the maggots..."

Tommy fired.

The automatic clattered, eating Pigface's head and one shoulder. Dark gobbets spattered against the Chrysler and rained on the grass. Pigface's auto-shotgun dropped useless in one hand. The body took a couple of hesitant steps backward—almost fell. Tommy leapt from the car and ripped the gun from its lifeless grasp. He kicked the corpse over with a boot to the chest. It scabbled and clawed feebly in the dirt.

Tommy returned to the car, tossed the auto-shotgun inside then circled the vehicle. The gangsters were both dead, deep in the sleep of Blacktime. Tommy took their guns, .9 mm automatics, and checked their wallets. As an afterthought, he walked to where Pigface crawled in the grass.

He kicked the grisly torso down and with a knee on its chest, frisked its pockets. This produced a wallet and a .357 magnum. More for the collection. Tommy pocketed both then let Pigface's body continue its crawl into oblivion.

He walked over to the Chrysler and hopped behind the wheel with a crunch of shattered safety glass. He began laughing.

“So, here I am in the fuckin’ Landfill. What in the Christ?” He laughed until tears started from his eyes and then he dug around under the seat like a cat after a ball of wool. His efforts procured him the remainder of my bottle. He drank desperately, and then lit a cigarette.

“Where’s that fucking Elmo?” He glared absently at the shattered windshield. Sharp, angular reflections grinned back. He tittered wildly at the images—the thousand mad clowns. All the while the whiskey bottle moved slowly between his legs.

I knew what was going to happen next, so I averted my gaze. All that violence was an aphrodisiac to the clown. I looked out the broken window.

Pigface’s body had regained its feet. It staggered blindly, whipped around quickly and flailed its remaining arm as though assailed by a flock of bats. I saw the bodies of the gangsters. They were lying peacefully amid the slaughter like they were made for the job. One even had an arm behind his shattered skull as if it were a sunny day, and a stream babbled nearby. His legs were crossed carelessly at the ankles.

Beneath me, I could hear Tommy’s wild breathing. He was reaching his peak. Taking over would be as easy as getting murdered in Greasetown.

Chapter 17

I left the car at the curb. It leaned battered and beaten at the base of a dim street lamp. A carload of Firebugs roared past moments before an ancient truck burst into yellow flames down the street. A dead wino looked at me with frightened eyes. I gave him a quarter and stumbled up crumbled steps under a neon sign that throbbed the word *Berlinz*.

Shortly, I was curled around a pink marble bar. Some sex kitten purred in a voice of rustling bed sheets, a song about *Stormy Weather*. She seemed oblivious to the many blatant leers that dripped around the lips of foamy beer mugs. I leaned over my drink and slurped with a bruised pucker. My vision jumped like jacks as I waved for the bartender’s attention and stabbed my empty glass.

“You like that stuff, eh, Mr. Clown?” He was a small Latino fellow with thin black hair slicked over a tiny head. His skinny arms worked the bottle of Canadian Club over my glass. “You got a lot of blood on you there.” He looked me up and down.

“Just pour, Caesar. It isn’t mine.” I turned away absently. My head ached, my body shivered with pain, and my guts burned with each glass of whiskey. I was in a great mood—felt like sixty-six cents.

I reached back, got my drink and concentrated on the singer. Her dress was slit to the crotch, and for a lascivious moment I distracted myself by playing peek-a-boo with a white silk bunny that flashed its cute little nose from time to time. When the singer jerked her hips in just such a way, her enormous augmented breasts heaved provocatively against the tight silk dress. I lit a cigarette, drained my glass and put my injured brain to work.

Pigface and the monkey-twins were obviously in Mr. Adrian’s employ. One might ask the question, why does Mr. Adrian hire gentlemen of questionable heredity when he’s

just a nice old taxpaying businessman. The dead men's wallets had provided little more than a few small bills in way of information; in fact, they were buying me a round.

I hadn't expected to find anything. Nobody carried identification any more. Regardless, Mr. Adrian called the shots. He would soon know that I had escaped because his boys wouldn't be home tonight. I decided not to worry about what he would do—he would do it anyway.

I was curious about Tommy. He had never intruded when I was taking my kick at the cat before, so why now? During my past possessions there had been a few odd Tourette-like explosions, but never awareness. He usually just picked up and went along his demented way when I was through with him. But now, he knew about the interview with the lawyer. He'd given that away when he was talking to Inspector Cane. The *phantom baby* case. Now out came his damn voice when I was talking to Mr. Adrian. Again, the phantom baby. And I couldn't forget the other new twist—my fall from the Morocco—I'd been knocked unconscious for the first time since I'd become what I am.

Whatever that is...

A voice intruded into my thoughts.

"Hey, what's with the makeup, Mac?"

I turned with my lips folded for an 'f' sound and looked into a face without a nose. I stopped.

"How are you, Pogo?" I really didn't care. I was surprised at how much I didn't care.

"Fine, you monkey fucker!" He hopped onto the stool beside me. "What brings you out on a day like this?"

"If I didn't go out on days like this, I'd never go out." The whiskey was starting to take the edge off. I'd known Pogo for about a year and a half. We frequented the same damp places on the underbelly of the world.

Pogo laughed in his peculiar wet way. He once told me he was a full-blood Apache Indian. Of course, it explained the brilliant war bonnet he wore to cap off his expensive suit. The subject of his heritage had come up once when we watched a documentary on the TV over the bar.

Apparently terrified by the ramifications of the Change, large numbers of people had forsaken the godless life of the cities to return to nature. Some of the old tribes were letting them in too. Pogo laughed at the whole process but said he could never go back.

"They ain't got no video, no nothing in nature. Who the fuck needs that?"

Later, he had had his nose cut off when he'd fallen into the hands of the Brotherhood of White Order. But he took the facial redecoration in stride. Pogo spent his afterlife as a pimp and dealer in exotic entertainment. He felt the new look terrified debtors and creditors alike.

I added these facts to the list of things I didn't care about.

"You're as crazy as ever, Tommy!" he said and lit up a long imported cigar. Smoke curled up and was sucked into the wet nasal opening. My guts juggled whiskey.

He continued: "But like I said, what the fuck are you up to man?"

"Same old shit, Pogo. Shooting people, getting beaten up, falling out of windows." I pointed for a fresh drink.

"Oh shit man, I know," Pogo laughed. "I heard about you whackin' that Queen. Now, them Queens like whackin' but not with no goddamn bullets... If I was you I'd keep my

balls the hell away from the Downings—forever! A few girls down there want to wear them for earrings.”

“What the hell would I go there for anyway? Probably some other clown.” I slurped my new drink. “You know I don’t shoot people. Death’s a serious thing these days.”

I noticed Pogo fumbling with something in his hands. It was a little can of Greaseasy—the newest high in town. He squirted a drop into each eye, clenched his face and held the can out toward me.

I smelled ethanol.

“No thanks,” I said, pushing the tin back. “I’m working.”

“Come on, man,” he muttered; his head wedged between his knees. “You’ll see clearly now...” He gripped his skull with broad hands. “Oh shit! There we go...”

“Maybe later.” I turned away from Pogo and his convulsions, and watched the singer. She had just started into the same sultry tune again. I still couldn’t name it—some sad song about a storm, and somebody’s baby going away.

“Hey, Pompeii!” I waved the bartender over. “Have you got anything to eat in this joint?”

“Just sandwiches, Mr. Clown!” He smiled insolently and showed off a gold tooth. I wondered if he’d like to have it surgically removed from his bowel.

I clenched my fists instead of swinging them.

“Sham sandwich—make it two, and one of those giant deli pickles if you have them.”

“You want sham or *real* ham Mr. Clown?” He gave me another grin. “Maybe it’s payday at the circus?”

I glared at him as he walked away from the bar, and whispered through a door at the back. He waved a finger to signify that it would be just a minute, hour, day or month—possibly a year.

It would just be *one* of something.

I scanned the bar. Most of the waiters were dead. They were cheap labor, and would work for nothing: busier, the better. About ten people in all enjoyed the atmosphere of Berlinz. It was not a big place—just a long rectangle that looked like it had been made over into about nineteen different styles.

Flickering lights behind a smoked glass wall screamed, “We’re a disco.” Ancient sepia tone pictures of black men holding saxophones over their bellies like brass entrails drawled, “We’re a blues bar.” A prancing little maitre d’ in a lavender tuxedo looking more bored than gay lisped, “We’re a bistro”; while from the ceiling, low-hanging wagon wheels slung with oil lamp light bulbs twanged, “We’re a country bar.” It was that type of thing.

Oddly enough, the customers fit right in.

My sandwiches arrived. My pickle didn’t. The bread was white and dry; but I found the sham to be white and dry, so decided not to complain. Everything breaks down after a while. Who was I to rock the boat?

I looked over at Pogo. His convulsions had ended. The veins in his neck stood out like sewer pipes, and his face was apple red.

“Good stuff, Pogo?”

He smiled, eyes wide as an ocean, and nodded idiotically.

“Yeeaaah!” His voice was wild and uncontrollable. “Gooood stuuuff, baby.” He nodded his head so rapidly that I had to turn away to smirk.

“Heee-ay, *Tommmmy!*” His voice followed me.

“Hey, Pogo.”

“Da-da Elmo, wwhere’s h-h-heeee?”

“At home looking after the kids...” My voice trailed off. Mood momentarily lifted, I smiled at Pogo’s noseless face then threw a ten dollar bill at the bartender and left.

Chapter 18

The Chrysler’s hubcaps screeched against the curb as I slid its long battered body to a halt. While I lurched up the steps to the office, the singer with the rabbit under her dress sang a song in the back of my mind: “Since my baby went away.”

I moved past Elmo where he sat looking bored in the outer room, and in minutes was pacing the eight feet of dirty carpet I kept in front of my desk to impress customers. The whiskey wasn’t doing its job. The back of my head had begun to throb again. The front of my head had joined in, too.

Elmo entered, his puzzled look crossed my bloodstained clothing but disappeared with a shake of my head. He sat silent in his chair like a deep dark secret. Cigarette smoke sketched clues in front of him.

I phoned down the street for coffee, lit a cigarette and sat on the edge of the desk. I was frustrated. I always got that way when a case broke. I may have completed the puzzle, but there was a real anticlimax in the way Authority dealt out justice. This was the hard part. Who could I trust with my news?

True, I didn’t have Van Reydner, but I had a confession from Mr. Adrian. Since the lawyer had hired me to get the guy who killed him, our business would soon be concluded. My problem was finding some way of bringing Mr. Adrian to justice. The plain truth of it was exactly as Mr. Adrian had stated.

He, like most powerful people in history, was above Authority. What that meant was he owned a piece of it. That was probably why Billings had wanted me to kill his murderer outright. The lawyer’s professional pragmatism must have told him that some people simply owned too much of the law to be subject to it.

And even the most hardened criminal could slip through the cracks on a technicality. The truth was I had an impulse to kill Adrian myself. I could say he really hadn’t treated me very well; but where he had power I had none.

It was a long afterlife to spend in a cell.

Still, I had to do something, if for my own sake alone. Mr. Adrian had just tried to kill me for getting too close. He would try again, unless I could draw attention to myself. There were enough rival factions in Greasetown that friction from one, or the possible reaction of another, often stayed the hand of more aggressive groups. I had done Authority favors before. Perhaps I’d try my hand again.

I dialed the operator. “Authority, *Criminal Division*, please.”

The phone rang. Then a stern voice. “Authority, Crimdiv.”

“Hello, I’d like to speak to Inspector Cane.”

“Just a moment. I’ll put you over to records.”

More canned Muzak. Of all the things we could have left behind in the old world, why not...

“Inspector Cane, who’s speaking.”

“Hello, Inspector Cane. It’s Wildclown. I know we didn’t exactly hit it off at our last meeting; but I remember you saying I should call with information. And I’d like to report an attempted murder.”

“I’ll come to your office.”

“Don’t we usually do this kind of thing at headquarters? Besides it’s kind of late.”

“I work late, Wildclown.”

“What time is it now?” I knew it was ten-thirty, the clock on the desk said as much. But I couldn’t resist asking. He seemed like the type who would hate that kind of thing.

“Just after ten-thirty.” His voice was a petulant hiss. “I’ll be there at eleven.”

“Fine,” I said, hung up, and then looked across the desk at Elmo. “It’s the best we can do, Fatso.”

He nodded sadly.

Chapter 19

The setting was everything I could have wanted it to be. My little lamp cut a yellow circle out of my desk blotter. The ashtray was the perfect distance from my hand. A cigarette smoked in my fist and my .38 snub-nose nestled snugly in my right boot where it crossed my left calf. Elmo was in the waiting room having a coffee and keeping an eye out for Inspector Cane. Elmo also had a gun, and he wasn’t supposed to.

Everything was perfect.

I heard a rap at the outer door, then heard Elmo shuffle his way toward it. I listened as Inspector Cane grunted something nasty. He crossed the waiting room then entered my office.

I smiled. I believe his face was incapable of such sentiment.

He walked up to the desk, grinning as he chewed his brass toothpick.

“Let’s hear it, Wildclown. I don’t have all night.” I could see a double reflection of my lamp, ashtray and hand in his glasses.

“Want to sit? It might take a while.”

“No.” His eyes were fixed on the back wall of the inside of my skull.

“Okay.” I gestured with the whiskey I had close at hand. He didn’t surprise me when he turned it down. That was fine, I didn’t want to drink with him anyway. I poured myself a large one.

Client confidentiality got complicated here. If I kept quiet, then Adrian could have me killed and Billings disappear which would be bad, or Billings could have Adrian killed which would make me an accessory—that was better, but still bad. I didn’t have a choice. Talking gave me a better chance of survival.

“On Saturday, March 2 a lawyer, Conrad Billings came to my office. He had been murdered. It happened at the Morocco Hotel. You may remember that.”

Cane nodded.

“He requested that I find his murderer. I went to the scene. During my investigation some arsonists torched the hotel taking all of my evidence with it. Except for this...” I set the cigar butt on the desk blotter. Cane picked it up and sniffed it.

“Don’t worry, that comes in later. To be honest, there was not a lot of evidence in the first place. I think Adrian paid to have the place torched. I was lucky enough to be there when it happened. I believe Authority investigated both the murder and the fire.”

Again Cane nodded, and then set the cigar down on the desk.

“Mr. Billings’ massage therapist disappeared the night he was murdered. It’s my theory that she was working with whoever wanted Billings dead. An accessory, to be certain. I acted on a lead from the night clerk: A Mr. Douglas Willieboy—I have his address written here...” I tossed him a card. “On that tip, I arranged to meet a man who had been in communication with Jan Van Reydner on the night of the murder, and her disappearance.

“The man I talked to was Mr. Richard Adrian, president of Simpson’s Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased. During the weeks prior to Conrad Billings’ death, he communicated with Van Reydner at the Morocco under the pseudonym ‘Simon.’ That cigar butt is the same brand that Adrian smokes and I found that butt in an ashtray at the Morocco. When I met with him, Adrian admitted his involvement and knowledge of Ms. Van Reydner, though not of her whereabouts.

“My theory is that he and Van Reydner had been playing a nasty game. Seems Van Reydner would work the old sex magic on the boys for a while, gaining their trust. Then, on a signal from Adrian she would make sure they had a nice gin party to make everybody real sleepy. In the middle of the night Adrian would sneak in and off the poor mark in his sleep. It makes sense that Adrian would do it himself. He looks tough enough, and it’s always better to use people you trust.” I paused a moment, looked into my glass.

“This time something went wrong. Billings woke up. He said he heard a baby. Whatever he heard, it got him out of bed just in time to hear Adrian come in. He was murdered in the living room—shot in the back of the head, which is the first indication that something went wrong. I’m pretty sure the marks would normally be poisoned, or killed in some fashion that could be passed off as natural causes to avoid the inclusion of Authority.

“I have a feeling something went wrong again, because Billings was allowed to come out of Blacktime on his own. I’m certain that if things had gone right, Van Reydner’s big breasts would have been resting on him when he came to. She would have steered him toward Simpson’s Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased before he had time to get his bearings. This time though, Billings was allowed to get to Authority and the outside world before Simpson’s got him.

“Anyway, back to Adrian’s office, he told me that he was involved and promptly thereafter, I was ambushed and taken to the Landfill where Mr. Adrian had asked his men to, and I quote ‘Leave him, piece by piece in the Landfill.’ Now, I’m completely aware of the power a man like Mr. Adrian wields, and the negative result charges against him would get me; but I had to tell someone. Authority was my first choice.”

Cane nodded slowly.

“If because of lack of evidence you can’t prosecute Adrian for the murder at the Morocco, I am willing to charge him with my attempted murder. I can take you to the scene anytime you’re willing. It’s an Authority Internment Facility. I suggest the sooner the better for both. The evidence will be fresh, and the bodies might not have crawled too

far off. There were three: two living, killed by their accomplice, and the accomplice, a dead man I was forced to shoot it out with.”

“And Van Reydner?” Cane’s face was inscrutable.

“Gone, for the moment.” I lit another cigarette. “I have the feeling she is gone for good. The fact that Adrian didn’t know where she was tells me she might have double-crossed him. He had no reason to lie. He thought I was a dead man—landfill.”

“Leave it with me, Wildclown.” Cane walked to the window, peered out through the blinds. “It’s not what I’d call an ironclad case. Christ, all you have is a cigar butt for physical evidence. I’d think long and hard before you charge Mr. Adrian with anything. He’s connected. Everything else you’ve told me is circumstantial and hearsay. And I’ll bet that whatever happened at the Internment Facility will be nicely cleaned up when we arrive. Keep everything between you and me. What was the location of the internment center?” He took out a notebook. I told him where: he wrote it down. He grinned around his toothpick. “If this is the best you can do, get out of the business, Wildclown.”

I ignored his sally, then climbed to my feet. “I’ve got to tell my client. He’ll want to know.” I was still a little leery. I had no reason to trust Cane. Who paid for his vacations? Also, with Conrad Billings aware, he might be able to use his talents as a lawyer to put the right amount of pressure on the right people. Hell, he might know a judge or two. I definitely needed more power working for me.

Cane stared at me for a moment. “Just a matter of money, eh?” His sneer was unmistakable.

“I told you I’d press charges.” I stared back and shrugged. “I’ve got to eat. Besides, he’s the only reason I know about any of this in the first place. Believe me, the last thing I want to do is anger a man with power. I mind my own business.”

“Okay, tell your client. But leave Adrian and Van Reydner to me. If I’m going to make these charges stick, I don’t need you poking your silly face into things.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling.

Cane started for the door, then stopped. “Oh, Wildclown. This doesn’t have anything to do with that stupid baby case. I guess you were just clusterfucking us around before.”

“It’s related,” I said, mainly for a reaction. What should he care?

Cane’s face was grim. “Hell of a thing to joke about.”

“By the way...” I rose from my chair. My head throbbed ever so slightly. “Who’s Inspector Borden?”

Cane’s face turned uglier for a second then went blank. “Why?”

“My client said Borden gave him my name.”

“Did he say any more? Just *Borden*?” I couldn’t read the look that played about his toad features.

“Just Borden,” I said absently, intent upon Cane.

“Then your client has hearing problems. I never heard of a Borden, and I’ve been in Authority for forty years.”

He adjusted his hat, licked his lips and left.

I walked to the blinds and peered out. Cane’s hunched form climbed into an armored Authority transport that waited.

“More’s the pity,” I whispered.

I walked out to the waiting room and met Elmo coming in. “Elmo, I’ve got to make another call; but I think you’d better pack. It might be wise for us to take a trip for a few

days—to keep out of Adrian’s way. He may still want to settle with me, and I don’t trust Cane.”

Elmo nodded like a good partner. He didn’t know what I was talking about but he nodded anyway. I had to get out of town before I gave Tommy his body back. I stretched. Damn it. If only I had Van Reydner.

Chapter 20

Billings took it all pretty well. I mean the fact that he was going to have to eat his vengeance—for the moment. He assured me he would do his level best to see that Adrian came to trial for his, as Billings put it, “Crimes against Humanity!”

I had to wish him luck. He would need it.

Cane had contacted me once more before Elmo and I left for a vacation. He told me Adrian was missing.

I told Cane that Adrian might have been a lot of bluff. After all, when he realized I was still alive and talking, Adrian might have put together an ugly picture of himself in the hands of a dead lynch mob—rather an unpleasant possibility for a man of refinement.

Cane had said Authority was trying to get access to his records. He might have been responsible for thousands of new clients. There was no telling how long he and Van Reydner had worked together. Cane ordered me to keep out of sight for a while, but to expect a questioning. Billings paid me exactly what he owed me—no bonus—and wished me luck.

I needed luck. So did Elmo. So did a woman named Jan Van Reydner who had become a recurring dream to me.

Part Two: A Witching Time of Night

Chapter 21

I was at the office. Elmo sat motionless across from me looking like he was painted on black velvet. I was tempted to shout or something, to lever him out of his trance. I had finished my umpteenth cigarette. So had Elmo. The air around us resembled a heavy Scottish mist. I resisted the urge to walk to the window and open it to replace the sour air within with the sour air without. Then, with extreme ease, I sank back into my own malaise. I was into the habit now of possessing Tommy every day, rain or rain, just to keep in practice.

We hadn’t had a case in weeks.

After the Billings murder, Elmo and I drove west, and we didn’t stop until we reached a lonely motel set on a stark hump of granite. We had started without a destination in mind, the motel simply appeared to us out of the rain.

It was a nice little place lost in a twilight zone of décor—fake tiger skin couches and plastic dome lamps. A fat landlady to keep us honest. I had passed over the possibility of a trip to Vicetown because so many gangsters and outlaws called it home. All those

casinos were like magnets to gunmetal. If Adrian were going to hire a hit man he would do it from there. Maybe I was being paranoid, but I would be a well-marked target with the clown makeup.

Instead, Elmo and I visited the Bonny-Vu Motel about eight hours west of Greasetown. The name must have come from the old world before the Change because the view was anything but bonny.

The motel overlooked a waste disposal dump.

Mrs. Loxley, the landlady, explained with chubby vociferation, that the dump was new. There used to be a lovely lake for fishing, she said, canoe rides and everything. The woman was obviously upset about the turning tide, but you could tell by her earnest eyes and perpetual blush of embarrassed self-assertion, that she would do her best with what the good lord had given her.

We stayed there about three weeks, drinking ourselves into oblivion in a cozy fisherman's lounge where stuffed trout cavorted in varnished glory for the guests. Tommy had quite taken to Mr. Loxley, who after initial hesitation accepted the clown as a formidable drinking partner.

Mr. Loxley occasionally described supplementing his income with trips into the dump.

"Incredible, the things people throw away," he had said time and again.

Once, he took us into his workshop where every kind of machine from toaster to dishwasher sat about with insides of wire and metal vomited on the floor.

"A gold mine!" Mr. Loxley's eyes seldom betrayed the madness growing behind them.

I spent the week in and out of Tommy. He seemed content to ride the wave, so to speak—as long as there was plenty of strong drink handy. I had held onto him until we were checked in at the motel, and he seemed fairly content upon waking. That was likely due to the exhausted and injured condition his body was in when I returned it.

Mr. Loxley was perfect though. Tommy loved to drink and talk—argue, if he could—preferably about nothing—and Loxley had an appetite similar in both respects. Things almost took a bad turn one night when, full of liquor, Tommy made a clumsy pass at the lady of the manor. I managed to take over and avert what promised to be a disastrous situation, much to Tommy and Mrs. Loxley's chagrin.

A phone call to Inspector Cane gave us the okay for return to Greasetown. He told us that Van Reydner was still missing, and that by all appearances; Mr. Adrian had joined her in oblivion. He had not been heard of, or seen, since the day I spoke to him. Authority was still looking though.

Surprisingly—mainly because of his earlier malice—Cane had described the Authority investigation into Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased. Files had so far shown over fifty clients with questionable deaths.

What had put them onto it was a businessman, Henry Ogden. The files said he had been brought to Simpson's after a fatal heart attack.

One of the investigating Inspectors knew him, and was certain that Ogden claimed to have suffered the fatal attack in his sleep after a night of extreme sex with his mistress—one, Jane Van Meering. When questioned further Ogden described a relationship with a redheaded massage therapist. This led to further investigation, and the bodies started popping up.

Simpson's made the claim that their treatments worked best if applied immediately after Blacktime. As part of their preservation policy, Simpson's acquired written permission to transport a client's remains directly to the facility, forgoing the customary trip to Authority run morgues or private hospitals. Upon arrival, a doctor would determine the cause of death using Simpson's patented non-evasive techniques.

When questioned Simpson's doctor seemed to be a genuine dupe.

Ogden agreed to a physical examination by Authority physicians and they found no sign of heart attack trauma. Instead, they discovered high levels of barbiturates in his now inert tissues.

As I sat across from Elmo, I thought about Van Reydner for about twenty seconds. It passed. I supposed professional pride wouldn't let go of her. She was the one that got away. That always led to a twinge about Adrian's absence. He, too, had escaped retribution.

I pushed the disturbing thoughts aside and slipped back into somnolence. I had done my job. I found a killer. It wasn't my problem that society was corrupt, or that justice was insubstantial. It wasn't my problem.

Now, we had suffered through weeks of inactivity. The season had changed. We had been back for over a month. The temperature was rising. The humidity grew to ridiculous proportions at noon. That meant summer was near.

Approaching summer didn't mean there would be more sun. It simply meant that after it rained, you could expect to sweat intensely for hours. I looked at the office clock. It said ten-thirty. It was Monday, the seventh of May. Oddly enough, Tommy didn't have a hangover this morning when I took over. The money was running low, so the clown had to settle for minimalist bingeing.

The only thing that kept our offices was a secret account that I had taken out while in possession of Tommy. So far, I had managed to keep it a secret from Elmo as well. I began to toss around the idea of releasing my hold on Tommy. Boredom was less acutely felt when disembodied—no aches to complain about, no buttocks turning to sand.

The phone rang.

Elmo and I looked at each other with surprise.

I quickly choked down my optimism as I prepared my business voice. It was my theory that creditors always expect stupid people to default on payments. It was the only way I could rationalize their being so unpleasant. My method was to hit them oozing intelligence and self-confidence. It caught them off guard. I always tried to make it sound as though I purposefully missed a payment, just to check up on them.

The phone rang again. I pulled the receiver to my ear.

"Wildclown Investigations."

There was silence for four seconds. Just enough to get the adrenaline going.

"Wildclown." A voice. It was heavily disguised—completely androgynous and muffled.

"Wildclown," I parroted.

"Not doing your job."

"Thank you," I said, resisting the urge to snipe.

"Another murder."

"Such is the way," I murmured, interested now.

"At the Morocco." The voice was almost mechanical.

“The Morocco Hotel no longer exists. I was there when it burned down.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“All right, I won’t.”

“*Same night as the lawyer.*”

My mind began to race.

“Who?” I didn’t expect an answer.

A resounding click was all I got.

“Hello?” No answer. So, an anonymous phone caller—perhaps a fellow do-gooder? I doubted it. Looking up, I noticed that Elmo was watching me with intensity.

“I think we may have something.” I lit a cigarette, kept the phone cocked at my ear, and put a finger in the dial. Cane first—then the paper.

Chapter 22

I was unable to reach Cane on my first or second try, so I busied myself perusing back issues of the *Greasetown Gazette*. It was simple enough to do. The waiting room was full of them. Even though the *Gazette* could arrive a day late, it was the biggest paper in Greasetown and gave the best coverage of events—its motto made the claim in 30 point: “All the News – All the Time!”

Whatever that meant. Not that I was big on news, it was just the best place to find work. And I needed work.

Elmo let them pile up in the waiting room, because he believed my many clients could read them while they waited to talk to me. He had big plans old Elmo. In the two years I’d been involved with him and Tommy, I had never seen a single client use the waiting room.

I was pretty sure he kept the old papers around because it was his favorite way to pass his sleepless nights. Elmo had piled fifty of the back issues on my desk. I found one dated March 2, 50 N.A., the day of Billings’ murder. *N.A.* stood for the New Age.

We had all restarted our clocks with the Change.

The front page held the usual local political intrigues—Mayor Harvey was up to his old tricks—and vague headlines for world events. They were vague because information was growing more difficult to collect from the Four Corners.

The breakdown in our global satellite communications had the effect of making the world a big place again. Just the same, landlines carried information though it often arrived garbled. Eastern Authorities were still stemming the flow of refugees from the Middle East. Camps were set up out of the way of radioactive clouds that followed the Children of God. The Dark Ages had returned to Russia. Post-democratic China massed its troops on the border. Civil wars raged across the African continent. Capetown had been made the capitol of a newly formed AIDS victims’ republic. Things were getting exciting.

I flipped past the headlines to the section set aside for murder and death. I grinned at the ad that ran across the bottom of the page.

“King Industries Announces Breakthrough in Afterlife Products.”

The ad under the banner described a de-mortifying process that married ancient Egyptian embalming techniques with state of the art technology. The downfall of

Simpson's Skin Tanning must have been good for the King of the Dead. By the look of the ad, his company had picked up the slack. I almost felt like calling him and asking for a piece of the action. After all, I was instrumental in this surge in business.

I dismissed the notion though. The King made it known that he did not scruple about fairness. His competitors were conspicuously low-key.

The Murder and Death section contained news articles about recent murders, stories updating old homicides, bounties for murderers posted by their victims and obituaries. Obituaries had become an interesting read, now that the dead could write their own. And I usually enjoyed a good chuckle.

Normally I read the whole section to see if I could drum up business. This time I had a mission. I curled my tongue like a snail in its shell—I think better that way.

The new murders, about fifty of them, were listed alphabetically by last name. Then, it jumped out at me. I read the story under 'Billings, Conrad.'

Authority is investigating the murder of New Garden lawyer, Conrad Billings, early Friday morning at the Morocco Hotel in the Downings District.

Witnesses on the scene reported the murder arose from a quarrel between the lawyer and his mistress.

Authority refuses to speculate on the motive for the killing and will not comment while the crime is under investigation.

I looked at the byline: *Mary Redding*. Elmo held out another paper to me. He pointed to a local news story dated Monday, March 5th. The headline read: *Fire Consumes Landmark*. Fires are not uncommon, especially in the Downings, so they don't get a lot of press. This one read:

Authority continues to investigate the Saturday night blaze that destroyed the historic Morocco Building in Downings District.

The fire started at 11:30 p.m., officials said, and investigators at the scene found no evidence of foul play.

"We are told by our experts that it was likely the old wiring," Authority Investigator Roger Shipton said.

"We've questioned a lot of the people in the neighborhood, and we haven't turned up anything that warrants further investigation."

Shipton said that there was no evidence connecting the blaze to the recent murder of a New Garden lawyer at the Morocco Building.

Authority refuses to release the names of those involved.

The Morocco Building played a significant role in the post-Change riots of the 20's as a headquarters for Resurrectionist Captain Jack Updike and his supporters. Historians mourned this significant loss.

No sign of foul play. I had to stifle a giggle. Those dead arsonists must have left some trace. The gasoline should have been detected. And there had to be something left of their bodies—charred bones at least—and the shotgun. Why would Authority sit on this? They usually went out of their way to discredit Downings District. It helped them justify their restrictions on the dead.

"Elmo, keep looking for related stories. Anything mentioned after the Billings murder, and before the Morocco fire. A disappearance, anything."

The Morocco had stood for years and years, and years, probably the scene of a hundred murders; but the caller had been exact in saying the murder happened the same night as Billings'. That was the night I wasn't doing my job.

I hated criticism.

I picked up the phone, dialed the *Gazette*. I read the byline for the fire story. Same reporter. The phone line buzzed angrily.

"Mary Redding, please," I asked when the husky, *good morning* voice of a switchboard operator answered.

"One moment..." it rasped.

The line continued to snap and pop like Rice Crispies. Five minutes ticked by. I could hear the line transfer, buzz, beep and rattle. A muffled conversation overheard, then...

"Hello." A clear voice—crisp and sharp. This reporter had purpose. I would have hated to work at the desk beside her on Monday morning. "Mary Redding, how can I help you?"

"Ms. Redding, my name's Wildclown. I'm a private detective. I understand you covered a couple of stories at the Morocco Building before it burned down in March."

"Yes..." She sounded distracted. "I did."

"I know about the Billings murder. But I wonder if you could tell me about the other killing."

A pause, then. "There was no other killing."

"Well, what was the other story you covered?"

"The fire." She was becoming hesitant.

"But," I pointed out, "the fire did not happen 'before' the Morocco burned down. I assume you covered that story 'after'."

"I thought that's what you meant." More hesitation.

"You agreed that you covered two stories before the fire. Did you not?"

"What's your name again?" She was fast becoming professional on me.

"Wildclown. I worked on the Billings case." I then decided to try a lie. Call it a hunch. "I was hired to investigate the other murder. Since I'm familiar with the scene."

"Oh..." Redding relaxed, but remained cagey when she said, "I thought that one was being hushed."

"I understand." I actually did. "I understand the pressure that Authority can bring to bear on some, shall we say, 'contentious' stories."

"You can say that again," she laughed. "I'm surprised you know about this one. They really put the pressure on to keep it out of the papers. I don't think any of us ever would have known about it if my fotog hadn't stumbled upon the body. We were there on a tip about the Billings case. The whole story would have disappeared."

"I see." I had to keep my bluff going. "Your fotog... you see I didn't know about that."

"Yeah, poor guy—he'd only been hired the week before. Then to have to see the body. Cotton was quite a mess. You know that much."

"Yes, he certainly was." I jotted the name on the desk blotter and then took an intuitive leap. "Cotton, well—Ms. Redding, any ideas what happened? Why would anyone treat a body like that?"

"You've got me. It was like he'd been put in a blender. One of our homicide reporters saw the pictures—said it looked like a tree shredder had been used on him. I saw the

body, and it looked fresh. The blood was still pooling—slowly coagulating in the dumpster. Christ, there was a bottle of gasoline too, like whoever did him in was going to really finish the job—but got cold feet, or ran out of time.”

“And Cotton was registered at the Morocco.”

“Yeah, under the name W. Irving. There would never have been a real name on him if there hadn’t been that bit of shredded I.D. In fact, I helped Authority put it together. Just the name: Alan Cotton. We had the last three numbers of his social insurance. Of course, Authority warned me to leave the story alone, right then and there. They said it was a drug killing. Said they found liters of Greaseasy in the guy’s sample case—which was conveniently unmolested. Authority said he was a salesman for afterlife cosmetics who was supplementing his income. They wouldn’t tell me what company. Just told me to drop it. I would have checked it out further, but the publisher called me personally, told me to drop it. Then the fire...”

“Well,” I said. “That about checks out with my notes.”

“Who hired you?”

“A friend. I’m not allowed to divulge...”

“What’s your name again?”

“Wildclown.”

“What the hell kind of a name is that?”

“It’s Scottish.”

“Listen, you’re not going to do anything public with the information.” Her tone was speculative. “I mean, I know all about journalistic integrity—I mangle it every week—but, I don’t want to lose my place here, I’ve got job security, but that means squat to Authority. I guess I really started to run off at the mouth.”

“I think you have a tough time with your integrity. I think you’d like to see something done with the story.” I liked her voice.

“Probably right.” She fell silent.

“Do you have a place of origin for Cotton. I mean his home.”

“Down past Vicetown on the coast, but surely you’d have that yourself.”

“Just double-checking everything.” I tried to push my smile through the receiver. “It’s important to be certain of the facts. Listen, thanks for the help. If I can ever be of service—look me up. Just don’t call me Shirley.”

“Yeah, I will,” she said. Then before she could bring her full faculty to bear, I hung up. Alan Cotton died the same night as the lawyer Billings. Unfortunately for Cotton, whoever had killed him had also destroyed his chance at an afterlife by destroying his body. I had heard of the bodies of syndicate snitches and both cooperative and uncooperative witnesses ending up that way. Sliced and diced.

But why Cotton? If it was drug related, then it could have been punishment or retaliation from some rival faction. Still, Authority had clamped a lid on it. Maybe Cotton was being made an example of. Whoever did it wanted him silent forever. But Authority had slammed the lid on the case. Why? And the fire too. *No sign of foul play*. They hushed that as well.

I looked at Elmo. He sat across from me. His long arms were jackknifed like grasshopper legs to launch him out of his chair.

“Elmo, we might have a case here.” My problem was getting somebody to pay me to investigate it. “Let’s take a trip to Vicetown.” I lit a cigarette and leaned back in my chair while Elmo slipped out to bring the car around front.

Chapter 23

The two-hour drive down the coast was uneventful. I was not surprised that Elmo had elected to come along. If there was still beauty in the world, you could find it on the drive down the coast. It had been a long time since the roaring waves had seen a sunset and the craggy cliffs a blue sky; but there remained a harsh gothic beauty.

Whirling clouds of spray churned over the gray rock face where the sea ground its time-laden bulk against the coast. I had even noticed a flock of seagulls stoically facing another day of rain and storm. They stood along the guardrail like so many Heathcliffes baring their souls to the biting counsel of nature. Part of me wanted to join them out there—but I knew they’d go for my eyes.

The highway wound in and around granite outbursts rising onto pedestals only in those areas that were near inhabited stretches. The Landfillers were less prevalent near the coast.

A lively seabird population scavenged anything that crawled near.

We got to Vicetown at around six-thirty. I’d spent a good part of the afternoon digging through the remaining newspapers—the *Greasetown Gazette* had few competitors—but found nothing about any other murders at the Morocco. Vicetown had looked much the same as I remembered it as we drove under its flashing welcome signs.

The city held about a million-and-a-half inhabitants, alive and dead. Its buildings were unique in the way they marched away from the highway, precariously close to crumbling cliffs. All told, the city sprawled along ten miles of coast. Inland, I saw the great Ferris wheel flinging its passengers tantalizingly at the sky, before terrifying them with a reckless descent.

As I understood it, since the Change, Ferris wheels had become extremely popular. In fact, most entertainment of this nature had—at least among the living. Once dead, an individual had to learn new rules of existence and acceptable risk.

I had looked up the number for Alan Cotton in the latest phonebook, but found nothing. Some deeper research located him in a phonebook a decade old. I called, found his number had changed—was under his wife’s maiden name, tried again, then reached his widow. She would be pleased to talk to me.

I had her address, 333 Sea Heights. I told her it would be late in the day.

She said that would be fine.

The neon drives you crazy after a while. Vicetown at night is a menace to the light sensitive. A steady drizzle fell. I complimented Elmo on his good sense. He had found time to get the windshield replaced since my engagement in the landfill with Pigface. Mr. Loxley at the Bonny-Vu had made a few dollars from us playing mix and match with the parts and pieces he’d mined from his collection.

Water still managed to dampen my right sleeve through holes in the passenger door, but we were fairly seaworthy.

The streets of Vicetown, I'm told, are reminiscent of a pre-Change town named Las Vegas. I didn't know whether Las Vegas still existed, but if it was like Vicetown in the old days, I could well imagine what had happened to it after the Change.

Vicetown was a place to go if you wanted to have things emptied: bank accounts, pockets, over-stimulated imaginations, you name it. I had come down for the latter, when deep in the intoxication of my first possession of Tommy. I could remember a dark woman named Lorna, who had a well-knit frame and plenty of energy.

Those first days were strange. I had pretty much awakened, fully sentient, whole without a past, floating over Tommy's head. I could remember the dizzying moments as I flinched mentally—expecting a fall. The following minutes were of extreme angst as I began to realize the unexplainable nature of my presence.

I knew who I was, at least what I did, but I did not have a name. I had a sense of 'I', but I had no body. I knew that I existed, but I didn't know where I came from.

This had been incredibly depressing for a few weeks—I began to think I was in hell, following the clown from toilet to liquor store to toilet—then, the first possession happened.

One day, I was floating over Tommy like a grumpy little rain cloud—he was cleaning his sinuses with his pinky finger—when he made a frantic phone call and ordered the car around front. We drove a few blocks before he told Elmo to stop the car and let him out.

I remember Tommy running up a flight of steps and into a hotel very much like the Morocco—I remember the terrifying speed with which I was impelled after him. He passed up another flight of steps and then along a hallway to a door. It was open—cigarette smoke hung in the air—jazz music squawked sour in my ears.

A heavysset woman leaned against the frame with exaggerated and somewhat elephantine coquettishness. She batted large fake eyelashes at the clown. The dialogue was depressingly average.

"How are you, big boy?" She ran her hands over her hips. The trip must have tired them out because they hung limp at her sides afterwards.

"How is my little mama?" Tommy had said as he reached out and fondled her breasts.

"Ooh," she cooed, pushing back against his hands. "Ooh!"

Tommy shoved her into the room onto a bed about a foot wide. I think it was an army cot. I floated overhead watching as he clumsily disrobed her and then mounted. There must be something innately voyeuristic about the human species, because I had to admit that floating overhead while all this was going on was very exciting for me—even though I had no body of my own.

Perhaps it excited latent memories. I don't know. I just remembered the moment I made the startling realization that I could see through Tommy's skull.

Inside was some sort of electrical activity that drew me.

The actual transition happened fast. The next thing I knew, I was lying over this woman's heaving body huffing and panting. I could remember the strangeness of the physical sensations: the half-pain, half-pleasure of the spent orgasm, the cloying musk of my partner, the little nervous aftershocks I was receiving, and even the sad, dead feeling of her over-conditioned hair.

I went from that room into a binge of sensation, the Epicurean at large. I became a wandering Hedonist avatar, drunk on the tangible. I ended up in Vicetown with both my wallet and my seminal vesicles empty; or rather both Tommy's respectively.

“This h-here, Boss?” Elmo raised a thin arm to a road sign that said *Sea Heights*, and brought me from my reverie.

“Look for 333,” I said and then mused gloomily.

Alan Cotton must have been doing a booming business selling cosmetics to the dead, because 333 Sea Heights was a sprawling white ranch house that perched incongruously on a tall narrow shelf of rock overlooking the sea.

Incongruous, because the design of the building demanded acres of flat farmland around it, not a deep precipitous fall into the pounding surf on one side and a thick apple orchard on the other. Something with a crenellated tower would have fit the location better, and perhaps a low brownstone carriage house with a loft.

As we drew near, I realized that what the house lacked in height it made up for in width. Cotton’s house must have been half a mile long. I pointed to a guesthouse, murmured something about *guests* then pointed to another. Cotton had done well.

We pulled up to the front. An ornately gardened walkway led to a tall oak front door. A monstrous rosebush grew on either side in wood chips. The drizzle had tapered down a little as we pulled to a stop. I slipped my gun into the glove compartment, smiled at Elmo, and then climbed from the car.

“Come on, Fatso.” I sniffed the breeze—salty with a faint aroma of fish. What a strange yet refreshing breeze, I thought.

Elmo busily straightened his suit—an interesting houndstooth number with dark slacks—then ran a comb through his thin hair. Poor bastard, I thought. Elmo had class; it was obvious. To have a boss that clomped around in army boots and greasepaint must have horrified him. But, he never complained.

I walked up to the front door, rang the bell, a second passed and it opened.

I could tell from the first glimpse that he was the butler. The jaundiced complexion and permanent sneer on the fellow behind the door also told me he was a snob. His eyes had an unfeeling metallic gleam. His tuxedo was covered in minute black and white checks, with a topcoat that stopped at the waist.

“I’m sorry,” he sniffed. “We do not accept solicitations.”

“Oh good,” I said. “Because I didn’t bring any.”

“Well, sir,” he continued, squeezing his eyes at me. “If you have business here, I suggest you use the servant’s entrance and speak with the house manager.”

I smiled, clenched my fists, and then smiled again. “I’m here to see Mrs. Cotton. I suggest you fulfill your job specs, and see to our comfort...”

“Now, I’ve had enough...”

“Am I wrong,” I cut him off. “Or is one of us here a *servant*.” I glared at him. “I’m Wildclown, a detective. I have an appointment with Mrs. Cotton.” I held up my license.

His eyebrows jumped to the top of his head when he looked at it, and then fell to a serious line over his eyes.

“Mr. Wildclown, of course.” His voice held a minute inflection of professional remorse. “Please come in.” He swung the door back to reveal a long oak-paneled hallway that stretched away from us in three directions. Elmo and I entered.

The butler gestured to a spread of leather chairs. “Here gentlemen. If you would please wait while I announce your arrival.”

“Thank you.” I smiled. Everybody was happy again. I noticed the butler took the seaward hall. His form became a bending rapier of shadow against the glare of polished wood.

I looked at Elmo. “Nice place.”

“Like a shithouse in heaven,” Elmo drawled, eyes searching the lavish carving on the pillars and overhead beams.

“Yes, keep an eye peeled for Apostles.” A sudden *tock-tock-tock* alerted me as a distant form appeared in the glare of the hall.

The strangest thing about Mrs. Cotton was the fact that her perfume reached me a full minute before she did. *Violets*. Mrs. Cotton had somehow managed to make the scent aggressive.

The second thing I noticed about her was the look of utter disbelief on her smooth features. Her long face was framed in platinum hair, and her body, to be kind, was *thin*. Mrs. Cotton in her expensive shimmery dress looked like a chicken-wing wrapped in silk.

“Is this some kind of a joke?” She stopped a good ten feet from us. Her voice honked, goose-like, from her long neck. I winced when the light from the hallway cast her body into sharp relief against the fabric of her dress. I was reminded of coat hangers.

“No, Mrs. Cotton.” I climbed to my feet beside Elmo. “I’m Wildclown, a private detective. This is my partner, Elmo.” He bowed nervously as though he had met the Virgin herself. “As I told you earlier on the phone, I’m working on a case. There was a murder that took place at the Morocco Hotel the same night that your husband met with misfortune. There may be a connection.”

Her eyes narrowed—looked me up and down. “This isn’t a joke.”

“No, Mrs. Cotton. I’m here to ask you some very serious questions.”

“And the makeup?”

I restrained Tommy. “Part of a disguise. Investigating murder can be a dangerous business.” I gave her my *‘I love danger’* smile.

“I see.” Her expression told me she wasn’t convinced. Her big eyes gave me the twice over. “Has the world gone mad then...” She shook her head, and then tried a gracious smile. “Do come in for a drink. Excuse me if I ask your partner to wait here.” She turned away and clattered down the hall she had just come up.

I turned to Elmo. “That okay with you, Fatso?”

“That’s cool, Boss. This is g-good enough for me.”

I left him sitting on the couch, a beatific smile on his face as he studied the carvings overhead.

Chapter 24

I wrestled gravity. First I gripped my knees, found I sank too far—pulled myself forward again, locked wrists around them. I wanted a cigarette, couldn’t smoke one this way so I let go and sprawled back into the overstuffed pillows on the couch. I tried to make the maneuver look natural so I dug into one of my pockets and produced a cigarette. I popped it into my mouth and then gazed across at the distant ashtray that taunted me from a heavy marble coffee table. I struggled out of the couch, and sat on its arm.

I noticed Mrs. Cotton had been watching me. I smiled, offered a cigarette that she declined, and then lit my own. Two great triangular windows swept up the wall of the living room that faced the coast. They formed the broad wings of a sea bird that was worked into the stucco. Through these wings, I could see the world outside, gray and blurry in the wind-blown rain.

Around me sprawled a number of similar man-eating couches and divans. Mrs. Cotton leaned against a mauve grand piano. We were waiting for our drinks. Neither of us had said anything for the last few minutes.

The butler returned. I welcomed the warm presence of the scotch. Mrs. Cotton sipped a martini. The living room was kept well lit by many ceiling lamps. I could see Mrs. Cotton better in this light.

She must have been pushing fifty before the Change, and the end of aging. She had fairly smooth skin, flawed by a slight bagginess over the cheekbones. It gave her eyes a protuberant, fish-like quality.

“I suppose you’re through sizing me up,” she said coolly, using the paperback mystery jargon.

“Nice place you have here.” I walked over, flicked my cigarette at the ashtray, and then looked around and around. There was a picture on a side table of a man with a kind face and bulbous nose. He was dark haired, and dark eyed. Heavy rimmed glasses held up his thick lenses. “This Mr. Cotton?”

A slight blush washed behind her features. “He hated that picture.”

I stifled an urge to agree with him. “Been here long?”

“Alan purchased the house for us ten years ago—just after his promotion. It used to belong to a movie director.”

“What was the promotion to? Head of the sales team?” I stood about ten feet from her; drink in my left hand, cigarette in my right.

She looked offended. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I was told your husband sold cosmetic products for the dead.” I sauntered over to the piano, resisted the urge to set my drink on it.

“Now you *are* being ridiculous.” She turned away from me displaying a featureless back. “He was nothing of the kind.”

“Really,” I said, experiencing the kind of tight feeling I get in my stomach moments before life gets complicated. “What did he do exactly?”

“Well, he *was* in the afterlife business; but nothing so inconsequential as cosmetics. Goodness, no. Alan was the inventor of new life *Regenerics*.”

Regenerics. The term rang a bell, but I couldn’t place it. “Would you mind explaining *Regenerics* to me?”

“You’re quite a detective.” She wandered over and placed her chin behind on the piano bench. “*Regenerics* is a relatively new field. Alan was the first to investigate it to any great degree. That’s what gave him so much freedom.”

“Freedom?”

“To move around. Write his own ticket—so he used to say.” She paused. “He was quite sought after. Though he complained about the fleeting aspects of celebrity.”

“And this *Regenerics*—what is it a preservation technique?”

“Nothing so superficial. Alan was involved in genetic... let me see—what did he call it—*genetic revivification*. He believed there was every possibility that the dead were not

completely dead. Oh, I know they still walk around and everything, but Alan felt certain there was a way to restart their life processes. He said it would revolutionize the death industry. Can you imagine?"

I *could* imagine. I tried to relay this with a knowing nod.

"What was he doing up in Greasetown?"

"When he died? He worked up there—spent most of his time in Greasetown.

Something on business, rest assured. Though he was always secretive with me. He got the majority of his funding from King Industries. They supplied a laboratory for Alan."

"He did all of his work in Greasetown?"

"Oh, yes. He had an office here, but as he used to say, 'the body' of his work was in Greasetown. Authority has already been over the information he kept here—his office and files, I mean. They felt it necessary, considering the nature of his—demise. But, as I said, Alan spent the majority of his time at his lab working." Mrs. Cotton did the first truly human thing during our encounter. She leaned forward, pressed a hand to her throat and grimaced as though she was trying to swallow a pill. "He tried to make it home on weekends."

I paused a second to hate my job. "I know this is difficult for you, but how did he die?"

"You don't know?" She finished the last of her martini. "You *are* a detective." I wasn't going to miss Mrs. Cotton. She continued: "An accident at the lab, involving one of his experimental mixtures and some faulty machinery. The explosion was quite devastating I was told. There—there, wasn't much left." She fell silent and again rubbed her throat. "Really, Mr. Wildclown. Must this line of questioning be pursued any further?"

"No, I'm sorry. I understand." My mind was already tossing these tidbits into the conspiracy I was cooking. Then I shook my head, and moved around the piano to stand in front of her. "Uh—no, I'm sorry, Mrs. Cotton. But there is something you should know. Your husband was murdered."

Mrs. Cotton looked at me hard.

"He was murdered. At the Morocco Hotel, Downings District in Greasetown. It's a bad part of town. It's a good place to go if you want to get killed, but what you've told me about your husband has me wondering what would have put him there. I have it on the word of a reporter for the *Greasetown Gazette* that she and her photographer discovered his body. I can't tell you any names, but Authority immediately put a gag on the story."

"This is impossible, Mr. Wildclown." Her hands clawed the air.

"I'm afraid not. Mrs. Cotton, has anyone other than Authority been here to talk to you about your husband. You said Mr. Cotton was a leader in the study of Regenerics. Don't you think that someone would come to talk to you about him if there was nothing unusual going on?" I cleared my throat, and leaned in toward her. "His colleagues, his employer, perhaps the newspaper or radio reporters."

"There was no one, as I said, his celebrity was fleeting. He often complained about it. He knew everyone would... talk about him; know him, if his process worked. For the time being, he was not well-regarded by his peers." Her eyes dropped. "But it's early yet, I quite expect to hear from Mr. King, his patron, very soon—or some of his colleagues. I'm sure everyone is a little slow with the shock."

“It’s been almost two months. That’s a lot of shock.” I sighed. “No one will come. Not Mr. King. Not the newspapers. Authority is sitting on the story for some reason.”

“But why...” She gave the floor between my boots a searching glance. “Why would...”

“I don’t know, Mrs. Cotton, but I’d like to. I have a feeling that this is somehow wrapped up with another case I worked on. I want to know how.” I rubbed my chin thoughtfully.

“But, no. This is ridiculous.” She shook her head, ran her eyes over me again. “You come in here, dressed as a-a clown of all things, and then begin to tell me this incredible story of Alan being murdered. I never should have let you in.”

“I understand your skepticism.” I smiled weakly. “And to help get you over that, I’d like you to do this for me. If there is nothing unusual about the accident, Authority would be glad to help you out. Am I right?” I bent, placed my hands on my knees and leaned even closer. “I suggest you call them, and ask for a tour of your husband’s lab. Tell them your doctor ordered it as part of the grieving process. Ask the investigating inspectors to take you to the place where Alan died. I’ll bet they won’t take you. I know what they’ll try to do. Calm you down. Oh, you’re upset. Poor widow. But, I’ll tell you this. Authority won’t take you because he didn’t die in his lab.”

“I have been curious about this. I just assumed that these things take time.” She held her face with broad, red hands.

“Another thing, ask them about a rumor. Tell them you heard that Alan was murdered at the Morocco Hotel. Don’t mention me, that would just tie my hands or kill me.” I straightened, but didn’t move back. “I know how Authority works. They’re a big powerful body. So why would they hide the truth? Well, they would only hide something that would damage them.”

“Why are you—did you, come here.” Tears glimmered in her eyes.

“I like the truth. And, to be honest, I need work. If, after you speak to Authority, you feel confident that your husband died in an accident at his lab—fine. I’ll be gone, and out of your hair. But, if the conversation raises the smallest doubt, I suggest you hire me to find the truth. I’m not expensive and I’m house broken.” I released a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry, I just can’t stand extended periods of seriousness.”

My joke went unheard. Mrs. Cotton’s forehead had become a farmer’s field of furrows. She rubbed her teeth lightly with a knuckle.

“I’ll make a call.” She looked at me. “It must have been the shock. I should have found out more about it anyway. I guess it was just so unexpected. Maybe I’ve been denying it. The insurance money was paid—and they always investigate...I was in shock!”

“It’s understandable.” I moved over, leaned against the piano.

“Funny,” Mrs. Cotton said, lost in thought. “I remember the day he left for Greasetown. He would usually stay away for a week at a time. I remember the last day. I asked him what he was working on. He said, ‘You know I don’t like to talk about my babies. Especially this one.’ He always called his projects ‘babies.’ I always thought that was silly, really. Anyway, there was something about his expression that day...” She fell silent. “Well, I intend to make that call, Mr. Wildclown.”

“Remember. Don’t mention me—yet.” She nodded.

I continued: “While I wait, would it be possible for me to view his office. I know Authority is thorough, but there is always the possibility...”

She tilted her head at me. “They took his files, but I don’t see why you shouldn’t see his office.”

“Edward!” She called down the hallway. A familiar waspish form moved toward us.

“Yes, Madam.” The butler bowed stiffly.

“Take Mr. Wildclown to Alan’s office. Allow him to look around. I don’t know why...” She searched my eyes with hers, “but I trust him and I really have no reason to.” She giggled.

“Thank you, Mrs. Cotton.” I felt a little guilty. Sensitivity was something suppressed by life in Greasetown.

“What makes you so sure he was murdered and that Authority is somehow involved?” She watched me earnestly.

“Certain actions, facts and behaviors. To be honest I don’t have much more than hearsay. No evidence. Just a feeling. Something unexplainable—like you trusting me.”

She smiled with real humor. “Thank you, Mr. Wildclown. Your efforts will be appreciated.”

I nodded, and followed Edward along the hallway. There was a major cover-up going on, I knew that much. But how hard should I push? It was very easy to disappear in my neighborhood. I had heard of other detectives that dug too deep and struck lava. And here I was investigating the death of man whose murderers had almost liquefied his body. Greasetown wouldn’t miss me any more than I would miss Greasetown.

I didn’t want to be a story in the Murder and Death section: Some nobody’s mangled remains were found...

Chapter 25

The search through Alan Cotton’s office had turned up nothing. Edward had been an annoyance throughout the inspection—humming distractedly as he checked the top surfaces of furniture for dust.

The office itself was a large one—room enough for a long couch and easy chair around a low coffee table. At one wall by a bay window, the prerequisite desk, chair and filing cabinets. It was one of those kinder, gentler offices—all fuchsia and pastel—that prompted an urge in me to butt my cigarette on the carpet.

Authority had been thorough all right. I tried to turn the computer on but it blinked and beeped like it was short-circuiting then quietly died. Edward assured me that Mr. Cotton did not use or trust computers, but kept this one in the hope that scientists could find a way to repair them one day. I dug around, but there was nothing left in the way of records except for a scratch pad.

I tried the old detective pencil shading over paper trick to reveal any impress from former notes, but even that had come up blank.

I left the office, rejoined Elmo in the foyer, and was met there by Mrs. Cotton. Her protuberant eyes were red. She dabbed at them intermittently with a silk handkerchief.

“You were right, Mr. Wildclown. I had a difficult time finding someone who would talk to me about it. Finally, they gave me to an Inspector Borden. He told me to calm

down. When I pushed him, he said the lab had been badly damaged and there would be no point in viewing it. He said I could see it if I had to, but he thought it might be dangerous considering some of the chemicals Alan used in his experiments. He felt it was an unnecessary risk.”

She rubbed her throat.

“When I asked him if he knew of a rumor about Alan being murdered at the Morocco Hotel, he became very interested. He wanted to know where I had heard it; in fact, he became very insistent on the point. I told him a servant had heard something of it on a trip into Greasetown. He wanted to know who the servant was. I said I couldn’t be sure because I was already quite distraught when I was told, and I have many servants. I told him I would try to remember.”

She managed an ironic grin.

“This Inspector Borden told me that around every death, rumors are bound to spring up. He said it had to do with the people’s morbid curiosity. He then assured me that Alan died in an accident, and then offered me an Authority Psychologist. He said it might do me good to talk. I just told him I had my own psychologist, and could look after myself. He said that if I must see the lab, I would have to give him some notice.”

Mrs. Cotton’s expression changed from the blank aspect of the storyteller to a rigid look of determination. “I’d like to hire you, Mr. Wildclown. I didn’t get this far in life without learning to recognize the runaround when it’s given me. I don’t care about the cost.”

Chapter 26

It was about eight-fifteen when we hit the highway north. Road signs appeared in our headlights like yellow ghosts. I was employed again—the same deal I gave Billings.

I now had more intrigue than I wanted. Mr. Adrian was missing. Jan Van Reydner was missing. The lawyer Conrad Billings was dead. Alan Cotton was dead. He was not a ‘cosmetics for the dead’ salesman at all. He was a scientist working on Regenerics.

Why would he turn up dead at the Morocco when he could afford a better hotel? Why would Authority try to cover up Mr. Cotton’s true history? I knew *how* they could. Authority just had to threaten the right individuals, but why?

Unless Cotton was more important in all of this than just another murder. What was he doing at the Morocco Hotel? Did he stumble on Adrian and Van Reydner as they were working on Billings? Who turned him into blood pudding? It was obviously an organized bit of work.

The type of job that was done on his body led me to believe organized crime was involved, but why would Authority cover for them? Like them or not, Authority still represented the law—even if it was a somewhat rabid law. Then, a name came to me: Mr. King of King Industries—*Former Senator William King, ‘the King of the Dead’* as the media called him.

The King made billions from his preservative treatments for the dead. Did he actually contemplate selling them life with Regenerics? Too many questions and not enough answers. I looked at Elmo. His face was strange and inhuman in the glow from the dashboard.

“Elmo, this is a stupid question, but: if there was a way for you to be alive again, would you try it? Even if there were risks.”

Elmo looked at me incredulously. “I’d d-do anything to be alive again.”

“I thought so.” I lit a cigarette. I was certain that this would be the attitude of all dead people. If so: what if Regenerics worked?

Any dead man with the slightest amount of pull would do everything in his power to obtain a new life.

But, I couldn’t forget Adrian. Regenerics would destroy him. So he would want Cotton dead. But *he* was missing? Did he step on someone else’s toes? He obviously wanted me out of the picture. So he had his goons try to finish me off. But what happened to him while I was out in the Landfill waltzing with the monkey-twins?

“Pull over at the next filling station, Elmo,” I said. In about thirty minutes we found one. I dropped a dime in the pay phone. A bit of verbal fencing with the butler, then...

“Hello, Mrs. Cotton. It’s Wildclown, I don’t want to upset you again, but could you answer one question for me?”

I heard a muffled affirmative.

“What was the name of the Authority inspector who claimed Alan’s files?”

“Oh, let me see. Yes, a surly little fellow. Mr. Crane, no Cane. Inspector Cane.”

I thanked her, hung up and got back in the car. “Cane,” I said absentmindedly. “Cane.”

“What’s that, Boss?” Elmo looked over as we pulled out onto the highway.

“Nothing, Fatso. Let’s get home. I could sleep for a week.”

The bars in the broken centerline passed like images in a dream.

Chapter 27

Life is but a dream, and like in every dream the images flicker fast. The pictures change, dissolve and strangely intertwine. Nothing’s what it seems. Clocks tick faster, slower, there seem to be recurring themes of the tightening noose, the enemy draws near, he shoots, you die.

I had the same feeling about this case. Strange New World aside, things were slipping slowly into the madness of nightmare—far off I heard the click of the heel, the impatient step of doom.

After returning to my office I sat quietly, my mind perusing abstractions for a time. It was about ten-thirty, and a bad time to do official detective research.

I wanted to have a look at Cotton’s lab, but had no idea where it was. The time told me that most reputable scientists were fast asleep with visions of atom bombs going off in their heads—or deep in thought in secret laboratories of their own.

I had heard that people were afraid of the dark *before* the Change—living in a world with walking dead while perpetual cloud cover hung overhead had intensified the paranoia to dangerous proportions. The Change had pushed the majority over the edge.

You could see madness in the faces on the street—people adapted as best they could, but nothing had prepared them for what the world had become. The hints were there, the cracks in the human spirit evident in the clothing frayed at the edges, the smeared lipstick, or the bus driver’s tears.

And so people did not open their doors after dark. And the thought of me showing up unannounced dressed as I was, made the notion as ludicrous as it was dangerous. Then, a name came to my mind. I snatched the phone up, and rummaged in the desk for my address book.

I made a call.

“Hello, Pogo,” I said with false charm. “Oh, well I’m Wildclown, a private detective, I’d like to speak to Pogo. Not there? Have him call me, it’s important and may benefit us both.” I gave my number and hung up.

Pogo knew just about everybody in Greasetown. Pogo did more than pimp. The fact that he boosted his profits by trafficking drugs like Greaseasy, and syncrak, told me that he had the acquaintance of a few chemists, to say the least.

I remembered Pogo telling me once that he had people working for him that were trying to develop new ‘chemical entertainment’ as he called it.

If you can’t talk to a reputable scientist, try a disreputable one.

Elmo came in. He was carrying three tall Styrofoam coffee cups on a cardboard tray. I took one of them and poured three steaming ounces into a dirty glass that had stood for months on the filing cabinet beside my desk. I replaced some of the coffee with three ounces of Canadian Club to cool it down, took a taste, and then smiled around a cigarette.

“Excellent work, Elmo.” I smiled at the comforting sting of the whiskey and then kicked my boots onto the desk to think. I pushed back until the chair was tipped enough to give me a precipitant weightless sensation. Elmo sat opposite me with a cigarette and coffee of his own.

He could become silence, at such times. That was one of the great things about a partner like Elmo: he could sit quietly for hours. He didn’t feel a need to clutter the air with pleasant conversation just to pass the time. I could think. I’d often fix my eyes on Elmo and let them glaze over. He didn’t seem to mind.

A half-hour slipped by. The phone rang.

“Wildclown Investigations.” I had almost upset my chair answering.

“Wildclown, you crazy monkeyfucker. It’s me, Pogo.” The voice was charged with adrenaline.

“Pogo, my friend. How are you this evening?” I could tell he was a little paranoid himself.

“Ah...” Pogo’s voice dropped. “It’s been bad, real bad. Almost caught one of those bastards that cut me. He lit out on a motorbike before I could stick a knife in him!”

“That is bad.” The Brotherhood of White Order had become Pogo’s white whale and with good reason too. He took his disfigurement in stride, but he had vowed revenge. “But you’ve still taken three of them out.”

“Yeah.” Pogo seemed to catch his breath. “But he was close.” A coughing fit struck him before he continued: “So, what you want?”

“Pogo, we have known each other a while, am I right?”

“Yes, yes, you could call it a while—a year or so.” The voice continued with strain. “You could call it that.”

“Pogo, I need some information about science, scientists, and laboratories. Not the developing, procuring or trafficking of illegal substances, but about science—genetics, microbiology, that type of thing. I believe you may have people in your employ that

could answer a few questions. Or failing that, may have a direction in which to point me.”

Pogo knew my feelings about drugs. The Pandora’s box was open. I would be there to count survivors, if the whiskey didn’t get me first.

“This ain’t no Authority fuckover?” It was a rhetorical question. Pogo knew I had no allegiance with any authority. “What’s in it for me, Wildclown?”

“You could add to the betterment of mankind. Failing that, you could help me put the screws to some local nasties.” *Local nasties* was a term I used specifically to set Pogo off. He always talked of competing local nasties when he was ripe and paranoid with the effects of his own products.

“Local nasties! Oh, fuck, sure Wildclown.” He fell silent for a moment, but in the background I could hear the persistent car-start sounds of giggling.

“Can I talk to someone tonight? What is it, eleven—a little after?”

“Oh sure, we’re open twenty-four hours...” Again the giggling. “But I got to straighten up first.” There followed a lot of coughing and the sounds of partial regurgitation. “Yeah, Wildclown. I’ll, I’ll send a runner over. He’ll take you to my scientists...” More giggling and coughing.

“I appreciate it...”

“Don’t worry about it, Wildclown. You’ve been good shit to me, even if you are one crazy monkeyfucker!” Giggling ensued. “Besides, if you can take down a local nasty. Hey, fuck I’ll help put the boots to him. Just don’t push my scientist around or anything. He’ll help—no shit. I’ll ask around—microbiology, ge-genetics—try to find out who to send you to.” Pogo laughed spasmodically. “Hey, you ain’t thinking of cloning yourself are you? I couldn’t take that.”

I made sure I laughed patronizingly that time.

Finally he chuckled and said, “Give me some time.”

I thanked Pogo and hung up.

I looked at Elmo. “I believe the ball is rolling again.”

Chapter 28

The runner was a lean whippet of a dead man. He wore a tight-fitting suit covered by a long, loose trench coat of the same dark purple. A broad-brimmed hat sat low over his eyes. I could tell by the unbalanced way he walked that he carried a cannon in his left armpit. He had a dark Spanish complexion that, despite his dead state, still added a sultry carnality to the set of his liquid eyes and leering thick-lipped mouth.

He introduced himself as Moreau. Moreau was a runner. A runner was someone who carried money or drugs. Moreau looked capable of taking care of himself.

“Come on, Dick.” He used the nickname. “We gotta meet our fella real soon. It’s awful late to need a scientist, ain’t it? You need an abortion or something? Haw! Haw!” He smiled carnivorously then looked at his watch. I knew if it were accurate, the big hand would be pointing at the twelve and the small hand at the one.

“My personal vibrator broke down,” I grumbled glibly. I knew that runners did not trust anybody. It was their job. I guess a detective still represented some kind of law to them. He would have to get to know me.

“Haw, haw,” he laughed. “Personal vibrator—you ain’t taking some sort a stab at me there, are you, Dick?” He drew near me, a menacing angular shadow. His long thin fingers worked like pliers.

“Just making light, Mr. Moreau. It keeps my spirits up, this late at night.” I showed him the palms of my hands, shrugged.

“Oh, haw, haw! Try coffee, Dick! It’s safer...” He gestured to Elmo. “The nigger coming?”

I looked at Elmo. I had forgotten he was black. “My partner’s coming.”

Elmo appeared unperturbed by the racial epithet. He was used to prejudice based on the fact that he was dead. Race had all but slipped into the background. Maybe Moreau was nostalgic.

I gestured. Elmo followed.

The runner led us down the stair and out. “Where’s your car?” The Chrysler leaned wearily against the curb like it was dying. I gestured to it.

Moreau stifled a chuckle as he opened its bullet-riddled passenger door. “This ain’t no fucking car. This is a traffic accident!” He insisted on sitting in the backseat.

I took the front passenger, but sat sideways with my hand near my gun. Elmo drove.

“Waterfront,” Moreau hissed. “A boat. The *Clementine*. Pier 74.”

Elmo nodded absently, gunned the engine and the car surged ahead.

“So, how’s business?” I watched the dead man in the shadow. I wanted to keep an eye on him. “Good?”

“Hey, I don’t talk about fucking business!” Moreau shouted. He talked with both hands and I could see the thick butt of a .45 caliber revolver echo his movements through his coat. “No fucking business. I told Pogo, I don’t talk about business!”

“No problem.” I shrugged. “I just get tired of talking about the weather. You know, rain, rain, rain, rain...”

We contented ourselves with staring at each other for the rest of the trip. Moreau would flare his eyes; I would flare mine.

I realized we were a pair of local nasties.

Chapter 29

Speeding recklessly down a pier past midnight with two dead men might make your average detective a little nervous. It wasn’t the most comfortable thing I’d ever done, but I had experienced stranger.

Since the Change, I couldn’t walk into a convenience store without something unbelievable happening. You could see it on people’s faces. Hesitation and fear lurked behind every pair of eyes. Everyone was a little disturbed, a little on edge, waiting for the next change.

Yet, there were truly unsettling moments, and this was one of them. There are intuitive flashes one gets when in the company of the dead. I suspected some dark brotherhood—minute adrenaline impulses of warning—nanoseconds of paranoia flickered where a comment or action was mistaken for envy.

I had to remember I was with Elmo. He was my partner.

The pregnant bellies of freighters bowed out toward us. The pier and the looming shapes of rusty hulks were created instantaneously from the fog ten feet in front of us only to be returned to the gray chaos the moment we passed. The pier's uneven planking gave the car an unsettling bounce.

"Ease it back a little, Elmo." I patted the dash. "Ease it back."

Elmo's driving managed to shake Moreau's tough demeanor.

"This fucking partner—he's crazy. We don't need to go so fast, but he goes so fast! Ah, fuck!" He leaned forward and pointed. "Just ahead." Moreau breathed the word. "*Clementine.*" he repeated, "*Clementine.*"

Elmo must have spotted a dime, because he stopped on it.

"Ease it back next time," I scolded him. If I wore dentures I would have had to pry them out of the dashboard. But Elmo was all primed for something. Perhaps speeding down a pier past midnight with a dead man and a gun-toting clown might make your average dead gungel a little nervous. His hands gripped the wheel as though the rest of his body were hanging over a cliff.

On our right was an old, well-patched freighter named *Clementine*. Large rectangles of steel were welded over its many portholes. From the awkward angle of its smokestack and superstructure, I could tell that the *Clementine's* well-traveled keel rested on the garbage and junk that made up the bottom of Greasetown harbor.

Its tie lines were slack. The dock it leaned against had shifted with the weight. Its planking zigzagged dangerously away from the ship.

I climbed out of the car, cautiously fingering my gun. Moreau followed me. I stared up at the superstructure of the freighter and barely made out a dim orange glow.

"So this..." I was cut off.

"Is the *Clementine*. Jeeze, Dick, I don't think you gotta be no smart guy to figure that," he chuckled. "No wonder you need help investigating..."

"Right." There was no use getting upset with Moreau. I wasn't afraid of him there was just no point in having it out with someone who was undoubtedly tough. It would be a rather meaningless display of violence, and a messy one at that.

Instead I chose to frustrate him with pleasantries.

"Right, you're right, Mr. Moreau. And thank you for helping me and my partner find the *Clementine.*"

"Hey." I noticed a demonic lack of light in Moreau's heavy-lidded eyes. "You ain't taking a sort of stab there are you, Dick?"

"Of course not, Mr. Moreau. Just making light, you know."

"Oh, haw, haw," Moreau laughed in his unnatural way. "I just wanted to be sure. I never know."

I smiled and turned away breathing a "*No kidding...*" and then mumbled to Elmo. "Well, Elmo, here we have the *Clementine*. I wonder if anybody is home."

"Go on up," Moreau said plainly as he lit a thin black cheroot. "He's waitin'."

I didn't ask who was waiting, because I knew I would receive a "Well, a scientist a'course, Dick! Haw, haw!" I could feel Tommy's anger just beneath the surface of my mind. He did not like insults. I released the suppressed anger by tearing the soles out of my boots with my toenails.

"Thanks." I nodded again, and lit a cigarette.

Moreau backed into the fog.

Elmo followed me along the wharf to a rusted iron gangway—the weight of the *Clementine* was slowly driving it through the dock. I saw a large silhouette at the top of it. It carried the sharp angle of a machine gun.

“You Wildclown?” The words came out as a growl.

“Yes.” I tried to do my serious face.

“Come on up...” The machine gun jerked up and down to encourage us. Tommy appeared like an afterthought to me. My eyes were locked on that gun barrel.

I muttered to Elmo. “Let’s remember Plan A.”

Plan A was a simple one we kept around for trouble in close quarters. It ran like this: if someone had the drop on us, and didn’t just gun us down, whoever didn’t have a gun pointed at him would moan like a lovesick moose.

We had used it once and it worked when we found ourselves ambushed by an angry man we had photographed with another man’s wife. He had caught us in a bar with a couple of his friends.

In that case, Elmo had moaned, and I was able to deliver a searing right hook that downed the protagonist. His friends just carried him away, unimpressed by any of our actions.

Regardless, Plan A became part of our repertoire.

I reached the top of the gangway. A lantern suddenly flashed in my face.

“Shit.” I heard. “You *do* dress like a clown!”

“My detective costume is at the cleaners,” I snarled. “We’re here to see someone.”

The lantern fell from my face.

The voice grunted: “Follow me.”

I did my best. It was difficult with all those little green dots in the way, and with the deck of the ship rising at an uneven and steep incline. I heard Elmo bark his shin on something and swear.

We were led along a shadow-strewn companionway to the bridge of the old freighter. Inside was all of the equipment you would expect to find there.

A large wooden wheel and an instrument panel commanded a good portion of two walls. There was a cabinet for nautical charts and a broad brass and oak table to spread them out on. The ceiling was low, lit by a forty-watt bulb. The smell of fish and oil was heavy.

There had been some changes. A leather couch stretched along a wall opposite me. In front of that was a battered coffee table bearing magazines, overflowing ashtrays and a couple of empty whiskey bottles. There were three fiberglass chairs arranged around that. Everything listed toward the dock.

Against the window, was a man in a long, black overcoat wearing a wide-brimmed fedora. He stood in shadow, staring away from us. The greasy, flyspecked window afforded him an ugly view of the fog. Smoke trailed up from his cigarette. I heard a funny trickling sound, like the last syrupy drops from a beer bottle.

“The most important point...” came a voice that was soft like the fog. “Is why you would want to talk to me. I don’t trust Pogo’s judgment. He takes too many of my drugs.”

I gestured for Elmo to sit in one of the fiberglass chairs. He quickly complied.

“I just wanted to ask a few questions....”

“Don’t, Wildclown, if that *is* your name! Not about drugs, not about the infinitesimal parameters that they hold—the crystalline magnificence of chemicals. The more you

know, the closer you get to death: by my hand, by the drugs, by Authority. Knowledge of them, the drugs, gives you knowledge of the Netherworld. Knowledge of the Netherworld gives you the power of Anarchy.”

“I’m not interested in drugs. At least not other than the severe alcohol dependency that I’m nursing.” I moved a little farther in. I still couldn’t see his features.

“Not now, but you could be, if you began to know the complexity, the hidden qualities. They’re the building blocks of life—and death. I don’t care how strong you are. You would become addicted. If not to their effects—then their eternal natures. Such knowledge could make you god of the underworld—or a maggot in the belly of a corpse,” he chuckled, and then turned away from me when I drew nearer.

“No closer!” he hissed. Again the strange trickling sound. “Take a chair. Take the couch. No closer.”

I did as I was told, dropping into the chair beside Elmo.

The man in black called to the guard that I now noticed had remained at the door.

“Lonny! Get them a drink. Whiskey is all I have for you gentlemen. I will not insult you by offering less potent pharmaceuticals.” He chuckled quietly. I concentrated on his speech. There was a quality to the whispering that was forced. His words were delivered with supernatural articulation. His diction reminded me of a bad stage actor.

“No, Wildclown, you would not be able to resist. There are too many interesting things to know, and you’re a detective. One clue leads to the next, and you go on and on, despite the fact that the clues may be leading you to your own death. You have no control over it after a while. We are the same in that, Wildclown. Explorers, driven and obsessive.” Again, I heard a low chuckling. The shoulders bunched.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” I started. “I’d like to know who I’m talking to, but if you’d rather not...”

“Why not?” The voice was bitter, petulant. “Why not? Oh, oh, oh what if I had a respectable life? Is that what you mean—what you infer? That there is some respectable set of circumstances I would keep my nefarious activities secret from?” His shoulders tightened around the words. “That is the inference you make!”

Lonny returned with a bottle of Five Star and a couple of gray glasses. He placed them on the table and left.

The man in black continued: “Have a drink, gentlemen. Forgive my outburst, but you see, I no longer have a respectable position or life, for reasons I am reluctant to divulge—even now, and yet, it is ever the same. I now have no choice; but I did not choose this life... *death*.” I poured two drinks, made them good ones and lifted mine.

He turned as I tipped it to my mouth and I immediately felt my stomach turn to stone.

The speaker entered the half-light given off by the single dim ceiling bulb.

His hat threw dark shadow over his face so what I saw was mainly in diffuse, reflected light.

A skull grinned out from under the hat. I could see the bone gleam waxily. The jaw worked and I saw that where his cheeks should be were the thin remnants of leathery muscle. Drool caused the prominent teeth to glisten like wet pearls. He twitched his head with the chin up, and jerked saliva down his throat in spastic motions.

The most horrifying part of the gruesome face was the very human but lidless eyes that stared from within the bony sockets. A clear plastic tube looped up from his coat and

over his forehead. It fed two thin brass nozzles bolted to the ridge of bone that ran from temple to temple. A faint gesture from him, and two streams of water sprayed his eyes.

Excess liquid trickled over shiny bone.

“I make drugs, Mr. Wildclown,” he admitted moving closer—now I could hear the rehearsed inflection. He would have made a great ventriloquist. “Some of the most intricate and complex interactive hallucinogens ever invented. I have made drugs that I consider too powerful for Pogo to sell. I have created hallucinogens that work on the chromosomes and bond with genetic material: their effects, permanent. But, in the best case, I can only create an altered state that inevitably and inexorably leads me back to this reality. Can you understand why I don’t take them, Mr. Wildclown?” He took a seat opposite me. My mind gibbered at the bony face. “My respectable job was lost when I had my accident. ‘It’s not because you’re dead, that we have to let you go,’ they said. ‘It’s because you don’t have a face.’ They forced me to give up a respectable life in the name of aesthetics.”

“I can see it made you bitter.” I was strangely angered by the self-pity.

“BITTER!” he screamed, leapt up and turned away from us before tearing his hat off. “This is, that’s...” His yellow cheekbones glistened with eye lubricant. Gloved hands crushed the hat into his face.

There was an agonizing moment as his chest heaved and strained against tortured moans.

I tensed, hoping I had not gone too far.

The terror and self-hatred in the sound suddenly changed to a cynical, self-mocking chuckle. Soon muffled laughter, contemptible satire, absorbed him until he doubled over.

Yet, there was no real humor in its tone—only bitterness. Fear and madness tinged every sound.

Slowly the sobs of laughter trailed off.

He replaced his hat and, chuckling horribly, lit a cigarette. A strand of drool hung from his jawbone. “I suppose that will teach me for being dramatic.” He shook his head. “Yes, it has made me bitter, Mr. Wildclown. It has caused me from time to time to add cyanide to the syncrak we sell. I’m a wanted man. They are calling me Skullface. Simple and brutish.”

“Well, what you do is your business.” I got a truly notable twinge of responsibility at mention of the murders. I had read about them; but everyone took their chances these days; and for the moment, I was investigating another murder.

“I just want to ask you a question about another scientist. He was working in the field of Regenerics.”

Skullface leaned in toward me. His mouth opened, the icicle of drool fell from his jawbone, pasted the back of my hand. His eyes cantered on me. The brass nozzles pumped. I felt a thin mist on my cheeks.

“Regenerics, ah, that titillating bit of nonsense. *Regenerics*. Don’t tell me you give it credence.” He stepped back, crossed his arms over his chest and caressed his chin with his left hand. Skullface absently squeezed saliva between his fingers.

“It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other. I’m more interested in the actions of people who do give it credence. Belief is nine-tenths of reality.”

“Of course, of course. Regenerics... I’ve heard of it. Any dead scientist would give it a glance wouldn’t he? Life for the dead. Dead tissue transmuted into living tissue. Biological alchemy. Regenerics... Isn’t that what I heard?”

“Yes, somewhere, but where, where! Regenerics was a theory held in very low esteem. Most of all, because the scientist who was its greatest proponent was of no reputation. Oh, believe me, anything to do with the dead or treatment of dead tissue gets immediate attention. The problem with this fellow’s... what was his name, Cotton’s, theory was that it depended too much upon another unanswerable question.”

“What’s that?” I asked to validate my existence.

“He needed viable fetal tissue to start his process. And, as we all know, there is no more viable fetal tissue. Conception no longer occurs. That is the true question of the day. Why are there no more offspring?”

“What about embryos preserved from before the Change? Frozen or whatever—won’t they work?” I took a stab.

“Excellent thinking, Wildclown, but about fifty years too late. Those embryos that were thawed out after the Change did not grow. They live, as the living, in stasis. They do not develop. They do not age. The only cellular activity to occur is like your own. Maintenance, mitosis, no meiosis—nothing more than replacement.”

I knew about the *forever children* out there. Most of them had gone into hiding, or been conveniently rounded up for study by Authority. Apparently their minds aged, but their bodies remained those of children.

“What about the babies born before the Change?” I asked. Something about Skullface’s intensity drew me in. “*They aged.*”

“To the approximate physical age of five, and no more.” Skullface’s eyes gleamed with moisture. “And those tissue samples taken at that time and frozen have since been found locked in the same mitosis cycle.”

“Okay, but what about someone who didn’t know or understand these factors. I suppose something like Regenerics, if it worked, would threaten a lot of livelihoods.”

“Of course, of course. That is exactly why I believe that even if he could make his theory an actuality, Authority would keep it a secret for the very select. It would be eternal life, would it not? Given the strange circumstances the world finds itself in—immunity to natural death. *And resurrection for the dead?* No more fear.”

“And to the best of your knowledge his theory was useless without fetal tissue.”

“Useless.” Skullface kept caressing his bare jaw. “There was something, oh yes. What he hoped was to graft a dead gene onto a living gene—a process that is unthinkable without a reliable computer lab. He was certain that the viable genes would jumpstart the dead. With his technique, you see, he depends upon a certain assumption. That with the entire absence of bacteria which degrade tissues, the genetic material of the dead is unchanged from the living state. The genes are simply in stasis.”

Saliva glistened on his moving fingers as he talked.

“Therefore, life functions could cease and since dead matter is resistant to corruption, the dead would be in a holding pattern, so to speak—though plagued with a host of other problems.”

Skullface’s naked eyes raged against the shadow.

“He believed that fetal genes, the proteins from them, would jumpstart the normal life processes in the dead genes. He had no luck with existing genetic matter. Its growth is

retarded. It is in a pattern of self-replication—no new development. That fact is responsible for the absence of offspring.”

His actions slowed as he approached his conclusion.

“But that is the important part and the nail in the coffin for Regenerics. The genetic material had to come from developing tissue. It had to be taken from cells that are growing, and that, Mr. Wildclown, we have not had since the Change.” Though Skullface was excited by the discussion his body language was slowly driving him away from the light.

“Did you know Cotton?”

“Not personally. We didn’t travel in the same circles, you understand. I’m no longer welcome in reputable company—though his was hardly better. He was hired by King Industries which surprised me because the King is no fool.”

“So they might have had some kind of breakthrough.”

“I doubt it, but that’s something you’ll have to find out. It means nothing to me. To be returned to life,” he said, gesturing at his missing face, “would be worse than death. Don’t you think?”

“So, in your opinion,” I pushed. “Cotton would never have been successful.”

“Not without a brand new baby. And I have a feeling that if there were babies, there wouldn’t be things like me, or your partner.” He gestured towards Elmo.

“Thanks for your time...Mr.”

“Skullface will do. I am not unaware of the defensive power of the sinister.” He shifted his position—turned away from us again.

“My feelings exactly.” Elmo and I left Skullface after he had resumed his position at the window on the gloom. We drove along the pier and then back toward the office.

Skullface had left me with a bad feeling about birth and death, and life in general. What kind of a world was it that could fire a good man for aesthetic reasons? Then, my skepticism kicked in as I realized that under all that ugly, Skullface was still a human being. I had a feeling he wasn’t telling me everything he knew. But I couldn’t be sure. He had no face to read.

As he told me his story, of course he’d be the victim in it. The pathos in the tale would evoke compassion and soften my stance. Everyone did the same thing.

Everything happens to me. I don’t deserve this! Who does?

As the vacant warehouses passed, I thought of a victim humanity. Strange twists of fate had played upon it. How much of what was happening did humanity deserve?

Chapter 30

The coverall stuck to the small of my back. It wasn’t the sweat of fear; it was the air that closed around me at over a hundred degrees. The world after the Change was a world of extremes. I walked around the front of the building. Long yellow strips of Authority security tape blocked doors, windows and air vents. All useless, since a good portion of the wall had collapsed, leaving a hole you could only block with a building.

The oily conglomerate smell of burned furniture and scorched stone was thick. With it came a damp and clammy presence that made me instinctively wipe my hands against

my sides. We were back at the waterfront again, and there was not so much as a cool breeze.

Warehouses by the thousands lined the jagged cement and steel coast of Greasetown. Since hundreds of airliners had crashed with the first computer malfunctions after the Change, people were reluctant to start trusting flight again. Another devolution had occurred, to control-wires and levers, pilot-oriented air travel; but the memories were still fresh.

And so sea traffic had taken over from air as the world's principal form of intercontinental locomotion and Greasetown's harbor had seen rejuvenation as a result, though it managed to retain much of its derelict charm.

Rusted iron freighters with foreign names came and went—now the primary physical contact with the Old World. Luxury liners did not dock here, but you could catch one after a five-hour drive north to the City of Light. That growing metropolis rested on the inland bones of the now dead and drowned New York City.

Elmo and I had a devil of a time finding this particular warehouse, there were so many of them, old and new. My instincts were on full alert. I was afraid to call Authority. I was afraid to talk to anybody. I knew I was lucky that Cane had missed the call I made before slipping down the coast to Vicetown. I couldn't trust anyone, least of all, someone in Authority.

I was certain I couldn't trust the anonymous person who had slipped a cryptic note under my office door during the night.

Warehouse 31, Pier 14: it read.

After driving all the way down, and a frustrating hour of traveling blind alleys, a scorched sign greeted me from one of the loading doors. It read: *King Industries*.

Now, it wasn't logical to chase after every lead, especially after one that came to me so mysteriously; but I had the distinct feeling that the anonymous phone caller was the letter writer as well. I took it for granted that someone was going to lead me for a step or two. I had decided to do a thing that a detective does at great risk.

I was going to wait for guidance. It was obvious that there was a good deal of power at work, and if I looked lazy, they were bound to feed me something. It was risky, because I'd have to decide whether or not I was being led into something dangerous and deadly.

Someone had started the chain of events I was following. If it was just a case of personal vengeance, they could walk in and shoot me whenever they wanted. Whoever had called wanted me to do something specific. Well, I wondered what they'd do if I went sedentary—if I just kicked back and relaxed.

I'd find out.

The security tape on the building indicated that Authority was involved, and as usual, wanted to hog all the fun. But it was hardly proof. I hoped that by letting my mystery guide feed me clues, I might get lucky and find out who he was and what he wanted—and who else was involved.

I poked my head through a scorched window frame. There were the expected chunks of melted plastic that had been computers and centrifuges, amid the charred skeletons of tables with so many hunks of glass and metal spot welded to them by the intense heat from a blast or fire. I could see the remains of a Bunsen burner, and a few firebombed cabinets and cupboards.

The place was cinder and coal from baseboard to ceiling. There was no way I would trust the floor. It had collapsed in one corner already. I was looking at a burnt out lab all right, and it was supposed to be Cotton's. Plenty of evidence was lying all around to support that, so much so that I doubted it immediately.

I knew there'd be something there with his name on it, if I looked. But it was all too pat. I had a nagging suspicion that this, too, was a part of an intricate shell game.

I turned from the building and headed toward the car. I would go home. It was noon, Tuesday. The paper sometimes came early on Tuesday. I needed to think, and Tommy needed to relax.

A change is as good as a rest, they say.

Well, I would change my approach to this case, and rest. Someone would be calling, I felt sure of that. I didn't know who, but someone had a timetable of his own that he wanted me to follow.

I would let him make the next move.

Chapter 31

The office was its usual depressing self. The single picture on the wall was crooked, and the ballerinas practicing in it were ready to cartwheel out into the waiting room. I left them. Something about their unbalanced state complimented my mood.

I motioned for Elmo to sit, and then jiggled the bottle of Canadian Club at him. He shook his head. I nudged his portion into the glass after mine. Waste not... the whiskey set its teeth in my tongue and hung there for a moment like a bulldog.

I smiled at Elmo, emptied the glass, and then replaced the four ounces or so. I took another mouthful then lit a cigarette. I moved over and opened the blinds.

Night was falling fast. It doesn't have any other speed in Greasetown.

I resumed my seat.

"Boss?" Elmo's voice broke my silent contemplation of another drink.

"Yes, Elmo." I twisted my head toward him. I had been staring distractedly at a streetlight outside the window. I realized it had been on continuously for the last month. That was fine, because I knew when it burned out, it would be off continuously for a month or so.

"What are we d-doing?" He seemed nervous, as he usually did when questioning the boss. I had tried to encourage him to be more democratic about our relationship, but he had looked at me like I had run over his grandmother. Elmo liked things the way they were. Anyway, whenever Tommy was in control he had a way of undoing my efforts with his insane bombast.

A whole day had passed, all I had done was walk down the street for coffee and a sandwich, tried to straighten my files, and leafed through a nudie magazine looking for interesting articles. I glanced at the clock on my desk. Ten-thirty, Wednesday evening and I was still waiting for Tuesday's paper.

"We're waiting, Elmo." I grimaced wickedly. "We're playing chess."

"Chess?" Elmo's eyes looked at me incredulous.

"Basically, I've finished all the moves I want to make." I laughed with Tommy's strained and frightening mirth. "We've been led along for a while, and the longer this

case, or cases, go on, the more I see conspiracy. Since I've only suspicions about who is involved, I'll wait. I can afford to, and hope one of the conspirators will grow impatient, and make a move. Either that or they'll get another detective. I need to know more, so I know whose toes to step on."

"Oh..." Elmo nodded and lit a cigarette. "We'll w-wait."

"It's the best thing." I leaned back in my chair and burped—hot and acidic. What was it about alcohol? Why could they never hide its poison nature? I never made the attempt, but even in those gigantic tropical drinks with the beach umbrellas, coconuts and fruit spears, you could taste its distinct toxic flavor.

Unless the body held some sway still. Like a dog trained to sniff skiers out of Swiss avalanches, perhaps the body was trained to nose and dig out poisons. A lengthy memory of hangovers was testimony to its poisonous effect upon the body; but I drank it anyway. As I eyed its dangerous amber spirit, I felt something equally menacing rise within myself.

I understood the relationship. It was that strange human impulse towards death that had us murder old dogs and cats with cataracts—that murderous pity of the human race—that made me drink. Humanity, the bifurcated beast—the mad dog that strained at Darwin's leash with as much desire to survive as destroy itself.

Drink made it plain. Our survival mechanisms assured our destruction.

I upended the glass, and drained it. At least I understood the relationship. That's why I drank it straight.

The phone rang. I smiled knowingly at Elmo and lifted the receiver.

"Wildclown," I said. At the back of my mind, I could feel Tommy all stretched and rubbery with the alcohol.

"This is Inspector Cane." The voice came hard and harsh.

"Inspector Cane. How wonderful of you to call." I blew smoke from a fresh cigarette.

"No fucking around, Wildclown." I'm sure I heard him snarl. I know I imagined him showing his teeth. "We found your friend, Adrian."

"My friend..." I sat upright now. "Where? How about Van Reydner?" I conjured up my mental picture of her—all eyes and breasts—or was it breasts and eyes.

"No. Van Reydner's still a no-show." He went quiet. "I want to talk to you."

"Sure, but where's Adrian?" I began to smell complicity again.

"Take the Western Highway for about an hour. I'm still at the scene." He hung up.

I hung up. *At the scene*. Not likely a traffic accident. That would be too easy. Murder? I emptied my glass, then looked at Elmo.

"Out onto the highway west, Elmo. Want to come?"

I could see fear and loathing in his sad and cold dead eyes. His dead lips formed an ugly frown. He nodded.

"Good!" I smiled, as I quickly took another shot of Canadian Club, secreted its long dark length in one of my oversized pockets, and then led the way out the door.

It might have been the whiskey thinking, or Tommy, but I genuinely hoped I wasn't too late to talk to Mr. Adrian—maybe push his broad white teeth down his throat.

Chapter 32

We were on the highway west. The night sky and my thoughts were dark. Long black Authority vehicles blocked a section of the elevated highway. Their bullet-shapes flickered in scarlet light. A circle of figures gathered near the edge of the double eastbound lane.

“Elmo, stay here, okay?” I climbed out of the bullet-riddled passenger door. It rattled with shrapnel when I slammed it. Elmo was glued to the steering wheel. He simply nodded, then drank from the Canadian Club. I had brought it for him. His boss didn’t need it. I was already feeling pretty light in the loafers.

Elmo seemed to sense the Landfillers many feet below.

I left him and crawled over the cement median wall. Authority Enforcers had cordoned off a large section of the far lane of the eastbound. They grew to elephant size in the strange light. I swaggered up to them as best I could in clown makeup.

The Enforcers didn’t stop me. I had the urge to make a snarky remark about whether the food at the zoo was as bad as everybody said it was, but their grim features—galvanized in the protective masks—snapped my tongue to the roof of my mouth. I walked past them to a circle of trench coats.

Mr. Adrian was looking a bit unraveled—if it was him. The body had dropped a lot of fluid on the road. Every ounce of its blood smeared the asphalt. I could feel it glue my boots in place. I found I could make squishy, sticky noises if I moved my heels rapidly up and down.

Mr. Adrian with the blue eyes was now a ribbon of wet gray flesh. He was stretched out in a thirty-foot smear. He had been cut up with something sharp, then stretched out like a streamer at a parade. The worst part of it was that what remained was moving.

Mr. Adrian had been out here for a while because Blacktime was over. Strange, snakelike undulations rippled through the grisly mess as the corpse made its first attempts at afterlife. Only the whiskey saved me from realizing the full horror of Mr. Adrian’s position. I saw one of his eyes—it blinked and I felt bile rise at the back of my throat.

There was no sign of the other, or the nose that had sat for so many years between them.

I had no reason to wish anything good for the man, but only a monster would do this. At least they could have burned him up, or something—committed him to the only grave that would hold a person these days. This was something different. This type of cruelty transcended the inhumane.

One of the investigators in his long black coat turned quickly toward me. It was Cane. His glance was as sharp as his omnipresent toothpick.

“Not a pretty sight. Jesus, Wildclown. I’d swear you look pale. How goes your spook baby case?”

“This is related,” I said. I was surprised to see a strange expression convulse his features.

“Related is it?” He laughed without humor. His eyes flashed at his fellow Inspectors with angry timidity. “This is an Authority restricted investigation. You’re not supposed to be this close.” He walked me away from the corpse, snarling. “You didn’t like Mr. Adrian, did you?”

I caught his drift. “I don’t dislike anyone that much. Come on, what did you call me out here for? Not for some lame attempt to implicate me. What do you have?” I felt cocky. I was sure that Cane had some strange stake in all these occurrences.

“I didn’t call you, asshole.” He stared hard.

I winked. Cane looked angry.

“We got an anonymous call about three hours ago. Said we’d find Richard Adrian wandering the highway. It...” He cocked a thumb over his shoulder at ‘it.’ Cane continued: “It is off the highway enough that your average motorist wouldn’t recognize what it is. We don’t know how long he’s been here. Autops boys are looking into it. They’re working on a positive genetic match from blood and hair samples. Poor fucker’s out of Blacktime! We got a wallet, but that’s shit.” He paused and winced evilly. “What do you know about Van Reydner?” He leveled and fired his gaze at me.

“Same thing you know. She’s gone. Maybe she took Adrian out. Who knows? She had a streak of the black widow in her. But that case is closed. I’ve been paid. It’s over. *You* find her. Maybe she’s gone somewhere to raise a family.”

An odd look grabbed Cane’s features. His face paled where it huddled beneath his hat like a humpbacked toad. His eyes flashed to either side of me.

“You’ve stepped too far, Wildclown. You just did, right *there*.” He jerked his thumb like a dagger. “Beat it. *Now!*” His thick lips grinned around the brass toothpick.

I stood my ground for a minute, staring at Cane. I thrust Tommy’s jaw at him.

“I’ve got a funny feeling about you.” I didn’t point a finger at him; I knew he’d break it.

Cane only smiled a smile that has been worn by every abuser of authority since the Beginning.

He snarled, “Are you one of these shit heads who enjoys life for the moment, paying no attention to the future?”

“I guess you could say I was one of those shit heads. I grab life by the balls and squeeze.” I showed him arrogant teeth. I was trying to understand his sudden vehemence. Had he wanted to talk? Or did he want to show me something? Or look for a reaction? Regardless, I would never go on another date with Inspector Cane.

“Enjoy it while it lasts!” he snapped, and then turned away.

I suddenly felt a presence behind me—then swung my head to look at an Enforcer’s thick chest plate.

“Small world isn’t it.” I pushed against him. His gun belt removed a yard of skin from my back. “We just had a tiff. I’m a little upset.” I felt I had already pushed my luck far enough for one evening, so I beat a wise retreat to the Chrysler.

The door cast a Swiss cheese shadow on the damp asphalt as I climbed in. Before I uttered a word to Elmo, a woman’s face appeared at the window. Her glasses were thick and heavy, held up by a pointed nose that looked too thin for the job. Her hair was straight, and plain—cut in a very functional and not wholly unattractive bang that swooped down as it circumnavigated her skull. The occasional white hair crawled through it like spider web. She had a real librarian look to her.

“Mr. Wildclown, right?” She smiled with white teeth.

“How’d you guess?” My face went slack with feigned disbelief.

“I asked around. Seems you know a Malcolm Aird down at the paper. He told me a bit about you.” Her eyes slid through my face paint. There was something in her features. She didn’t just look—an expression of expectation appeared and was gone. Frowning, she studied my face. She half-smiled, then frowned again.

“Oh yes, Malcolm. How is he?” I asked. As she answered I tried to picture his mug—came up empty.

“He wasn’t kidding, that’s for sure,” she muttered, fumbling for a cigarette before glancing toward the ring of Authority. She whispered, “Can we grab a cup of coffee somewhere? I’d like to ask you a few questions. I thought it over—our last conversation; I think you played me for a fool. I’m Mary Redding.”

“If you wouldn’t mind a walk down a two-way street, I’d be glad. My office?” I tried to be nonchalant.

She agreed to follow us.

Elmo drove west until we could get onto a turnpike east. We passed the scene again, slowing as the flares illuminated our tortured fenders. For a moment I glimpsed technicians sliding Adrian’s corpse onto a long strip of vinyl sheeting. Probably off to an Internment Facility.

Suddenly a bomb went off. It was Ms. Redding. She started after us in an ancient Volkswagen Beetle with asthma.

As we gunned away, I’m sure I felt Cane’s eyes boring into us.

“Well, Elmo,” I said, we’d left the flares behind. “Try not to lose Ms. Redding, if you can, and concentrate on keeping all four wheels on the ground. It would be an exceptionally bad time to total the car.”

I watched concrete abutments pass quickly through our headlights.

Chapter 33

Her calves might have been too fleshy for the average man, but for me, they held backbreaking possibilities. I’ve always found strength an attractive quality in women—and simplicity. She wore a blue corduroy frock dress that unzipped down the front. The act of sitting and crossing her legs had sent a chill through me that had little to do with Tommy.

Ms. Redding’s eyes were made from blue ice and were divided by a serious vertical line in her forehead. She was one of those enviable people who had the ability to hide all of her emotions. Her eyes acted as doormen and would allow only those feelings that had invitations.

The flaw was the fine line between them. That was the gatecrasher. Through that came the chaotic moments, the flare-ups. I would keep my eyes upon that fold of flesh. Right now, her expression was of frank and somewhat obscene sensuality. When she dipped her head in such a way, I could feel the temperature in the room go up.

She was so alive I could feel her heartbeat from across the room. Tommy’s erection showed approval. I folded my hands over it.

“The coffee’s ordered,” I said with a gesture toward the phone. “Cigarette?”

She shook her head, then drew a pack of her own from her purse. They were long, slim, and the strongest on the market. A lighter flared in her hands, the cigarette glowed.

“Where’s your partner?” Her eyes did a quick scan of the room. They looked up to the broken ceiling fan. I followed her gaze, didn’t see him up there.

“In the outer office, the waiting room.” I gestured with my cigarette. Ash fell from it, powdered on the corner of the desk and sprinkled the floor. *So much for the suave act.*

“There’s an all night coffee shop down the street. It’s late, so we’ll be taking our chances with it, but they deliver anytime.”

“Everything *is* these days.” Her words were clipped.

“Is what?”

“Everything’s open all night.” She smiled through a cloud of smoke like a hungry demon. Her head tilted. “Why haven’t I heard of you? Surely one of your cases has drawn enough attention to warrant a couple of lines in the *Gazette*.”

“Hot night, isn’t it.” I almost walked over to the window to open it. Instead, I slouched.

“They say it’s going to get hotter.” Her smile was all teeth.

“They say a lot of things.” I grinned back at her.

“They do.” She crossed her legs, drew in on her cigarette.

Elmo entered with a box containing six large Styrofoam cups. He set them on the desk. One day, I had to find the patience to use the coffeepot. We’d go broke entertaining this way.

“I paid the man,” Elmo said, scooping up one of the cups for himself, and pulling the office door shut with his free hand. I knew he would take it back to his seat in the waiting room, drink it with abnormal speed and then continue to stare at the door. He might read one of his old newspapers.

“Thanks,” I said to his back. My eyes returned to Ms. Redding. “I don’t trust Authority—never have. Most of my cases begin quiet and end quieter. I’m not in the habit of telling Authority anything. Money is my game, not headlines. Detectives who get famous tend to get dead.”

“How about justice, are you into that?” Her legs crossed again; I caught a flash of silvery silk. My heart did a back flip.

“Yeah,” I said, pulling out a drawer and dumping my heels into it. “I mean, all these people, all the buildings, there must be a scrap of it somewhere. I guess you could call me an optimist.”

“Is that why you paint your smile on?”

My gut cramped around a mouthful of coffee. Tommy rattled awfully close to the surface. I must have let my guard down, because the lunatic managed enough control to curl my lip into a sneer. I fumbled for a cigarette to cover it.

“I’m sorry.” She climbed to her feet, grabbed a cup of coffee, and slid one round hip onto the desk to my left. “I didn’t mean to upset you—but it’s hard not to notice. What’s a big lug like you have to hide from?”

“Yeah,” I said in explanation. She had shaved her legs today and she wasn’t wearing nylons. “What did you want to talk about?”

Her smile faded.

“Ah,” she said, dropping her eyes into my lap. “I thought we were going to be friends.”

“Why don’t we ease into it over a few questions.” If the erection thumping my chest said anything, Tommy was awake and listening and wanted to be friends. “How did you find out about Adrian tonight?”

She sighed in a heart-melting way, and carried her coffee back to the company chair. After crushing her cigarette in the ashtray, she said. “I’ve got a friend in Authority who

tips me off when there's action. He's kind of a clusterfuck..." She breathed more smoke. "He wants me. *Naked*."

My eyes slid to her knees again. "It takes a long time to get good contacts in Authority. How long have you been with the *Gazette*?"

She smiled. "Only about three months. Freelanced for years before that... but I was lucky, I guess. I met my contact when he tried to pick me up at a bar. I knew he was an asshole, but I was a reporter out of work, and you never know."

"I guess hard work pays," I said, then changed the subject. "You were at the Morocco for the Billings murder, and you found Cotton. You *are* a lucky girl." I smiled this time.

"Same guy called me then, as tonight. He said there'd been a murder the night before at the Morocco Building—the Billings murder. I went, looked around, of course Billings was already down at HQ, when my fotog stumbled on Cotton's body. I picked up the story about drug dealing from the Inspectors. It never did sit well; but I decided to follow up the Billings story first. Since people always like to read what the victims have to say, and Cotton wasn't talking. It was easy to find Mr. Billings' address in the city registry, so I drove down to talk to him.

"He lived in New Garden, really nice neighborhood with an Enforcer on every street corner. Well that's where he was staying at the time I'm not sure where he ended up. The money down that end of town usually squeezes the dead people out. At the time I talked to him, he was still a little disoriented with the Blacktime and death, but he gave me a fairly detailed description of events."

"I believe this is old news to me. Adrian did it."

"Adrian? Interesting." She went on to describe the story Billings had told me. I puffed on two cigarettes during the narration.

"Did he tell you why he got up that night?" I felt strange saying it, but a focused silence within told me that Tommy approved.

"Oh that's the weird part of the story." Her eyes dropped to study her shoes. I watched the smooth skin on her hands. "He said he got up because he heard a baby crying—but you've got to remember the guy had just been murdered, and God only knows what happens to you in Blacktime."

I remembered Adrian's face when I had visited him at his office, and Tommy had slipped that question out about the baby. I had seen a similar twinge of recognition in Cane's features.

"It's the same thing he told me." I stood up, crossed to the front of the desk and leaned on it. "What do you think about it?"

She smiled over the rim of her cup. "Come on, the *Gazette* isn't one of *those* papers—don't tell me you're one of *those* detectives."

"Indulge my infantile curiosity in the unknown then, if you will. Let's say that as a boy I did a Bigfoot project at a science fair. Just give me your opinion."

"We don't follow stories like that any more. Even though in these days, Elvis Presley being seen may be a little more believable." She smiled. "Don't tell me Elvis Presley's involved."

It was my turn to smile. Partly because it hurt, partly because I wished I had said it.

"That strip of cold cuts we saw tonight—Mr. Adrian—when I spoke to him, I happened to mention that a baby was heard crying at the Morocco and he got nervous. From reading the lumps on the back of my head, I came to the conclusion that he was at

the Morocco the night of Billings' murder. He as much as confessed to me, and I believe that he heard it too—the *baby*.” I lit a cigarette and looked at Ms. Redding.

“Don't be insane.” Her eyes pleaded, she pressed her palms together as though in prayer. “Please don't be insane. You seem like such a nice guy.” She smirked and leaned back in her chair. “There are no such things as babies.”

“I know that. But, whatever it was, Billings heard it, Adrian heard it, and I'm wondering if Cotton heard it too.”

“What do you think it was?”

“I don't know. I'm really not sure if it's anything. It could have been a television running an old movie—for all I knew...” Then my brain turned on. “What floor was Cotton on? What was his room number?”

“The twelfth. Room 4. He had registered under W. Irving.”

“Right, and Billings was in—”

“Room 6, on the twelfth. Shit!” Ms. Redding sighed. “Why didn't I put that together?”

“Because the building was burned to the ground before anyone had time to link the cases.” I stared blankly into the corner. “Something was going on up there that night. I know why Billings bought it. Adrian and the missing woman, Van Reydner, were in on a scam to collect bodies for their preservation treatments. But Cotton. What the hell was he up to?”

“That's what I wanted to talk to you about!” The line between Redding's eyes throbbed with barely restrained ire. “You conned me before. You weren't working on that case at all.”

“Sorry,” I grumbled, frowning. “I have to get jobs somehow. Besides, we're both working for the same end. Whatever Authority is hiding, might be exposed. That must please you, and I might add, without any risk to yourself.”

“It's not the risk. I just hate being had.” I watched her face relax, and again become a mask of calm.

“So do I.” I lit another cigarette. “Indulge me. It's probably a lot of nonsense, but I'd like to refresh my memory. You're a newshound, you must know more about the phantom baby than the average person.” Urgency suddenly clenched my jaws. “Just a moment ago, you asked me if I was one of *those* detectives, what did you mean by that.”

She laughed outright. “I've heard about guys like that. You know, ghost hunters, all that shit...” She paused, stared hard. “So Adrian murdered Billings—it was the rumor, but they gagged that one too!”

“Yes,” I said, smiled again. I could see frustration cloud her vision. “You reporters have got to dig a little harder.”

“And you detectives have to be a little braver and tell the press about your cases.” Chagrin settled in her eyes, but passed. “They told us it was a lover's quarrel. Said the murderer was at large. They never update us on these things.”

“God only knows what else they've been suppressing, but like it or not, everything's starting to slide out.”

“So, how big do you see this conspiracy?” Her cheeks flushed red with excitement.

“Big *and* dangerous. I've got a bad feeling about it all. There are two people I know who were there that night besides Billings. The paté out on the eastbound highway who is beyond questioning *or* the justice you mentioned earlier.” Her expression was expectant.

“And Van Reydner. That’s what hurts. Van Reydner could clear up this whole mess. Maybe. But if the recent demise of Mr. Adrian tells me anything, I’d say the best place to start looking for her would be the Landfill.” I paused to look out the window. The streetlights gleamed like tin stars.

Ms. Redding derailed my train of thought. “What’s your theory?”

“I don’t have one.” I cracked open a new coffee and burned my mouth with it. “I think it’s a case of a couple of small-timers getting smashed in the wheels of a bigger machine. What do you know about Cotton?”

Her eyebrows became a delicate arch. “Not much. After I talked to Billings about *his* murder, I called Authority to ask about the other murder, but the news gag was already going into effect. All I got from Cotton’s ID was his name. He had checked into the Morocco as *W. Irving*. He was from Vicetown. Made a living selling makeup for the dead. You know, collagen creams, synthetic tans and the like.”

“Who gave you the bio on Cotton?”

“Authority. An Inspector Cane.” I could see doubt forming behind her features.

Cane. I was starting to hate that guy. “What did Cane say?”

“He said they found a big cache of Greaseasy and syncrak in a valise by the body, so Cane told us it was a drug-related murder. Then came the gag order. Under investigation. That type of thing.”

“Convenient,” I said. “Would all of this be in your records?”

“Probably, the *Gazette* has a huge library of old and related stories—we call it the morgue. Should be stuff in there about the baby, too. If you’re serious.” Her face was flushed.

“Can I see your files?”

“Sure, later.” She got up, walked over to me, and passed one arm around my neck. She smiled.

“What?” I said in my usually succinct manner.

“I was going to ask if you had to wear the makeup, but decided to keep my mouth shut. It’s kind of sexy and weird.” Again her teeth flashed at me. “Do you have an apartment?”

“No,” I growled. “I sleep on the couch out...” I could feel her solid form pressed against me. Her other arm slid into the small of my back and pulled me closer. I had no doubt now that she was a strong woman.

If she had hugged any harder, we’d have passed through each other. Her breasts felt like armor-piercing shells.

“Are you sure about this?” I gestured to my face.

I counted the teeth she showed me in answer.

“I don’t care, Wildclown. It’s not so bad I guess. Besides, it’s hard to find a man in Greasetown who can spell justice let alone one who knows what it is.”

“What time is it?” I asked, my nose tickling hers. She looked at her watch where it hung over my left ear.

“Almost one-thirty,” she whispered, and pressed closer. “Come to my place.”

“I’ve got to stay close to the phone. I’m open all night.” I slashed out behind me at the papers on the desk. The phone fell with a thump and a ring. An ashtray cartwheeled across the floor and broke in the corner. I leaned back; Ms. Redding followed. Her solid form pressed down on me.

“Don’t come in, Elmo!” I shouted at the door.

We froze for a moment—faces close and expectant. Then I kissed her. Our tongues met like hungry snakes. I felt Ms. Redding’s hands like vices on my buttocks.

As my fingers took an enjoyable ride on a long zipper, I had the feeling that we were being watched. Elmo would be down on one knee at the keyhole. Hell, who wouldn’t?

Chapter 34

Ms. Redding left at around three-thirty. Apparently, she was unaccustomed to sleeping on desks. I saw her to the door then asked Elmo if he wouldn’t mind reading in the office so I could use the couch. I had to give Tommy’s body a rest. If I pushed too hard, I would end up wrestling his personality for control.

Also, I had my own little hallucinogenic facsimile of sleep, and I thought better when disembodied. Mary Redding’s Volkswagen exploded to life in the quiet street below. In minutes, Tommy was snoring beneath me on the couch.

As I had expected, the sex and orgasms had quite exhausted my intellect. I felt all shocked and spread out—kind of drippy—like egg yolk sliding down a wall. I floated near the ceiling, my mind a flickering cloud of sexual echoes.

Ms. Redding had been willing and able, and she had never met someone like Tommy. That was one thing about him I could accept. He had a libido that could sink a ship. Ms. Redding had staggered away finally, flushed and musky.

“Save some, save some,” she had said.

It was true. Tommy’s body responded to each atom of sexuality as though it would be the last he would ever encounter.

I let the buzzing, chafing images huddle and squat on my mind for a few panting moments, and then I gave it all up to my own strange dreams.

Transition.

I was in a confined space. A line of Authority Enforcers sat across from me. They held auto-shotguns in their gloved hands. A red light overhead made them look like demons. I heard a grumble of gears. An engine groaned before the sensation of motion.

Transition.

I was outside walking down a street that glistened wet from a new rain. My shoes dragged on the asphalt, and made a slushy scuffing sound. I could taste whiskey, cigarettes and sleep. I rubbed sand from my eyes.

Suddenly, a baby’s cry echoed up the street, bouncing between the buildings and rattling off the fenders of parked cars. I shook my head. A cat, probably—or cats making kittens.

A shape emerged from the mist beneath a streetlight. At the end of the block, at the corner, a clown in greasepaint swaggered through the puddles toward me. He wore tall hard boots of black, and red spotted coveralls. A .9 mm automatic pistol jumped like a rabbit in his hand.

I reached into my coat for my .44, but found my shoulder holster missing.

A brilliant star blossomed at the end of the clown’s gun. My chest erupted in red. Another star burst forth, then another. I dropped to my knees as holes appeared across my chest in bloody plumes. These shooting stars came plummeting, impacting into my chest.

I fell forward. My hands were wooden paddles. I couldn't feel the street. The world weighed a billion tons—I tried to hold it away, strained to keep it off of me. My arms quivered. Blood poured out of my sleeves—puddles formed. The streetlights lit the growing red mirror.

I could see my reflection. A clown laughed back at me. My mind raced.

Transition.

I marched toward the noises ahead. To the left and right of me, Authority Enforcers moved shoulder to shoulder in a line. They held tall plastic shields and clubs. So did I. Our boots crunched on the broken asphalt. Ahead of us came shouts of rage. A huge mob of the dead approached. They had guns, and clubs and rocks. A scream, and the shields clattered as rocks were thrown. I heard an order shouted, and a long blinding arc of flame leapt over our heads and landed on the mob. Another order, and we charged the burning figures.

Transition.

I was back in the waiting room outside my office. A sucking dryness pulled at me. In Tommy's place below a tall pale man in black and gray was stretched out. His lips were a sour pucker as though he held a skinned lemon between his teeth. His face was broad, his nose straight. A hat covered his head. From a closed eye, a tear trickled.

Transition.

I was back on the street. A burning corpse grabbed me. I saw its flaming eyes.

Transition.

Tommy was below me again. The waiting room was silent. The hallucination ceased. Moments passed silently. A fly's buzzing assault against the window was the only sound. A fly that carried eggs, that carried maggots, that carried rot. Rot that was the end for all animal, vegetable or mineral.

Tommy screamed. He leapt from the couch, hands clawing for his gun; the gun I had put away in the desk.

"Get away!" he shrieked, hands gripping the thick hair at his temples. "Get it off me!"

He attacked the wall beside the door to the hallway with such ferocity and venom that he was dust-covered and through the slats in no time. I saw blood streaming from knuckles and forearms. Elmo entered the room. His eyes were wide with terror. His hands were outstretched. They worked an imaginary rope.

"Boss! Boss!" he yelled, terrified.

Tommy continued to pummel the wall in an effort to escape. He whirled around into a crouched position, and screamed into his hands like a man in quicksand. He bellowed mad, garbled words at Elmo—words that made no sense to the living or the dead, the words of the dream world. The dead man stood against the far wall bewildered.

"Whiskey, Boss?" he mumbled impotently, like a man with new teeth, lips and tongue. "Just a dream, Boss. You want whiskey, that's all."

Tommy was silent, thrashing his glance around the room.

He barked, "Whiskey!" and gripped his gut. He rolled on the floor. "Yeah, and bring my gun, I want you to put a bullet between his eyes. Let's do it right this time!"

Eyes wide, Elmo hurried from the room. Tommy rolled onto his back and stared into the space I occupied.

"I hate him." The dark words fell from a slack mouth. His expression was cold, his eyes black.

My mind still swam from my own experience. I was too disjointed and exposed to care. Below me the clown squinted, and smiled.

Chapter 35

I staggered against the desk, then lurched upright leaning heavily on my hands. They splayed across the wood like two dying squid. I looked at them, they were crusted with dried blood, and the skin was torn from the knuckles. I gagged, but managed to baby-walk my way around the desk.

The floor surged.

I kicked a boot at it. The boards tried to twist up again; I stamped them flat.

The walls leaned in at me, they wavered, and the blinds vibrated like an eye-test. The horizontal rhythm, the blind, space, blind, space, blind, space—had my guts churning.

The air was thick and sour, thick like water—it suffocated me. And it was hot. It was so hot. I was overboard.

I thrashed forward—my hands, arms and legs a million miles away. I was working them by satellite.

But I was attached.

Each motion worked the fissures in my shattered skull against each other with terrifying painful screeches.

Finally, exhausted, I dropped into the chair and fumbled for the phone. In a mechanical voice I ordered coffee—lots of it, then flailed out and picked up a cold cup that I had knocked on the floor. With a slight tug it came free of a sticky black puddle. I tore the plastic lid away. The coffee was bitter and icy, so it fit right into my state of mind.

I was drunk—*ripped*. Tommy had polished off a bottle of whiskey in an effort to find sleep. Not wishing to miss a day's work, I had taken over before he passed out. There had been no struggle for control that time. I could sense his relief when I entered. Of course, it meant I had to deal with a zero to ninety sensation of complete sobriety to rip-roaring drunkenness.

My guts rumbled.

I didn't want to throw up, but Tommy's body didn't want cold coffee. I felt bile rise; doubling over I painted the inside of the wastepaper basket. I stared at it, wondering who the idiot was that thought wicker was a suitable material to build them out of. I came to the conclusion that he had never been sick in one. I felt better, but I knew that feeling would pass.

I was full of poison.

I decided that sorting through the case might sober me up, but all that would come to me was Cane's strange behavior.

"Who was he?" I thought and then, "I wonder if I have a new girlfriend?"

My hands trembled as they lit a cigarette. The smoke was dry and acrid, and caught at the back of my throat like plastic. I put it out. Too hot. Water. I needed water. My lips felt heavy with vomit. The phone rang. I nearly dislocated my shoulder when I swung a dead arm at it.

“Good morning, Mr. Wildclown.” It was Mary Redding. “I trust you’re as well this morning as you were hung last night.” Her voice was so perky and cheerful I wanted to shoot her.

“Yeah, not bad—and you?” I was stalling for time. My tongue was behaving like a strip of leather. I had to get my act together. “Are you at the office?” I asked absently. My brain was a toaster that wouldn’t pop up, it was set on high, and the toast was burning, burning, burning.

“Yes, tired as hell, but here. How about you, are you coming down?”

“Yeah, in about an hour.” I felt my whole body turn to about eighteen per cent liquid. My bowel rippled with explosive pain. “Maybe an hour and a half. What time is it now?”

“It’s about ten, but let’s not run any races. You sound like shit. Make it one o’clock; just ask for me at reception. They’ll show you to the newsroom.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said good-bye, hung up. Elmo brought in the coffee. Distaste wrinkled his face when he saw the wastebasket.

“Boss, you should sleep,” he said finally.

“Supermen don’t need sleep. You never read comics, Elmo?” I was trying to engage my mind, to push past the nausea. I had done it before. Push hard enough and the poison could still work for me.

“Sure.” He cracked a puzzled grin as recollection crossed his features. “Back before the end happened. When I was a boy.”

He set the coffee on the desk, crossed to the window, opened it, and sat down. There must have been a miraculous clearing because the early morning light was intense enough to push through the blinds and softly divide him into fuzzy lines of light and dark. Of course, everything was pretty intense.

My optic nerves were howling.

I could hear the coffee cups settling on the desk. I noticed Elmo’s skin held an oily sheen.

“Some type of leather polish,” I thought, then wrestled my guts. I reached out, tasted the hot coffee. It almost didn’t go down. The brew brushed my tongue like rusted metal, but I welcomed its warmth.

“Trouble, Boss?” Elmo asked. I realized he had been studying my features.

“Yeah, it’s just too hard to be a detective this way. In and out of reality. I can’t take it.” A cool breeze finally made its way across the room.

It was lukewarm when I got it.

His face went blank. “What’s that, Boss?”

“Nothing, Elmo. I just hate the world sometimes. It’s such a garbage pail. Why does the human race have to be this pack of greedy, evil pigs slashing and chewing at each other in a thoughtless rush for the trough? Shit, there’s only slop and garbage in there anyway! What the hell’s wrong with us? Why can’t we just sit back and enjoy this immortality we’ve found ourselves with? No, we’re never happy unless we can tear into each other. What makes me tick? Why don’t you slash open my guts and look for meaning in my intestines. Har-haru—what did they call it? Haruspices or something, yeah, the meaning of life in a pile of guts. We haven’t changed. We haven’t. Not since the Romans. God, probably before that.

“Look at it, Elmo. We stopped aging, we stopped dying and staying dead. But what do we do? We figure out ways to make a buck off it. We slash, burn and rape everything

before we know what it is. It's like the way they made hamburger out of Adrian. People don't go into the ground when they die, so hey, let's find a way to make eternal life worse than death." I stopped.

I realized I was talking to two Elmos so I breathed deeply until the double vision passed.

"Sorry, Fatso." The image of Adrian's slithering corpse coagulated in my mind. "I'm just sobering up. Gotta clean out all the poison."

"Yeah, Boss," he said, nodding sadly. "You had a couple."

I opened the top drawer to the desk, pulled out the mirror and started to reapply my makeup. First, I rubbed off as much of the old stuff as I could, without having Tommy expel me. He was sleeping deep though. As soon as I could feel his spirit start to quiver, I stopped.

I saw a plain, wide face in the mirror. Fortyish, it was pale in the smeared greasepaint, and hollow around the eyes. The chin was trowel-shaped; the nose was long and aquiline. The dark blue-green eyes stared back, ringed with care, worry and self-hate. I wondered for a moment, as I reapplied my smile and goggling eyes, what could chase a good looking boy like Tommy, hound him so, that he had to hide behind this insane persona. It was not the first or last time I posed the question.

I looked up at Elmo. "How long have you known Tommy, er—*me*?" Now, if your partner of a number of years said this in all earnestness it might phase you. Elmo only smiled.

"I've worked for you, or known you, for fourteen years now. Course, there were the times you disappeared. But about two straight now, *years* that is. No interruptions. And two straight now, when you has been wearin'..." Elmo moved a hand in a delicate caressing motion over his face. He was referring to the makeup. "And of course, we ain't always been in business, like this." He gestured to the office. "But I like things fine like this, Boss. No interruptions, just w-work. Is there a p-problem?"

He had referred to the early days, when Tommy would disappear on gargantuan drinking binges for months at a time. Elmo found him on numerous occasions—drunk and down and out with some group of fellow alley rats in the worst section of Downings. Not that Elmo had looked for him. That was another one of his rules. If the Boss wants to be alone, he's alone. He had only stumbled upon him, "from time to time."

Elmo had also informed me that when Tommy used to go without makeup—and he did so frequently—he had gone by the name of JJ. Elmo had been unable to explain the initials, only that during those times, Tommy had been up to activities of questionable legality.

"I appreciate that. If I didn't tell you... Those times you picked me up." It was Tommy whom he had rescued, but I knew Tommy would never thank him.

Elmo only nodded and looked shy. "It's been good workin' for you. Always interesting. If you don't m-mind m-my saying, you're a changing man, Boss, and these times n-need that."

I stood up. The room broke into separate images for a moment, and then resolved into one. I was feeling numb, and sick, but better. I knew that in about an hour I would be chain-smoking again. "I've gotta take a shower. Let's go down to the bath house shall we."

Before I left, I deposited the wastebasket in the dumpster in front of the building where I knew it would be next year, if I needed it.

Chapter 36

The *Greasetown Gazette* was published in a huge building of the Gothic persuasion. I immediately imagined its designer to be a hunchback with a penchant for swinging from the many gargoyles that leered from flying buttresses above. Towering sheets of masonry thrust up into the clouds with dizzying speed—or were they descending? I could never tell.

There were places in town where pollution and constant rain had expunged all color, where on particular days it was difficult to distinguish the buildings from the sky. This building, it had been white marble, bore the ugly stains of car exhaust and industrial byproduct. Slowly, it was fading to gray. It would disappear too, given time.

When I first saw it I thought of a cathedral in Hell where it perched halfway along main street thrusting its spires upward over the rooftops of the fading post office and a decaying apartment building.

The mud-colored sky was absorbing everything.

I walked through an enormous revolving door that elephants could have used in twos.

Inside, the lobby was anything but gothic. Fluorescent lights turned a pink and purple color scheme into a pansy's dream. A dual stairway circled up and around both sides of a diminutive reception desk at the far wall. I could just make out the shape of someone behind it. The bright white light flashed off a pair of glasses.

My boots knocked hollowly on the marble floor, sending an army of echoes charging into the heights above. I realized the size of the lobby had distorted my sense of scale when I reached the reception desk; it wasn't small at all. It could have reached up and pinched my nipples without standing on tiptoes.

"Hello." My voice echoed as if I had shouted. The receptionist's features were strained, but pretty, beneath light brown hair. The thin face held the worn and bitter hollowness of self-hatred. Her eyes pleaded for help but refused to say what kind. A release perhaps or surcease. A common condition in Greasetown. I don't think she would have cared one way or another, if I shot her or married her. She dressed in the type of black suit she might wear to her own funeral.

"Mr. Wildclown?" Her voice held a brittle lid on a hair-pulling screech of nails on steel.

"Yes," I said, unwilling to go through the obvious discussion about how she knew me. "I'm here to see Ms. Redding."

"Take the elevator at the top of the stair to the fifth floor. Newsroom's on the left." The words rattled out of her mouth like the mechanical taps of a telegraph machine.

"I'm curious," I said in an effort to be amiable. It seldom worked. Especially when my eyes were blood red and I reeked like an open cask of whiskey. But I made the effort. "What in hell else do you do in this building? I mean: this is a big building." I gestured to the high marble walls.

"Advertising," she said curtly before repeating vaguely. "Advertising."

"Oh," I said, joining her in the fun. "Oh."

I walked to the stairs and up. The warm marble banister spoke to me about power and cooperation with power. The stone had an oily sheen of twisted ethic and pandering. Power was not cheap in Greasetown—the electrical kind. There were blackouts every other day. But this place was lit up like Heaven.

I kept expecting to see the good Lord himself—bed hair sticking straight up, pink terrycloth bathrobe tucked tight under his beard, tooth brush and spit cup in hand—step out of the elevator on his way to the bathroom.

The elevator doors slid seductively apart when I pushed the button. No emerging gods.

Inside, the moving closet sang songs to me from a half-forgotten age. Whoever the fool was who enjoyed singing in the rain would definitely love Greasetown.

I got off on the fifth floor as some melancholy drill sergeant droned into a marching song about New York City—the only thing that could make it there now had gills. A sign marked ‘Newsroom’ pointed to the left. I followed through ankle deep carpet that sucked at my boots. I’d forgotten what it was like when people had money and wanted you to know it. The sound of Photostat machines greeted me.

A thin balding man, reading a coil of paper that streamed out behind him like a cape, thumped into my shoulder. He looked at me over semi-circular glasses. I could see the lower half of my face maniacally reflected in them.

His eyes blinked, widened.

“Who...” he muttered.

“Who?” I echoed, still speaking receptionese. “I’m from Ringling Brothers Cosmetics. Here to see Ms. Redding.”

His little beak of a nose wrinkled. “You’re drunk—I’ll call security.”

“Only if they bring their own whiskey, boy. I’m not here to be sneered at. Where’s Ms. Redding?” I was edgy, and in the middle of a cold sweat from detoxifying. If this little bird didn’t want me washing my cheeks in his blood, he’d have to stand down on the ‘holier than thou’ attitude.

“Ms. Who?” He was taking us back to the beginning again.

“Redding,” I said, putting my chest into it.

“Oh.” He looked hurt or suspicious. I couldn’t be sure. My intuition was still drying out. “Over there.” He pointed with a rattle of paper. My musky cigarettes and whiskey detox scent must have frightened him. A shower can only clean the skin. My pores were pumping out the poisons like so many little factories.

“Nine—nine, over there,” he stammered; his neck bent back like a swan’s as we looked down a division in a labyrinth of dividers.

“Thanks,” I said and left him to his owlish blinking.

My boots clomped over a well-stained strip of carpet. Coffee, mustard, relish, cigarette ash, all pounded, pounded, pounded, into what had once been a deep pile rug. It resembled a dirt path now. I stopped at red dividers, peered over the top.

Mary Redding looked up at me over her glasses. Her desk was covered with paper, held a typewriter and an overflowing ashtray. She studied my face, then smiled nervously. “I still can’t believe last night.”

I smiled. “I can. That’s what makes life so interesting to me. I believe in everything. There’s nothing that will surprise me. I could open a fortune-telling booth—tell people exactly what they want to hear. Doesn’t matter how weird or strange the idea is, I expect

someone to bring it into reality. It's true. People will say, 'I'd never do that!' But, watch. Sooner or later you'll catch them at it. Most of the human race is in full denial. They're still trying to leave instinct in the animal world."

"Snarly today, are we, Mr. Wildclown?" She stood up, reached out a hand. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Oh, these aren't my feelings, they're borrowed." I clasped her soft hand in a shake. A memory of the night before caused Tommy to stir where he likes to stir the most. I dropped her hand and patted my pockets until I found a cigarette.

There was a time before the Change when smoking was not allowed in public workplaces, but there had been hope back then. People actually wanted to live forever. I lit one and gave her the once over.

Ms. Redding was wearing a crisp, gray and black pinstripe suit. I saw her strong calves jutting knee-down from the close fitting skirt. Black pumps cupped her broad feet. I swung my eyes up. Hers were blue and expectant. The cleft between them quivered for recognition.

"Can I look at your records?"

She smiled. "Sure, Mr. Business." Her teeth momentarily resembled a shark's. "Come with me."

Ms. Redding walked along the space between some thirty cubicles toward a room at the back. I ignored the astonished looks of the reporters who coughed on their coffee as I passed. They were so many strange angular shards of faces stealing quick peeks over the edges and around the corners of their multicolored office dividers.

Mary turned and with a sweep of one hand bowed. "The Library, Mr. Business. Or more affectionately, the *Morgue*."

Behind her, the wall opposite me was layered with many wide trays, about twelve feet across. An old coot with a poker visor and a tan suede vest looked up from a file he was perusing. He looked at me with astonishment, and then cast a glance at Ms. Redding. I smiled. He snatched at his bottom lip. I almost laughed when I looked down and saw his tartan slippers.

"Oh, Ms., Ms., Ms., uh, *Redding*. I'm sorry! Here, you can take over. There we are." He began to tidy up his files. There was a strange urgency to his manner.

"Hey, Morris, relax. There's no hurry." Mary walked over, placed a hand on his shoulder. "Take your time."

"Oh, yes, certainly, Ms. Redding." He looked at me. "I was just leaving." He tucked the files under his arm and left.

"What got his goat? He afraid of clowns?" I watched Mary shake her head. "Christ, you pack a wallop, Mary. You said you've been here three months. You don't waste time."

Mary smiled and ran a hand down my arm. "He's just an oldster we have working here. He wanted to help, so we let him. I think he suffers from the volunteer skitters. He's sure he'll be in the way and that we'll ask him to leave."

"Oh, bad luck for Morris." I looked at the broad trays again. Two green buttons stood out of the wall to the left of them. Mary walked up and held a hand over the buttons.

"Our hard copy files—there's microfilm too...at the back." She pushed the top button. The wide trays groaned downward on a simple chain and gear apparatus. "Thank god for hardcopy! The damned computers are worthless. The geniuses at Microsoft keep

saying they'll figure out the bugs, but it's been fifty years and they're only getting worse," she sighed. "The other button brings them up."

"Thanks," I said walking to the wall files. "I prefer something I can get my hands on." I tested the bottom button—the trays moved up.

"And what hands!" Ms. Redding stepped forward and kissed me lightly on the cheek. She came away with whitened nose, chin and lips.

"I'll never get used to that," she said, as she wiped the marks from her face with her fingers.

"You may not have to," I said cryptically as she winked and left the room. I watched her go. There was nothing like wide hips on a woman who was built for them.

I turned my attention to the files and found that if I rotated the trays too quickly, my head would start to swim. I soon located the file on the phantom baby calls. The *Gazette*, going along with the Authority edict, had adopted a new dating system. Some lobby group for historical respect and perspective finally got the A.D. officially changed to N.A. for New Age. It was positive, vague and friendly—exactly what a race of responsibility dodgers and public relations men would feel comfortable with.

I noticed that phantom baby calls had started roughly six months after the Change. Strange days they were, too. An entire generation had just been stillborn. Regardless, everybody claimed they had a live one. Nothing could be proven. There were hoaxes, where one of the forever children—a toddler at the time of the Change—would pretend to be a newborn.

But that type of thing died out over time, as the forever children's minds grew to middle age and despair—before they disappeared in Authority education camps, illegal prostitution and porn rings or into the wilds.

I dug through the files. There was quite a pile of stories. They seemed to taper off around 35 N.A.. Authority studies were under way at the time. Artificial everything was attempted.

Between 40 and 45 N.A., Authority pronounced the human race dead, though they encouraged people to keep trying. 50 N.A. and the *Gazette* continued to get an average of twenty calls a year—a dwindling side effect of the growing hopelessness that gripped the world.

I picked up the thick bundle of clippings and staggered over to the desk beside the computer. I dumped them on it with a bang. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of white flit off the table and behind the computer. I wanted to disregard it, but tried to remember the detective rules. Don't throw away evidence unless it can be held against you.

I yanked the computer away from the wall—damned paperweight anyway—then blindly scabbled around behind it with one arm. Bent over in that position my temples throbbed—I overcame an urge to fall into a coma.

My hand came up fuzzy with dust clenching a page torn from a notebook. On it was written:

Special to Harker. Grey, Owen, called May 9, 48. Wanted info on baby. Said on case. No Authority connection. Kidnapping.

I walked quickly over to Mary's desk—showed her the paper. "Know any of these names?"

“Hmm,” she mumbled as she scanned it, looked up at me quizzically. “I’ll ask around.” She left her desk, walked toward some offices with doors. I spent a minute peeking at an eye that had appeared at a crack in the office dividers.

“Boo!” I said. It disappeared. Mary returned.

“James Harker. He used to work here about two years back. Quit though, joined a band I think.”

“You don’t know a Grey, or an Owen?”

“No.” She hesitated, her eyes looking deeply into mine. “Do you?”

“No. Do you know where Harker works?”

“No, but payroll must have a record of where they sent his severance.” She looked worried. “Besides, old reporters tend to keep in touch.”

“Thanks,” I said and returned to the files. I found an article from 45 NA about the Worshippers of the Twelve Stars. They were fundamentalists who felt the Second Coming was coming. As Brother Godin leader of the Greasetown congregation said, “It was written in *Revelations*. We shall all come ‘before his throne and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.’”

Brother Godin carried on for some time. He sounded like he needed a vacation. He must have said, “We must arm ourselves” thirty times. I looked at his picture and felt fairly certain I wouldn’t want my daughter dating him. His shtick was nothing new.

There were about fifty churches with similar outlooks. But the Twelve Stars was the biggest of that breed. I had heard of them before but instinctively stayed clear.

I had too much to think about to stay alive. I’d deal with death when it came for me. There was a sinister twist to their Twelve Stars’ message though, when they spoke of an *Eternal Reich*.

They had managed to mix Nazism with Christian fundamentalism, and it blended together surprisingly well.

My eyes were drawn back to Brother Godin’s picture. A charm hung around his neck on a chain. A steel swastika was gently cupped in the oval part of an Egyptian Ankh.

Acting on impulse, I returned to the file drawers and searched for homicide stories. Sure enough, I found four complete drawers dedicated to murder. They were chronologically ordered, but the sheer volume of stories kept me searching thirty minutes before I located the file on Alan Cotton. I found copies of Ms. Redding’s notes and other specifics.

I found a photostat of a driver’s license that was blackened at the edges and badly damaged. I also found a faded photograph of Mr. Cotton from the 1970s—slick comb over and pop bottle lenses. Mary must have been working on the case and dug it up from somewhere before the gag order came down.

As I looked at an Authority photo of the crime scene, and the red hamburger that was Mr. Cotton, I realized someone must have provided Cotton’s picture.

No one would be able to identify the body.

I looked at the driver’s license again. 333 *Sea Heights, Vicetown*. I thought back. Mrs. Cotton claimed she had not spoken to anyone but Authority. So someone in Authority must have delivered the outdated photo to the newspaper. That meant someone was in favor of unearthing the truth. Ms. Redding’s friend again? The copy of the license could be easily obtained from the licensing bureau.

I pocketed my notes, and the memo to Harker, put the baby file to bed and returned to Ms. Redding's desk. I looked down at her over the cubicle wall.

"You're beautiful when your nostrils flare like that," I said. It was true. Such sensual twitching held an irresistible carnal attraction for me.

"You romantic." She could tell I was about to leave. "Can I come by later?"

"I'll be out," I said harshly. "I'll call you though."

She looked crestfallen.

"Sorry, but I'm a very busy little clown. Thanks for the use of the records." I looked around at Mary's co-worker's gaping mouths. I couldn't resist. "It's an old story, clown meets girl; girl meets clown."

I left, not really feeling bad about Ms. Redding. She was almost a hundred years old, after all. I caught the little owl fellow waiting for the elevator. I clomped up and leaned over him.

He shrank away from me.

"Excuse me, I wonder if you could answer a question?" I said this with only the slightest trace of rancor.

"Yes." He gulped down a big lump of air.

"What does Morris do in the Morgue?"

"Oh." The fellow's bulging eyes blinked wide. "He's the librarian. He keeps our records straight."

"How long's he worked at the paper?"

He gave me the owl's eyes. "Since the Change."

"Thanks," I said, turned away and then braced myself for the Muzak assault I was about to undergo.

Chapter 37

It was Thursday evening and getting dark. I had eaten a sandwich, and then left Elmo at the office to play secretary. I took the Chrysler, though my destination wasn't far.

That's how people get big asses. It's not that I have, or Tommy has one, but that's how it happens. Suddenly we can't go anywhere without our cars.

I walked into a dark room. There was a dim gleam of brass horns on a stage across from me. The music they played was sultry and rhythmic, it reminded me of sex.

Tommy's psyche responded typically.

I felt flushed and momentarily appreciated the makeup.

I sauntered up to the bar—I'm good at sauntering—past dim tables and dark guests. I could feel their glances as I passed. Leaning heavily on the counter I ordered a scotch from a woman with rusty hair who wore a quadruple string of pearls that would give an ox back problems.

When she set my glass on the bar, she gave me a 'why don't you grow up look,' which was rare in Greasetown. Most people just look dazed or frightened. Then she grinned like a hungry grizzly bear and returned to her cigarette where it smoked beside the ale spigots.

The drink was a little too warm for me. I downed half of it before my stomach jumped like I had sword-swallowed a cattle prod. I set the glass down, and peered

through the gloom at the band. I had been told by accounting at the *Gazette* that Jimmy Harker musician, alias James Harker journalist, had given up the search for truth for a life of late nights, women, and applause. Looking around the place, I realized Jimmy would need infrared vision to see any women in here.

He was playing with a band called the Swing Dogs.

I had called a few bars and asked the managers about them. On my fourth call, I was directed to a place named Crisco's. So far, Crisco's was little more than a big collection of dark. They must have saved millions on cleaning staff. My boots glided like hockey skates over the damp floorboards. There was something on them that slid like oil, but stuck like glue when you stopped moving.

Harker had a moustache and a ponytail—the woman in accounting had said—played trumpet, and very well, by the sound of it. I realized that in the darkness, I'd have as much chance of seeing a moustache as I would of seeing heaven.

For once, I didn't have a cigarette. I opted instead to repetitively clear my throat—it was scorched. I listened to the music and tried to imagine what had brought me here.

The band stopped in the middle of a song. I heard them confer in muffled tones, and then someone laughed. They picked up where they left off.

They were warming up. Their first set probably wasn't until nine or nine-thirty. I glanced at a bar clock set in a huge replica of a popular beer—there was frost on the bottle and everything. It was eight-thirty. The band stopped again, a drummer let his frustration out through a snare drum. I shared his angst.

Why was I at Crisco's watching the Swing Dogs looking for Jimmy Harker to ask him about babies and strange names like Owen, and Grey?

A cold finger of fear had its way with me.

What was driving me now? I was supposed to find out who had killed Cotton. I guess all the baby talk, the Regenerics, and the phantom baby stories were beginning to work on me.

For a moment, I began to wonder who was in control. Tommy had been acting strangely. It had started during the Billings case.

For two years we worked well together. I took over and I didn't hear a peep out of him, now... he seemed to be aware of my actions. That strange dream of mine: What was that all about? There was something out of whack.

Tommy had been quiet for so long now. He seemed to approve of the direction the case was taking. But what direction was that? I definitely wanted to know who had sliced Adrian up, but I wasn't being paid for that. It was obvious that the cases were related.

I had to caution myself. Hold on, Detective. You're not taking this strange New World for granted. You're fighting the flow. Next you'll be wondering who you really are.

You're the Detective that's all that matters. Cotton can wait; you've got to go with your gut.

The music stopped. It was replaced with the loud hush of crowd noise. The lights came up. I think someone lit a candle. I could just make out the dim forms of the musicians leaving the stage—flitting through a rustling curtain at the back.

I turned to the barkeeper and caught her staring at me. I motioned her over.

“Say, beautiful,” I sang. I wasn’t stretching a point. She was pretty enough behind overdone makeup, and her figure was solid and panther-like beneath the gaudy purple spandex. “The musicians have a room back there?”

“Do I know you?” she said, her head tilting from side to side.

“Do you have to know me to answer me?”

“I just get this feeling about you.” She squinted.

“Every kid loves a clown,” I answered glibly. I couldn’t believe how little patience I had. “Do they stay back there between sets?”

“Yeah.” She continued to stare then smiled again. “You look like someone I knew. Without the makeup.” She laughed and sucked on her cigarette. “That’s where they stay. They aren’t allowed to drink until the last set.” She laughed. “Like anybody’s gonna enforce that one...”

“Do you know Jimmy Harker?”

She smiled. “Sure, nice ass on the guy.”

“Good,” I sneered. “I’ll just look for a nice ass.”

I left the bar and crossed to the stage—only stumbling twice. I pushed the curtain aside and walked into a small room. A toilet roared from a tiny alcove at the back lit by a blinding fluorescent light. A tall, slim black man walked out. His hand twitched like a spider on his fly.

Two vinyl couches ran the length of the room on either side of me. They were occupied. A man who looked forty sat closest me. His black skin gleamed blue in the weird light. He wore sunglasses that must have made him completely blind in the room outside. He had a whip-like ponytail that grew out of the top of his head and fell down the back like new silk. His moustache was as sharp as a knife.

He looked at me; so did the other members of the band. They were a pair of white men of elder years who looked like they lacked the wind to blow their instruments, and another was a big dead Asian. He determinedly strummed a bass guitar. I was amazed at how much mass he had for a dead man. He looked like he Sumo-wrestled in his spare time.

“What the fuck you want?” This came from the black fellow I’d caught coming out of the washroom.

“I’m looking for Jimmy Harker. I was told he played with you guys.” I smiled.

“So. People tell you a lot of things, I bet,” the black man sneered belligerently.

“Jimmy only play with himself.”

“So, I want to talk to him.” I wished for a moment that I had come unarmed. “My name’s Wildclown, I’m a private detective.”

The fellow with the moustache and ponytail broke out laughing. “A private dick, aw shit man, come on. Who the hell are you?”

“Listen, I just want to ask a couple of questions.” Tommy’s spirit flashed ire.

“Nobody’s in any trouble. Does everybody in this town have a chip on his shoulder? You can’t buy a newspaper without getting into a fist fight.”

The two old men broke out laughing now. They obviously weren’t the leaders. I glared at them. There wasn’t much else I could do.

“All right, he’s a funny, funny clown. Have your laugh.” I grinned like an idiot.

“Lucky for you, I’m in a good mood today. I’m looking for Jimmy Harker.”

The fellow nearest me stood up. He was a good head taller. "I'm Jimmy Harker. Who are you?"

"You play a hell of a trumpet," I said feebly.

"I play sax," he said and I immediately cursed the woman in Accounting.

"Sax, sax. Sorry I get those things mixed up." I pursed my lips. "I'm not a musician."

"So?" He glared at me—let his eyes rake over my form.

"Okay, maybe if I appeal to the wayward newshound in you." I smiled again, threw my chest out—it wasn't old or anything I just threw it out. "I just came from the *Gazette*. I'm working on the phantom baby case."

His face went blank then it drooped like someone had left it in the sun too long.

"Phantom baby," he said smiling, and shook his head. "Get out."

"I'm serious." I gestured to my clown's face. "Surely to Christ you guys can appreciate an idiosyncrasy. You're artists—God, what's the world coming to when artists get judgmental?"

They all started laughing now—even the Sumo wrestler. His dead lungs thrummed like stretched rubber tires. I smiled. I had nothing else to do. Inside, I could feel Tommy railing for control. I had him though. A full day of detoxifying left him tired. Still, he managed to jerk my gun hand in and out of a fist.

The Swing Dogs seemed to take the gesture as a threat. They stopped laughing.

Harker came close to me. He pulled off his sunglasses. My arms instinctively bent to catch the flick of a knife. But he didn't have a knife instead he just stabbed me with his eyes. They were hard points of night.

"What the fuck you want?" His voice was serious with a fragile edge of fear. I wanted to exploit that fear, but that kind of manipulation can turn on you quickly when you're in the back room of a bar with a bunch of guys you don't know.

"Just to ask you a few questions. That's all. Then, you go back to your life, Harker. I'm not out to get anybody." I turned up both empty palms as proof.

Harker's eyes flickered with something like recognition.

"Ask." He slid his sunglasses on.

"A man came in two-three years ago, he was somehow connected with a kidnapping. His name was either Grey, or Owen, maybe both. Wanted info on the baby. Here." I handed him the memo I'd picked up at the *Gazette*. He looked at it, and I noticed his shoulders round, his head tilt slightly to one side.

"Well shit!" He cocked his sunglasses at me.

"What?"

"That's funny." Harker looked at me again, and grinned. "Guy's name was Owen Grey. I think he used to work for Authority, before he was a nobody. He sure as hell wasn't Authority any more. I must have talked to him twelve times in all. He just showed up one day, asking questions about the phantom baby. Said he was a detective. Personally, I think he was a goddamn drunk—always smelled of booze. But hey, live and let live right? The Change has been hard on everyone. Anyway, he said he was looking for a missing girl. Some rich kid, parents looking for her. I let him look at the files—why not? Son of a bitch tried to use me as a library though, came back quite a few times. Couldn't guess why he was interested in the baby."

"What's funny about that?"

“I was trying to think who you reminded me of?” He slapped the note. “Him. The way you talk.”

“It’s the detective shtick.” My scalp was crawling. “Do you know the name of the girl he was looking for?”

“Oh, shit. No. Two or three years ago, damned if I can remember.” He shook his head, handed the memo back.

I held fingers up. “Two *or* three years? Which?”

Harker rubbed his chin. “A little over two I think—yeah, just before I packed it in. Isn’t that right, Chang?”

The big Oriental nodded, holding up two thick fingers.

“Do you know where I can find Grey?” I watched my dim reflection in Harker’s glasses.

“No. He disappeared. I remember him coming in for the last time. He seemed really nervous, looked funny on him since he was such a big guy—tall as you but much heavier. One of those glass garglers, two-fisted palooka types, you know. Anyway, he came in that time looking scared, wanted to talk to me—I was on the crime beat back then. I sat down with him, even gave him a cup of my coffee. He suddenly lost interest in talking though because he drank it, and left.”

I could feel adrenaline pounding through my veins. “What did he tell you?”

“Nothing.” Harker shook his head, then resumed his seat on the couch. He picked up his saxophone, his hands fingering the keys nervously. “He drank the coffee, and left. I never saw him again.”

I stared at him. “Nothing, he just disappeared.”

“Poof.” Harker made a disappearing cloud motion with his hands.

“And he never gave you a contact number, an address where he worked? You were a reporter, you must have kept a notebook.”

“You don’t keep a notebook that long. Christ, you go through a hundred a year. Couldn’t tell you a number. Sorry.” He paused, scratched his head. “Gritburg comes to mind. But that’s a guess.”

I gave him one of my cards.

“Thanks,” I said, and spun on my heel to leave—then stopped. I threw an eye over my shoulder. “You said Grey sure as hell wasn’t Authority any more. I suppose that was based on the poor sap’s wardrobe?”

“No, Grey was a good dresser, plain but good. I just knew he wasn’t from Authority, because I only talked to one guy at Authority about the phantom baby.”

I felt sweat soak my back. “Who?”

“Inspector Borden. Called him every time we got anything on it.”

My jaw died. Then I managed, “I suppose they’re still doing it, at the *Gazette*.” I continued to stare over my left shoulder. “Calling.”

“Hey, it was one of those things. You do what Authority wants.” He couldn’t hide the wounded pride in his voice.

“Thanks.” I left, and in seconds found myself in the street. My brain was aching with all the little cogwheels turning at once. My stomach was a block of ice as I drove back to the office.

Chapter 38

In the hallway, it was dark. Somewhere ahead of us came the mad pleasure-pain shriek and giggle of a woman. After it, a man laughed frenetically—donkey-like. That came from the accountants who rented offices down the hall from me. I didn't like them. They had too much dirt under their fingernails for accountants. I unlocked the office door pushed it open and heard a rustling sound. I pulled my gun free and shoved the door with it. The inner office was dark, but enough light slipped past the blinds to expose the corners in bars of gray. Nothing. I looked down. An envelope lay crumpled at my feet. I bent, picked it up. Elmo was a shadow behind me.

We had stepped out for a late supper after I returned from Crisco's. I needed the fuel. All that detox and running around, and sleeplessness. Elmo came for company. He hadn't said a word. It was perfect. We had pulled up to the front of the building at about eleven-thirty.

"Come on, Fatty." I crossed the carpet, opened the inner office door, flicked on the desk lamp and dropped into my chair. I flipped the envelope over, ran a thumbnail under the flap, and tore it open. Inside was a message hastily written in pencil on foolscap. It read:

"Mr. Wildclown. Please come. Arizona Hotel. Have something you want. Under Nancy Smith."

Well, I wanted a lot of things. I wanted my own body. I wanted more money, and I wanted a drink—a lot of things. I wanted a cabin with a stream nearby, where I could take my nephew fishing. We could catch a big one, shellac it, and nail it to the wall. I wanted a nephew. I wanted to be under Nancy Smith. I especially wanted to find the person who had written the message. I also wanted to know how she knew me. A strong female hand had written *Jan Van Reydner* between the blue lines at the bottom of the page.

"What time is it, Fatso?" I asked, peeking through the blinds.

"Just past eleven-thirty." His voice was matter-of-fact.

"Not too late to call on a lady."

"Best time to," Elmo said and brought his face to life with a grin.

"You better pack a heater," I said, as I checked the action of my gun. "I'm not sure what kind of reception we're going to get."

Elmo smiled. He liked packing a heater. Dead people weren't supposed to.

Chapter 39

I looked up at the sign. The letters comprising 'Arizona' were painted to resemble something soft left too long in the sun. They melted and dribbled in yellow trickles over the word 'hotel.' A bright sun hung in the top right corner of the sign. Sweat was jumping from it in big fat drops.

One look at the Arizona Hotel and I was reminded of the Morocco—minus the Arab dome. In place of that, a rickety yellow and brown awning covered the walkway that led to the entrance. The fabric was torn in many places and the whole thing groaned so much in the breeze that I had to imagine the howl it would make in a windstorm. The building

itself was run down, dirty, and the windows had been replaced by cardboard in places. We were in Downings again. No Queens this time. Elmo and I climbed the front steps, entered. We walked across threadbare carpet and up to an equally dilapidated front desk. A small East Indian man perched behind it. He didn't notice us for a second or two, long enough for me to see the title of the book he was reading. *Radio Planet*.

It was a cheap paperback with a tiny man about to battle a gigantic ant on the cover. For some reason the little fellow was wearing panty hose. Maybe that was the best gear to fight giant ants in.

"Ahem!" I cleared my throat. The clerk jumped. "Don't worry, I'm not a giant ant, you're safe."

Embarrassed, he threw the novel into a desk drawer and leapt to his feet looking flustered.

"Yes, how can I help you?" He made nervous birds with his hands. They fluttered up and down the front of his red blazer.

"This your first job, man?" I replied glibly.

Suddenly, his eyes registered what he was talking to—a big clown. They squeezed tight as Venus flytraps. "What, who—"

"Where, when and why," I said and smiled. "But I'll ask the questions. I'm a detective. Wildclown. I was told to meet someone under Nancy Smith here." I grinned. "The name... Nancy Smith. I know it's late, but we're members of an insomniacs anonymous group. What's her room number?"

"Oh, er, certainly, just a moment." He gave me the 'I've seen everything now' look and then almost ran back to a wall of wooden cubbyholes. His head swayed back and forth like a viper and then a hand lashed out.

"Number 602, Nancy Smith." He looked back and smiled.

"Thank you, a job well done. Uh, would you mind if my friend here waited over on one of the couches." I gestured to a cheap-looking reception area beside a fireplace that had fake logs burning with sixty watts of light. "I'll just be a minute."

"Certainly." Then he cautioned, "But those magazines are for all our guests..."

We left him. I whispered to Elmo. "You keep an eye open for strange people, anybody we know...anything. I'm in 602 so ring it up at the first sign of trouble. I'll play this alone."

"Sure, Boss." He winked; patted Pigface's .357 magnum where it nestled in his left armpit, and then sauntered over to the fake warmth of the fire. I noticed that he sauntered very well himself.

I called to the clerk. "Elevator's out, right?"

He jumped to his feet again, dropped his book. "Yes sir, you'll have to take the stairs."

I knew I'd have to take the stairs. It seemed that whatever had changed the world had evaporated all of the elevator repairmen. Sixth floor. I lit a cigarette and began my climb. I wondered what awaited me. Inside I could feel Tommy's quiet anticipation.

I was asking for trouble, but my gamble had paid off. I was being led now, that was a certainty. First Cane, now Van Reydner. Of course, there was no way of knowing if Van Reydner had actually sent the message. It could have been the bastards who had butchered Adrian. It could have been anybody with a sharp knife and time on his hands. They could all be waiting up there under Nancy Smith.

My mind paused mid-stride when I realized that I hadn't had a serious drink in about four hours. I immediately made a mental note to rectify the situation as soon as possible.

The lights flickered. I crouched instinctively—my gun out. The fake brass lamps along the stairway gave off a muddy brown light for a few seconds, then grew in intensity. Another brownout—more and more these days. One day the power wouldn't return.

I slid the gun back through my pink skipping rope belt.

The top of the stairs revealed a long hallway that stretched out in both directions, punctuated with many doors. I read the numbers on the closest. The room would be to my left. I moved cautiously down the hall watching the doors as I passed. I kept close to the wall as I walked and soon stood beside 602. Dim light colored the carpet at my feet. I grabbed my gun and quietly knocked with it.

No answer. I knocked again and thought about loose ends as I awaited a reply.

Nothing.

I remained jammed against the wall, and then pushed the door with the gun barrel. It swung inward with an asthmatic creak onto a wide white room. Against one wall was a long couch with wooden scrollwork on its back. A matching chair with red felt cushions sat tight against the end of a big bed with rumpled sheets. Beside the bed was a night table bearing a lamp and a phone. A closet door was open. Hangers were strewn across the floor. I spotted the shriveled snakeskin of a stocking. Red or purple.

Somebody had left in a hurry.

I pushed the door flat against the inner wall. No thugs hiding behind it. I took a cautious step into the room. No trapdoor, no knives whistling from the assassin's hand. I crossed to the bed and immediately recognized the smell of baby oil—the same I had smelled in Van Reydner's room at the Morocco.

If she was as involved as Adrian had been, it was unlikely she would open up shop again in Greasetown. She'd have heard about his murder by now and if she hadn't been involved with it herself—then she'd be in as much danger as he had.

Two months had passed since she disappeared. Had she been in contact with Adrian? The fact that she knew about me encouraged me to believe it. If she knew about Adrian did she know who killed him? Maybe she was part of it.

All of these ideas kept me sharp, and nervous. Sweat hung in heavy bands under my arms.

Suddenly, I was floating over Tommy's head, and he was walking toward the washroom. His eyes darted back and forth. His breath came in ragged sobs. I didn't have time to think about how easily he had expelled me.

"Babies are slippery," he said to himself. "They're like rubber monkeys to hold." His head snapped to the left and the right. He paused and took a tremendous nose-full of air.

"They're loose, they're twitchy. They're even stinky."

Once inside the washroom he dropped to one knee and scanned the floorboards.

"Nobody has a baby that can keep a bathroom clean. Don't leave them unattended now. Bathe them, and clothe them, and change them, and feed them. Don't drop them!" He laughed to himself then gagged out a sob.

I tried to take possession, but found a bulletproof wall of purpose. The back of his head was an impervious barrier.

Tommy jammed an arm under the sink. He chuckled when his hand came up clutching a badly deteriorated rubber nipple. Using the nipple as a start, I hit Tommy with sex images. I pictured enormous breasts in sheer black silk—burning aureole rising over dark lace like twin suns. His spirit was passive—like he'd finished a task, and was now content to rest. He snatched greedily at the images.

I was suddenly on one knee holding the top of a baby bottle. It was an antique—the nipple looked old, but inside it I felt a pale dampness.

Then, quite by surprise, an elephant sat on the back of my head again. A hot, black blanket covered me. I'm not sure if it was me, the darkness or the elephant that roared. I was swallowed by something.

Chapter 40

Another odd thing happened.

I woke up with blood in my eyes when by all rights I should have been floating over Tommy's body while *he* woke up with blood in *his* eyes.

Just another strange development that I really didn't have time for. The only good thing to come of this was that I also had hair in my eyes. This was good because it hid the fact that I was awake and being surprised and realizing things.

My arms were tied behind my back to the wooden rungs of a straight-back chair. I was sprawled forward; my hands were asleep. My gun was gone. A lamp overhead bathed me in a cone of light. I smelled cigarette smoke and heard the little puff sounds of lips drawing on a filter.

A voice said, "Wake the bastard up."

Five gallons of ice water were poured over me. Gasping, I swung my head to clear my eyes of blood, hair and water. I caught the edge of a large shape disappearing into the darkness outside the cone of light.

"Good morning, Mr. Wildclown."

"Morning," I said squinting into the darkness ahead of me. A cigarette glowed; its tip was dimly reflected in a pair of glasses.

"I hope you are well." The voice came from behind me and to the left.

"Never felt better." I tried to smile, but didn't have the energy.

"Suppose you tell us what you were doing at the Arizona Hotel."

"Suppose you tell me why I should tell you a goddamned thing." I don't know why I said those things. I was angry, and a little frustrated I guess.

Pain blinded me momentarily when a gorilla pinched me on the back of the head. Pliers crashed to the floor at my feet, a lock of dark hair was crushed in the steel teeth.

The voice grated, "Forgive me, Mr. Wildclown. I'm really quite a *handyman*, and can never resist using my tools. I've got the whole set with me. Even the power tools."

"Lucky me," I grunted.

"What were you doing at the Arizona?"

"Are you Authority?"

Another storm of pain, this time from my right shoulder. A screwdriver fell—it rolled across the floor scrawling a bloody trail.

"Answer the questions, Wildclown."

“Why can’t I stay mad at you?” No new pain.

“Why were you at the Arizona?”

“I was looking for someone. Jeeze, I guess the hero cracked pretty quickly.” I had to play for time.

“Who?”

“I really, sincerely, wish I could tell you.”

“Who?” Following the word, I flinched. My coveralls were pulled roughly from my shoulders. Then, I felt the sharp teeth of a handsaw lightly prick my left shoulder. The saw rocked back and forth on the stiff muscle there, inches from my neck. “Who?”

“Richard Adrian, I’m trying to find him for an old girlfriend!” I shrieked. Three quick strokes of the saw and blood spattered my chest. Numbness rushed over my scalp and set fire to my mind. I screamed, twisted away from the blade—knocked the chair over.

I landed cat-like, on my face. I held my breath against the pain. It was an angry presence gathering force in my shoulder—winding up like a clock spring. I knew it would just get worse and worse. My contortions had dropped me out of the cone of light. The cool darkness drew me in.

No time for sleep. The saw was thrown to the floor with a clang. I felt strong hands on me yanking the chair upright. New pain leapt from my shoulder and head. I leaned over—tried to hide between my knees. A large hand reached around and grabbed the hair at my forehead. As he grunted against the full strength of my belly muscles, I felt an odd tickling at the hairline. Inches from my face dangled an ankh with a swastika set in its oval. It hung from a chain around a thick wrist.

I was jerked upright. On impulse I spat at the cigarette that glowed in the shadow. I must have caught the Handyman by surprise because unprepared, he used a boring old fist on my jaw. I struggled against the ropes and pushed off with my toes. He punched me again. My fillings rattled.

I got a mouthful of his shirt and kicked out. We sprawled in a heap. The Handyman leapt to his feet and started wiping the toes of his boots on my stomach.

“Enough!” A voice hissed.

“Yes.” The Handyman called off his attack like a good soldier. For a moment there it had become personal for him. I felt a large boot press against the back of my neck. “We’ll let you rest, Mr. Wildclown. I’ve got to make sure I brought a long enough extension cord.”

I heard his heavy feet cross the floor—a door opened. A flash of light struck me. I turned my head but only made out two silhouettes—one tall, one short. I shut my eyes for a minute and tried to remember why I liked being a detective.

The room was too dark for me to get any clue to where I was. There were no background noises so I ruled out the Arizona. No signs saying: “You are here.”

Not many people had the balls to torture someone in a hotel, even in these strange days. What could have happened to Elmo? He wouldn’t run.

I had heard no gun-battle, so my torturers must have entered the building another way. More likely, they had been waiting. That left me with the faint hope that Elmo might come to the rescue.

Of course, they would leave the same way so Elmo was probably still sitting in front of the fake fireplace wondering why his boss was taking so damned long.

So, it was up to me. Luckily I was bleeding, dizzy and tied to a chair. Anything else wouldn't have been worth the effort. My hands were bound with a plastic cord—tight; they were turning into brass monkey's paws. Blood streaked my cheek and oozed from my shoulder.

"Shit," I told the darkness. I tried the army crawl, more like the worm crawl, and discovered I could make it to the door in about an hour. The chair gave me the agility of a tortoise. I struggled until my breath came in hot gulps.

The door opened. The new light blinded me. I was swung upright, placed under the lamp again.

"How've you been?" the Handyman asked.

"Go to Hell," I growled. A fist smashed into the back of my head, and I was suddenly floating over Tommy; echoes of the blow tore up and down the halls of my consciousness like students on frat night. I tried to possess Tommy again. We'd have to act fast in the next few minutes if we wanted to survive. Tommy was awake below me, and angry.

"Where am I? You dirt fucking, sons of bitches, I'll kill you all!" Saliva rained from his lips.

"Oh, your spirit has returned!" the Handyman laughed. "It makes my contract so much more worthwhile if the courage has to be broken."

I watched as his shadowy form moved to a large tool chest. He picked up a heavy-looking instrument. He fiddled with a cord in the darkness. A high-speed electric motor whined.

Tommy laughed. The Handyman laughed.

"Who were you looking for at the Arizona?" the Handyman repeated.

"I was looking for the spoils of war, you decimated rat-sphincter." Tommy laughed at his own wit unaware of the danger.

"There is spirit, and there is stupidity." The Handyman pressed the bit against Tommy's right shoulder. "I wonder if this bit could drill through your shoulder bone." He gunned the motor. The sharp bit only twisted the skin.

"That's a drill?" Tommy chuckled. "I thought it was your dick and you were going to fuck one of my pimple craters."

Tommy screamed at about the same pitch as the drill. The Handyman put his weight against it. Blood poured from the wound. I was sickened by the gristly sound as the drill bit chewed muscle and scored bone. If I had had a stomach of my own I would have emptied it.

The Handyman stopped.

"Now, I haven't gone into the bone yet. Really just scratched the surface. Will you tell me who you were looking for at the Arizona, or will I finish this? I hate leaving a job undone." The Handyman sounded slightly winded—either from his exertions or anticipation.

"Few things, demon, have the power to wrest from these lips the truth," Tommy ranted in a rasp. "Give me your best."

"Once more, I'll ask. You're bound to lose consciousness when I pierce the lung. Who were you looking for at the Arizona?"

I was helpless. Tommy was closed to me.

"I'll tell you who I was looking for. *You*, you pig. I was looking for you, because I love to eat pig." Tommy's voice was strained. "There's nothing like a pork sandwich!"

The smoker with the glasses hissed from the darkness. “The hell with it. Kill him. We’ll question him after Blacktime. If he doesn’t value life, maybe death will change his perspective.”

Something about the voice was familiar, but it sounded muffled.

Just then, a gun went off somewhere. The smoker leapt to his feet. “Kill him, I’ll find out what the hell...” He moved quickly to the door and out. Something flashed under the glasses.

“Okay,” said the Handyman as he turned to his tool chest. I heard the sharp rattle of a bit being dropped. “I think a longer bit will do it.” Metal grinding against metal. “Right beside the spine, past the shoulder blade, through the lung and into the heart muscle. Then a touch of Blacktime, and we can do it all over again. Dear me, and you’ll be such a ragged dead thing.” He laughed mechanically.

A harsh crack snapped his head around as Tommy tore the back off the chair. He leaped into the air and swung his arms under him, skipping rope style. Then he whipped the remains of the chair over the Handyman’s head. It splintered. The Handyman jabbed the drill at Tommy’s gut.

Tommy leapt aside like a gibbon; his long arms lashed out and grabbed the Handyman’s wrist. They both tumbled to the floor. The Handyman landed on top, freed his arm then rammed the drill at Tommy’s head. It screeched against the concrete floor. Tommy lunged upward and clamped his teeth on the Handyman’s jaw.

The Handyman screamed.

I could hear Tommy sucking and chewing at his opponent. The Handyman was off balance with this human bulldog. He punched Tommy’s head—screamed as the clown’s teeth ripped at gristle and bone. They tumbled across the floor. Tommy lost his grip and they both grappled for the drill. The Handyman’s right arm was tangled tight to his side with the extension cord.

Tommy’s muscles stood out like rope as his bound hands tore the drill away. He pinned the Handyman’s free arm to the floor with a big black boot and stared down at his face.

The Handyman had a thin crop of spiky military hair. The scalp beneath it was damp and shiny with sweat. His eyes were wide in a thick-cheeked face. Twisted lips moved mutely over crooked teeth. He looked about sixteen, one of Greasetown’s forever teens—a muscle-bound adolescent.

Tommy smiled.

“Like playing handyman, do you, Sonny-boy? Now it’s my turn. I’ll be the handyman and *you* be the block of wood.” Tommy began talking in an exaggerated instructional voice. “Now, if you plan on reconditioning a face you’ve got to be willing to accept the size of the job.” The drill whirred. The Handyman gasped a garbled plea. “If it’s an older face, you should be prepared for some painful costs.”

The drill whined shrilly—the Handyman screamed as Tommy set the bit under his cheekbone.

“Remember,” Tommy continued, “to hold the drill firmly in hand so that the bit won’t bind up and the hole will be clean and true. Remember, *clean and true.*”

The Handyman shrieked. A few sickening, bone-cracking seconds and it was over.

Tommy sat straddling the Handyman’s chest looking at the ruin.

Smiling, he whispered. “You idiot, the only thing I ever passed in school was shop.”

The Handyman lay wrapped in Blacktime; the drill jutting grotesquely from his face.

Tommy's eyes were red coals flashing around the room. Another shot rang out. He ran to the door—me in tow—and out. A hallway set in a thin space between cinderblock walls led to the left and right. At both ends stairs ran up. Flickering lights cast strange shadows.

Another gunshot, to the right. Tommy showed teeth and ran to the left—crouching, his bound hands pulled close to his chest. His boots made too much noise and too many echoes as he raced the distance of the hall and up the stairs. I noticed a growing red stain on his back as he charged into the door and out.

Lightning rent the black sky over an alleyway; I looked up. We were behind the Arizona.

Tommy was off again. He sprinted madly through torn garbage bags and heaps of newspaper. The clown bolted between rusted trashcans—rats scurried. We were on the street in front of the hotel. Tommy looked left and right, the Chrysler was gone.

All at once, rain fell from the sky like an airborne lake making a landing. More lightning.

Tommy's back was a crimson smear of rain and blood. His breath came in gasps. He panted Elmo's name. I tried to take over, but Tommy was unreceptive. He ran; I followed. More lightning. He dodged between parked cars, knocked over a dead prostitute taking shelter from the rain in a doorway.

"Stupid motherfucker!" she screeched from a puddle—yellow satin dress soaked—her dead wares damp. "You *mother...*"

Tommy ran wildly, apparently without a goal in mind. He just wanted to be anywhere away from the Arizona. I followed, rain passing through my substance without effort. More lightning.

I hated lightning. I was too exposed.

Headlights, Tommy threw himself into the gutter behind a truck. I floated at the level of the passenger window. I recognized the engine. It rattled, the whole car rattled. Tommy leapt up so fast he passed through me. He ran for the street. The Chrysler bore down on him, and then slid through the rain to a halt.

Tommy tore the passenger door open and jumped in.

Elmo's face was stretched with disbelief.

"Sorry, Boss..." His eyes scanned Tommy's body. "I-I just missed you, they must've been waitin'. I tried to break you out!" He reached for the plastic bindings at the clown's wrists

"Forget that! Drive!" Tommy screamed. "Drive!" His fists beat the dashboard. "*Drive!*"

Elmo's face was perplexed. His hands jittered over the wheel. "Where?"

"Mother of God Cathedral, where the hell do you think?" A sob shook his bloody shoulders.

If Elmo was going to question this odd destination, he let the query die on his tongue. The Chrysler lurched ahead.

"Faster," Tommy muttered. "Faster." He scratched around under the seat and found a pint bottle about half full. He drank from it. His eyes flashed to his waist, slid along the skipping rope belt. "My gun?"

"Take mine, Boss." Elmo pulled it from his shoulder holster with his right hand.

Tommy hugged the gat to his chest. “We’ll end it now—sanctuary or bust,” he mumbled. “We’ll end it now.” He glared at his bindings, and scowling tried to work them loose.

I’d have to wait to take over. Tommy’s mind was a mess of contradiction and madness.

I had a lot of questions to ask Elmo, like: What did he see? Whom did he see? And who put the bullet holes in his chest?

Chapter 41

The Mother of God Cathedral was piled high into the flickering darkness of the storm. The lightning briefly illuminated the many stained-glass windows like half remembered dreams. A stone angel, sword in hand, flew over the enormous arched doors. His eyes were set with grim purpose. The vigilance on his features increased my curiosity. What was he guarding? What could be important enough to get an angel so worked up?

Tommy ordered Elmo to stay in the car. He flew out and up the steps. The rain was slowly scrubbing the paint from his cheeks.

I looked back to where Elmo waited at the curb and saw his face jammed into the acute angle of the windshield, eyes wide. I tried to think of the day. Thursday, no, Friday now.

How long did the Handyman have me before I woke up? It couldn’t have been more than an hour. Things were happening too fast.

Tommy dropped to his knees in the shadow of the gigantic angel.

“Uriel, oh Uriel.” He suddenly twisted into a knot like he’d swallowed a fishhook.

“Uriel,” he sobbed, “let me in, let me in.”

I didn’t recognize the name.

Through the incessant splatter of rain and grumbling sky I heard a shoe scuff pavement. Behind Tommy to the left was a man. He had the unmistakable broad beam of middle age. He was dressed in black. The collar of his long damp coat was tucked under his ear lobes and his hat was low, deepening his eyes. He hugged a briefcase and a paper bag that was oily and dark with rain. He moved quickly toward Tommy.

The clown heard him and swung around with his gun at the ready.

“No, *dark one!*” he barked.

The man flinched, and in the action sent enough strain to his wet grocery bag to tear it to pieces. Fruit bounced off his feet, and a jar of pickles smashed—its contents rolled and bounced away like legless frogs.

“I mean no harm.” the stranger blurted; his voice as taut as wire.

“What do you want?” Tommy’s was slurring noticeably, growing weak.

“I thought you needed my help.” He took a hesitant step forward.

“I want in, I think it’s time to go.” Tommy began to wilt.

“You’re injured, let me help you.” The priest moved another step. “You can come in.”

Tommy’s gun drooped. “I’m fine. There’s no need for alarm. Nothing to see here. The show’s over.” He raised himself to one trembling leg, tried to get the other under him

but failed. He sprawled over the spattering puddles, the gun sliding from his grasp. An epileptic spasm shook him as he made a last desperate attempt to rise. He failed.

Tommy was unconscious in the rain.

The man hurried over, knelt by him. He studied Tommy's form from boots to hair. He touched the plastic bindings on his wrists, shook his head.

"Dear Father," he muttered. His arms slipped under Tommy and with great effort he lifted him. "Another castaway. Such a storm, Holy Father. What else will it wash up?"

I floated along overhead. The priest took Tommy through a nondescript side door and into the cathedral, then down a long, ornately paneled hallway. He stopped beside a door recessed in the wall leaning Tommy's weight against the frame as he struggled for the key.

The door opened, the man turned on the light and then dropped Tommy on a large bed.

"My Goodness," he muttered rubbing at his back. He produced a penknife from his pocket, easily released the clown's hands. Then he stripped Tommy of his clothes. "What in Heaven?"

He stared at the wound on Tommy's head and shoulder, clicked his tongue then left momentarily. He returned with a small, metal box emblazoned with a red cross. He paused and studied a number of quarter-sized pockmarks that ran across Tommy's chest.

"This is strange," he murmured, then gently bathed and bound the new wounds. The vicious tear in the clown's shoulder still oozed blood.

I was amazed. I couldn't remember the scars on Tommy's chest, and yet now that I'd seen them they raised a grim indeterminate specter in my mind. Perplexed, I watched the fellow produce a large cloth and soak it in alcohol. He worked it over Tommy's face.

The makeup already streaked with blood and rain came away easily.

I watched as the face appeared for the first time. It was strange. Almost boyish around the eyes, yet lines of age and the rough skin of maturity covered his cheeks.

Again I asked myself, "Why the makeup?" Christ, he didn't even have a hair lip. Then, the strangest thing happened. The priest smiled with recognition.

"Of course!" He nodded, resting a palm on Tommy's cheek. "*You* again. The scars." Fingertips like butterflies lit on the old injuries. That was all he said.

But it was the most profound thing I'd heard all night.

With Tommy's wounds tended the priest gingerly slid him beneath the covers. The clown's black hair made a dark halo on the pillow.

"Sleep," said the priest.

He left us then, and I heard him retrace his footsteps. I thought he would go to retrieve his briefcase and groceries, perhaps he would see Elmo, ask him questions.

I had to think before I let my hallucinogenic trance take over. I was weary of existence—bone tired without any bones. Who had been waiting for me at the Arizona? What the hell did they want me for? I suddenly remembered the charm on the Handyman's wrist. The ankh circling a swastika.

The Twelve Stars? And I'd seen it before in Adrian's office.

My thoughts returned to the spectator. I couldn't forget the image of the glasses staring at me while the Handyman worked. The reflection of a cigarette calmly smoked while hidden eyes watched my torment. The voice had been familiar. What had happened to Van Reydner? Who shot Elmo?

If questions were currency, I'd be a rich man.

The door opened. The priest walked in. New moisture dripped from his hat. He took it off, and placed it on the floor beside him. He pulled a chair to the bedside.

"I spoke with your friend, Mr. Wildclown. The dead fellow. He was beside himself with worry." He smiled, knowing his words were going unheard. He continued nonetheless, for his own comfort if not Tommy's. "I sent him home, told him to return in the morning. To bring you some fresh clothing."

He sighed, pressed his hand to the clown's forehead. It was hot with fever.

"Oh dear." The priest picked up his hat then set it and his coat over a chair in the far corner. Returning to the bedside, he produced an apple from his pocket and tried to get comfortable in his chair. He pulled the peeling from the fruit with his teeth, and then placed the long strips on a circular side table under an antique lamp. I decided to take advantage of the peace to release my psychic trauma through my strange dreams.

Transition.

I wrestled a burning corpse, crushed its head against the asphalt with my armored fist. A gloved hand grabbed my shoulder yanked me to my feet. An Authority Inspector, face hidden by shadow barked orders at me.

"Stop fucking around." The stranger pointed to the approaching mob of dead. "I ordered you to open fire. OPEN FIRE!" I raised a rifle—it was different. No auto-shotgun. Blue fire primed the nozzle. A flame thrower.

"Open Fire!" The Inspector's voice bellowed. "Open Fire!"

I pulled the trigger. Flame leapt out and consumed the first six dead men it touched. A shriek rang out.

Transition.

I walked along the street again. Neon colored the puddles blood red. I felt a tightness in my chest, looked down, and saw many gaping holes.

"Hey, Dick." It was Tommy's voice. I looked up. He stood about five feet from me. The gun in his hand still smoked.

"I shot you. You know the rules of the game."

I tried to speak, but the effort brought blood to my mouth. I coughed. Blood foamed from the wounds in my chest.

I felt my legs weaken. I took a faltering step forward. The night air chilled the blood on my legs. My socks were oily with it; they slid inside my shoes.

"Die, *goddamn it!*"

With enormous effort, I reached out. My arms had become wood, but they caught and held fast to Tommy's neck—fingers like roots.

He screamed and clawed at my wrists. I could feel my fingers penetrate his flesh, burrowing inward. Suddenly the gun went off and I felt a sickening thud of pain. Again the gun roared. I dropped, but my hands held fast.

Tommy shrieked. There was a flash of light.

Transition.

Tommy screamed. He leapt up from the bed below me. The priest was right there, forcing him back with a gentle hand on each shoulder.

"It's here!" Tommy shrieked. His eyes scanned the room. "It's here!"

"You're all right. Please, Mr. Wildclown. You're fine there's no one here." The priest strove to hold him still. "You'll injure yourself the more."

“Can’t you feel it? Waiting. Watching!” Tommy continued his frantic scan of the room. “It’s *gray*, it’s gray and *dark*. Oh God!”

“Please, lie still. Here.” He quickly poured a large shot of brandy from a bottle he must have procured while I dreamt. “Here.”

Tommy snatched the glass from him and poured it down his throat. He handed it back to the priest.

“Ghosts, all around us,” the clown muttered, as the priest refilled his glass. “The dead.”

“True, my son,” the priest said quietly. He watched Tommy empty the second glass. “These are trying times. But you must remember that the Lord does these things for a reason. It is up to us to gain the wisdom to understand that purpose.”

“The ghosts. The angel, Uriel.” Tommy lay back on his pillow. “He would know. He could help me escape.”

The priest’s brow wrinkled. “Uriel? *He* who protects the Garden?”

“I want to go there,” Tommy muttered. “That’s the only escape. Forgiveness for all.”

“Sleep, my son.” The priest tucked Tommy’s covers around his ears. “Try to rest. You are overwrought now. *Sleep*.”

“Get Uriel,” Tommy muttered. “He’ll know what to do.”

“Yes,” the priest said quietly. “But rest for now.”

“I’m tired...” Tommy worked his lips then fell asleep.

I watched the priest shake his head and cross himself. He picked up a book from the bedside table, sat down and leafed through it. I could tell he was unable to concentrate on what he read by the glances he’d throw at Tommy with the turn of each page.

“Dear Lord,” he mumbled caught up in memory, then after a few minutes of staring; he returned to the book.

I floated overhead trying to recall my own strange dream, but the images flitted away from me like sparrows from a belled cat. *Ghosts*, I thought. *Spooks*. I was taken up by a hallucination of utter blackness. It was beautiful.

Chapter 42

I woke up before Tommy, and for a few seconds watched him snore on the pillow below. The priest sat slumped in his chair. I wondered what had put the driven look on his face. Whatever had happened—the Change—it hadn’t been easy on the faithful. Greasetown sure looked like damnation to me and I only used the Bible to flatten cockroaches. What would the Change be like for a believer?

I tried to content myself by floating close to the rough stucco ceiling. I wasn’t sure, but I got the feeling it had been shaped and textured into an apostle or something.

For a religion that warned against idolatry, they sure had a lot of idols.

I couldn’t blame them. The human race needed idols—made idols of everything. I had read in an old magazine that at one point in history, however briefly, people had idolized and bought the musical recordings of talking and singing raisins.

Was I going to fault the Christians for the odd saint? I looked down again and pondered. Tommy was exerting more and more influence during my possessions, a

development that gave me pause to wonder. Was I losing my ability to overpower him? Not a pleasant prospect for someone who had less substance than a puff of wind.

I was in no position to be giving anything away.

To the best of my knowledge I was the only one of my kind. The only reason I believed this was that if there were others, one of them would have gone public by now. My old rule again of believing in the inevitability of everything. If I was dissipating, what awaited me? Blacktime forever? That notion was less than inviting. The living worry about losing their bodies—hell, even the dead worry about the condition of their own. I only had myself to lose.

The universe would do the big Alzheimer's on me. *Poof*, you're nothing.

A part of me had to ask the question. What's wrong with that? I couldn't answer it. I only knew that this was close to life, if it wasn't life, and I was determined to hang onto it, since I had no guarantee there was anything more.

The prospect of nothingness loses its attraction the closer you get to it. No wonder so many suicides died screaming.

I had to keep focused. I knew I had to finish this case. Even though Tommy's body was not mine I had a certain possessive attitude towards it. The Handyman had been torturing me as much as my host.

Someone had hired the Handyman. I wanted that someone on the loud end of my gun. Also, I wasn't sure why, but I wanted to see some sort of justice done. Someone had to pay. It was still wrong to murder.

Review the case. Yes, simple enough. So far I had done nothing but bungle my way from mistake to mistake. I had paid dearly for allowing myself to be led by the players in the play. It was a gamble that I had almost lost. And it seemed that Tommy was working on something now, something that ran on a parallel course to my own case. Parallel, yes, but not the same. Some strange twist of life had intertwined two ugly stories. I had stumbled upon something, just as Adrian and Van Reydner had stumbled upon something at the Morocco. But what?

A real baby would be big business, and it was obvious from Skullface's discussion on Regenerics that Dr. Cotton would need a baby for his theories to work. The problem was, he wasn't the only one who would jump at the chance to claim one. Every crackpot in the world would herald it as a messiah, or the great evil one. A baby in a world that no longer had them would be priceless. But there were no such things as babies.

Even with *my* ego, I found it difficult to inflate my career with Tommy to date. A few missing persons. A burglary, a host of cheating spouses. Nothing but stiffs, cheap diamonds and stiffs. Why would Billings come to me?

I remembered writing the name down, the same that both Harker and Mrs. Cotton had mentioned: *Inspector Borden of Authority*.

Funny, Borden told Billings to talk to me. He told Mrs. Cotton to be a good girl and don't dig too deep into her husband's death. As Harker told me, Borden was also the Authority contact for the phantom baby reports.

I could see a recurring theme and it smelled of dirty diapers.

A baby cried late one night at the Morocco Hotel, and everyone who heard it died or disappeared. Now this Owen Grey character. Who was he? Some washed-out detective looking for a missing person. What the hell interested him in the baby?

Whatever his involvement, he was gone too.

I looked down at Tommy and noticed that the covers were forming a fair-sized circus tent below his midriff. With little effort, I stepped into his head.

My first impulse was to cry out. Pain and pleasure momentarily vied for dominance. I was always amazed at how alike the two sensations were.

Pain won out.

I gritted my teeth and hissed into a sitting position. The priest's eyelids fluttered like doves. He looked at me with concern, and half-levered himself out of his chair.

"You shouldn't..."

"Let's not debate the right and wrong of it, Father." My shoulder throbbed, my head throbbed, my neck—I *hurt all over*.

"But..." The priest stepped over to the bed.

"But I'm not going to get any better moving around. Don't worry. I'll stay put. I just want to sit up." Fire lanced along my back as I pushed myself against the headboard.

"It's strange..." His eyes squinted at me.

"What's that?" I could barely hear over the jackhammer in my head.

"Oh, it's strange, something, something. Don't you mind just now! I'll get you food. You need food." He headed for the door. "You must be exhausted"

"I can wait. I just wanted to ask you a few questions first." I tried to smile, but it hurt its way into a grimace. Suddenly, I realized I was without makeup. I slid a hand over my chin. Lovely feeling.

"I'm curious about..." I started, then my mind blanked. "Oh damn, it was right there. What the hell was it?"

"You have had a lot of strain put upon you." The priest shook his head. "Rest, is what you need. Food, not questions."

"Sure..." I said, puzzled. The priest walked to the door, smiled, and left. I ran my hand over my face again and relished the sweet familiarity. Fine stubble grew there. It had always been a nightmare to shave regularly with the makeup. I was due. I looked at my bare chest, felt the shallow depression of the scars.

The door opened, and Elmo entered. He had a small case in one hand and a tall Styrofoam coffee cup in the other. He smiled shyly, like he was a girl at a sock hop and I was a boy. Then his eyes went wide.

"You okay, Boss?" He set the bag on the bed and the coffee on the bedside table. "Father says it's okay I come see you." He looked hesitant.

"Yeah, Fatso. Aces. Good job you got me here. Did you have any more trouble?" I lifted the plastic lid on the coffee. My stomach fluttered.

"No, I just drove around all n-night, then stepped into the office quick, this mornin'." He sat down in the chair by the bed. "The f-father said he's makin' you breakfast. Had to call somebody." Then he frowned.

"What is it Fatso?"

He rubbed his chin. "Must be cause I never seen you in some time without no..." Elmo gestured to his face. No makeup. "And them b-bruises...but..."

"What about it?"

"You look different, I guess." He rubbed his right forearm. I noticed the holes in his shirt. "I know you put on weight, but..."

"Christ, I almost forgot! You got shot last night. Are you all right? What happened?" I scanned my dead gungsel's chest.

Elmo pushed his jacket away from his left side, and then absentmindedly drilled a finger into one of the three bullet wounds in his chest. I heard a sickening fibrous sound like old burlap ripping.

“I was waitin’ like you said, but then, I figured you was away for too long—and I thought anyway, I could check in with you and still cover your back, ‘cause the elevator was broke—and, and trouble would come up the stairs.” He shifted nervously. “I got up to the r-room, and you was—were gone. Then, I looked around and found a fire ‘scape sign, and a door. The door was open, so I knew you was either wanderin’ around outside, or there was some kinda trouble.

“I stepped quick out the door and saw two b-big fellas carryin’ you down the stairs. There was this other guy too, and he had a gun. Shot me three times. Small bullets though, so I ain’t too bad off. But I can feel them in there if I walk too fast. Need some duct tape is all.” He smiled.

“Christ, Elmo. I guess you’re lucky they didn’t torch you or something worse.”

“I guess they must’a figured I was a living p-person, ‘cause they didn’t check on me. I just got knocked down and I stayed down. Then, I followed them when they forgot about me. They took you down to the basement through the service elevator. But a big guy, an Enforcer, he guarded the door. I had to sneak back up the stairs and find a way to the basement inside. I’m sorry I was kind of late.”

“Don’t worry about it, Elmo. An Enforcer?” My head was reeling. “Authority?”

“All rubber and steel, like.” Elmo traced a large block shape with his hands.

“Then you started a diversion to give me escape time.”

“No, Boss.” Elmo rubbed a forearm again, abashed. “I kinda surprised another Enforcer by m-mistake. We shot it out. But I got away.”

“Good work.” I rubbed my chin, then noticed Elmo’s mouth fall open—agog.

“Boss, things is looking different...”

“I know it’s different.” I was beginning to enjoy the sensation of a clean skin. I was also beginning to wonder why Tommy hadn’t run for the makeup, or thrown me out as he had done on other occasions when I’d attempted to take the damn stuff off. Unless he was unaware. “You’ve got the makeup, Elmo?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He reached over and patted the case. “And clothes.”

My mind suddenly clicked. I swung my legs off the bed.

“You said the Father was going to make a call. Damn!” I winced as I struggled out of the bedding. “Elmo, he’ll probably call Authority. ‘I’ve got this poor abused guy at my church, see.’ You just said there was an Enforcer involved last night. Quick! Give me my clothes!”

I struggled into a fresh coverall. This one must have been Tommy’s special occasion suit. It was slightly cleaner. The spots were very bright red, blue and yellow. *Lovely*. I struggled into my boots, lashed my pink skipping rope belt around me.

I was up. My gun! Elmo read my thoughts. He shrugged two bony shoulders and handed me his .357 magnum.

“I took it off the church steps last n-night,” he said. I passed it back to him with a ‘sh’ sound on my lips and remembered the car.

“Fatso, did you empty the trunk?” He shook his head as I thought of the Monkey twins’ guns: a couple of .9 mm automatics and an auto-shotgun. Perfect.

“B-but, Boss?” Elmo shook his head. “I, we should wait for the Father. He’s got food and you is—*are* sick.”

“No time to explain, Elmo. Come on.” I pushed past him and he followed, case in hand. We ran down the hallway, and out onto the steps before the church. The sky was gray and cloudy; a few damp spots remained on the concrete. I scanned the area.

“Come on!” I scrambled ahead of Elmo. He followed as quickly as he could. His legs moved jerkily.

“Come on!” I shouted again.

The car was sitting at the curb like a badly landed airplane. Bullet holes pocked its length. A great dark stain seeped from beneath it.

I ran to the trunk, and then waited an impatient second for Elmo to hobble up to me. He jangled the keys in the lock, and the lid popped open. I gave Elmo his magnum and snatched an automatic from the trunk, checked the clip for bullets and slid it into my pink skipping rope belt.

“Come on, Elmo. Drive.” I jumped into the passenger seat and pulled the door shut. I suppose I was so used to seeing a clown anytime I looked in a mirror that for once I noticed my reflection in the shattered rear view on my side.

I looked determined—and then I was floating over Tommy’s head. He was huddled over, covering his face with his arms.

“No! No!” he cried shrilly. “Oh, it’s him. It’s *him!*” Two great sobs were dragged out of him with chains. He balled up his fists and then smashed his face repeatedly.

Elmo sat beside him in wide-eyed terror. Boss was crazy again. This time, Elmo seemed to make the connection. He quickly opened the case and pushed the tin of white face at Tommy.

“Here it is, Boss. H-here it is!”

Tommy frantically rubbed the makeup into his cheeks. It resisted application where tears soaked the skin. I heard a door shut. I looked away from the beleaguered clown toward the sound.

A long black sedan had pulled up in front of the Chrysler. Its doors were open. Two Authority Enforcers clomped toward us in steel and rubber boots. Auto-shotguns twitched nervously in their hands.

“Boss, Boss!” Elmo became frantic. He stabbed at the ignition with the keys, dropped them, then desperately struggled under the wheel to retrieve them. Tommy didn’t even look up. He was busily rubbing makeup into his cheeks. I noticed he was ready to trace on his lips. He repeated over and over.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t a’ dropped him. I’m sorry!” The clown struck his forehead against his knees.

The Enforcers spread out leveling their guns at Tommy and Elmo, and approached the car from opposite sides. I made a desperate attempt to enter Tommy. He was closed to me. The last time I had tried to remove the makeup, I’d been shut out for two days.

One Enforcer, crouching, reached quickly into the car and snatched the gun from Tommy’s belt with one deft motion. He thrust it through his own, then stood there for some seconds either puzzled or amused. He signaled to his partner, who complied by lowering his gun; then the Enforcer did something I’d never seen an Enforcer do. He removed his helmet and facemask. Simple as that.

My emotional roller coaster took another savage turn when I saw the face beneath the helmet was Douglas Willieboy's.

Part Three: That Sleep of Death

Chapter 43

What did Socrates say? Real wisdom is the property of god. Well, I had to agree with him. I liked to think that I had a fairly quick mind; in fact, I tried to make a living by it. But throughout this case or cases I had astounded myself with my lack of foresight. In my defense, I did have the handicap of being a person who couldn't remember his past, and therefore could hardly draw from it. But that's just an excuse, my weak justification. Even my system of 'believe in everything, expect it all,' didn't help.

Douglas Willieboy had long since slipped out of his armor. His partner waited outside. Elmo sat beside Tommy on a heavy brown vinyl couch.

Willieboy paced, frustrated.

After removing his helmet on the street in front of the Mother of God Cathedral, Willieboy had tried to talk to Tommy; but the clown was then as he was now, locked in an autistic trance. Willieboy had been in a rush because after a quick signal to his partner, he climbed into the Chrysler, bulldozing Tommy into the middle. His partner ran ahead to the sedan, turned it around and headed downtown and on toward the docks.

Willieboy had gestured with Tommy's gun for Elmo to follow the sedan. Elmo did. Willieboy hissed at him to hurry—his eyes flashing side to side like wayward comets. Elmo hurried.

I had floated overhead, bemused. By that time I had abandoned trying to make sense of the mess. I had made a couple of half-hearted attempts to possess Tommy. His mind was closed to me, so I gave up, and slipped into an empty somnolence—no, correction, I sulked. Maybe not thinking would help. Maybe nothing would help. Maybe I stopped caring if anything would help. Willieboy didn't care. He remained silent for the rest of the trip tapping at his teeth with a fingertip.

We had followed the sedan along the river for some time until it quickly veered off onto a side street. Willieboy told Elmo to go straight on toward the harbor. We turned away at the docks, and roared along thin streets between great brick warehouses until we came to the Pangton Fisheries building.

It was an enormous pile of bricks that ran on and on away from us.

In front of the Chrysler, a faded mural had stretched across the wide loading bay doors. It depicted a smiling man in hip waders pulling mightily on a fishing rod that was bent like a question mark. A huge salmon with crazy eyes leapt from the water.

I had noticed that some conscientious graffiti artist had added body parts for anatomical correctness. It was obvious in neon orange and blue, that both were well-endowed boys.

I studied the mural as a minute ticked by. Willieboy had grunted impatiently, flashing his eyes at Tommy until the happy fisherman's stream suddenly parted like the Red Sea, the doors squealing aside on rusty tracks.

Elmo drove through without prompting, and came to a halt beneath a vaulted archway of corroded girders. Willieboy had signaled to his partner who was cranking the door shut.

The other Enforcer had nodded back as Willieboy manhandled Tommy out of the car and up a creaking wooden stairway to an office.

Now over an hour had passed. Willieboy paced the room, ranting wildly.

“God damn you, Wildclown. What the fuck is wrong with you? Is it Greaseasy, or what? Syncrak?” He looked desperately at Elmo, back to the clown. “I know you’re pissed, you smell like a fucking whiskey barrel; but I can’t believe anyone can get that fucked up on booze!”

Tommy mumbled something. It was almost a whine. He had drawn his knees up. A string of spittle connected his head to his belly button.

“Fucking loser!” Willieboy punched his fist into his palm. “Fuck!” He kicked a chair. It slid across the floor then dropped like a newborn lamb.

All this time Elmo sat fidgeting in his chair. He had smoked the last of his cigarettes long ago while he silently endured his own interrogation, remaining the proper captured flyer throughout. Name, rank, and serial number—nothing more. It was soon obvious that Elmo awaited orders.

“What the fuck is wrong with your boss?” It was the umpteenth time the question had been asked. This time it connected with Elmo, like he was growing impatient too.

“He gets like that sometimes. All like his mind’s gone or somethin’. I think it’s how he does his *detecting* ‘cause he comes out of it all kind of action. But he takes his own time.” He scratched his head, dubious for a moment. “Course I do remember him comin’ round once, I mean comin’ out’a it a lot quicker-like!”

“How?” Willieboy was open to suggestions.

“Well, it’s kind’a embarrassin’. But, I s-suppose...” Elmo rubbed his thin forearm. “I was waitin’ for him to come ‘round once, and so I w-was just kind’a readin’. Well, it was one of them magazines with the naked people, doin’ it... I guess.” Elmo would have blushed if he were alive. “The phone rang and I sat the magazine down in front of him with this woman’s big old, well ‘you-know-what’ stretched over the two pages. I talked on the phone about two s-seconds, and then the Boss just took it from my hand and started talking. Came right out of his c-condition, he did.”

I remembered the time he was talking about. The picture had been of a large blonde woman straddling a camera lens. I had meant to tell Elmo to use that technique if I ever lapsed again. Another bit of quirky memory.

Willieboy smiled broadly then slapped his knee.

“Of course! It makes sense with this sick clusterfuck!”

He left the office. I listened to his boots on the stairs. Elmo did what he sometimes did when his boss was in a bad way. He reached out and laid his cold hand on Tommy’s.

“Wake up, Boss. Wake up now,” he whispered it in a gentle voice like a mother waking her child for school. “I think we’re in trouble.”

Then Willieboy was back. He had a magazine under his arm. He dropped it on the table in front of Tommy. The cover bore a picture of a gorgeous young woman sucking on her index finger. The skin on the finger had been tattooed to resemble serpent’s scales.

Butt Violence was the title that ran across the top.

Willieboy quickly tore the magazine open to a centerfold of two women wearing the kind of underwear that doesn't cover anything. They were both bent over in living color. The girls appeared to be blithe and uncaring as they played an impromptu game of hide the weasel.

The inevitably silly caption read:

Natalie knew that they were playing for keeps and called her pretty opponent's bluff. But Cindy was ready to meet the challenge and made the move to sweeten the pot.

I could see Tommy's almost immediate arousal flickering beneath the surface of his skull. He had a thing about animals. I began to broadcast old images of *Lassie, the uncut version*, and in a second was in the driver's seat. I looked up at Willieboy, then winced. I had stiffened up during the intervening hours of inactivity. I grimaced.

"Makeup." My voice was dead and dry. I shrugged my shoulder as I waited, felt the ghost of a drill bit in the bone and I shivered involuntarily.

Elmo had brought the case along. Relieved, he quickly snapped it open and handed it to me. There was a compact mirror at the bottom. Tommy had managed to apply a ghostlike foundation of white before slipping into his coma. I finished drawing on the eyes.

"Shit, you're about the weirdest goddamned son-of-a-bitch I ever met, Wildclown. I should've known *Butt Violence* would get you going." He shook his head and set his chair upright—dropped into it. A large paw rummaged in his jumpsuit pocket and produced a crushed pack of cigarettes. He tossed one to Elmo, and then offered the pack to me. I took one and held it between my lips.

I was at a difficult point in the application. The pupils were the tough part. I had to close each eye as I applied them. One trembling finger and the job would be a mess.

"Come on, goddamn it! You look fine. Shit!" Willieboy puffed heartily on his cigarette. "I can't believe you! You're worse than a woman with that goddamn shit!" He stood up and began pacing again; his heavy boots tore at the floor. His leather, steel and rubber jumpsuit creaked. "Oh come on!"

"Go plant a garden..." I mumbled around my dead cigarette. Finished, I put the mirror and makeup away, clicked the case shut, and set it on the floor. I gestured to Elmo, pointed at my cigarette, he lit it and I leaned back taking a long hard drag. Willieboy walked back and forth, his cigarette a cancerous will o'the wisp.

"Any whiskey?" I asked, smiling around my smoke.

"Fuck you're just coming out of it...Ah!" Willieboy restrained himself, then went over and rummaged in a faded veneer cupboard. He turned around with a dusty bottle of Canadian Club and three glasses. I looked at the dust on the bottle, ran a finger over it, and frowned at the gray on my fingertip as he poured.

"I'd say you haven't been treating this whiskey right, Mr. Willieboy." I smiled again, and drank the glass offered me.

Willieboy sat down, drank his own, and then topped mine up. Elmo sipped at his. The whiskey sprinted into my veins. I took the initiative.

"I suppose it would be awfully insensitive of me not to mention the faded prison fatigues you were wearing that night at the Morocco Hotel. Nice touch."

"Good eye, Wildclown. Glad you appreciated it." Willieboy folded his hands over his knee.

“Let me see,” I said, making a steeple of my fingers the way Sherlock Holmes would. “You are not an outlaw; but you do work outside the law. Robin Hood, shall we say?”

“No, not Robin Hood. I ain’t giving no money to no one that didn’t earn it. I just work outside *their* law.” Willieboy’s grin was unconvincing.

“Whose law?” I could feel my senses perking up.

“There are powerful groups inside Authority that follow their own agendas.” He let me have it with the eye sockets; they darkened as he squinted around the serious statement.

I dropped my hands and gazed at my boots through cigarette smoke. They were miles away. “I’ll take a stab. You’re Inspector Borden.”

“Yes I am.” Willieboy smiled in an unfriendly way and my mind went to work tying that into the web.

Chapter 44

“Willieboy’s just a cover name,” I grumbled, glowering at him over a fresh drink. He hadn’t moved. “I should have known. It’s just stupid enough to be believed.”

“I wanted to use a name that would inspire compassion.” He grinned angrily.

“Your face would have done that,” I snarled.

“But you should know,” Willieboy said sourly. “There’s more than one Inspector Borden.”

“More than one.” I was interested, but tried to be coy. “Nepotism?”

“It’s a nickname we have for a posting in Authority. It’s reserved for injured workers, and bad inspectors go there for punishment. We collect shit on the phantom baby, stuff like that.” He smirked. “It’s a play on Inspector Boredom.”

“What else do you collect?” I leveled my gaze. My head still thumped alarmingly.

“Records, man! Things about the baby, UFO’s, ghosts, you know, the odd missing person. But mostly weird stuff—anything that might be connected to the Change.” He shook his head. “Authority doesn’t know what it is—why there’s dead people walking around and that—so we collect and record every bit of unusual information that we hear.”

“So there are other Inspector Bordens?”

“Lots, maybe a hundred, I don’t know. I just found it a convenient dodge.”

I barely heard his last sentence. I was imagining a hundred Inspector Bordens, and myself trying to find out how many of them were involved.

“Let’s not waste time with your real name, Inspector Willieboy. I’ll just fire away like we’re old friends. Why were you working undercover at the Morocco?” I paused watching him. “Say you’re a rogue inspector fighting a corrupt system, and I’ll vomit.”

Willieboy frowned. “A maverick inspector, then.” He climbed from his chair to pace again. “There’s a lot of things going on that run against the original mandate of Authority. What you and I call *Authority* started to form five years after the Change from existing government and privately run agencies. Its original name was *Social Authority*. Anyway, we were kind of a police force designed to handle it all. No one knew what the Change was, or how long it would last. ‘*To maintain a social direction,*’ it says that right in our handbook or charter or whatever.

“You got to remember, everyone was scared back then. Nobody knew what was happening. I think the first steps to creating Authority were taken by the FBI and the CIA, although Interpol and the U.N. got involved because Authority is present in some form or other in every country in the world now. Anyway, it was decided that the *social direction* would be one with an open-ended policy of discovery. Since no one knew what the hell had happened we couldn’t wisely take any specific direction. And there were a whole lot of powerful Christians in government going bugaboo about the Second Coming. They didn’t know whether to shit or go blind. So, *discovery* was a safe bet.

“With law enforcement agencies privatizing at the start of the new Millennium we conscripted our first people there. Then for a while Authority competed with the government-run coppers. Remember the dead riots? Human rights conscious civil servants couldn’t cut the mustard any more. A heavier hand was needed if civilization was going to survive the panic. So Authority started absorbing government police forces too.

“As time passed, control of Authority was shifted to the civilly elected directorate boards that were created not long after the country fragmented—say fifteen years after the Change, when the dead took over the countryside and forced us all into city states. The Federal government had to change with the times and the politicians and lawmakers saw that to keep a hook in the action, they had to streamline the process of *Social Authority* being adopted by all political and legislative branches of government. The directorate boards were created using representatives from the old system to administer government on federal, regional and local levels.”

“Same shit. Different pile,” I said, pleased with the history lesson.

“Government in the old world was simple: get elected, cover your ass and go for your pension. Same thing applied to the new directors only now, with the populace spooked, they only had to offer protection and reassurance. Nobody blinked an eye when Martial Law was unofficially declared. Thirty-five years into it, democratic elections were taken over by Authority’s public relations wing, and the rest is history—the higher-ups just started making appointments from the ranks.”

He clasped his hands over his stomach.

“We’re in the process of soaking in the air force, army and navy on the Federal level. There’s a movement on to re-unite the surviving cities under a single flag—a single Authority. Same thing’s going on all over the world: *maintain a social direction*. If Authority exists then people have something to rally around and something to fear. The result: *order*.”

“Good for business,” I mumbled in my most cynical tone.

“That’s what it’s all about.” Willieboy crushed his cigarette, sat down, poured himself another drink and then topped mine up again. He lit another cigarette, gestured for me to take one from the pack where he threw it. His level of literacy improved as he talked.

“As time goes on, society’s getting crazier and Authority’s growing more powerful. Since the men and women that make up the directorate board come from the old system: lobby groups, congressmen, senators and hangers-on, they just adapt their routines to the Change—and with the appointments from Authority ranks—well, people are getting really entrenched.

“And since everyone is suddenly immortal—you can imagine! There’s plenty of opportunity for old wounds to fester, and for special interest groups to grow within

Authority—who am I kidding, they were there already. Now we have pressure tactics, protection rackets—that kind of thing springing up—nothing new.”

“And you’re one of the select few committed to the original ideals of the bold and brave drafters of the Social Authority mandate. I don’t buy it.” It was my turn to stand and pace a little. My head throbbed immediately, so I leaned against a desk along the far wall. It groaned, but held my weight.

“Fuck, you’re a cynic, Wildclown.” Willieboy turned in his chair. “That’s not it at all. I work for one of the groups inside Authority. But we’re on the level—you know, we’re not into any of this religious shit, or just violence for the fun of it. We’re straight money people. I’m not alone, and I’m not pure. We’ll put pressure on a bad loan, you know, lean on troublemakers; but we don’t grind people up. There’s no profit in that.”

“Who does?” I rubbed smoke from my eye.

“Hard to say. There are a lot of groups big and small. There’s even a bunch of ex-cops and law enforcement agents trying to clean things up. Some of the worst are the religious groups. They haven’t handled the Change well, you know. But look out for the King’s Men. They work for the King of the Dead. You probably heard of him—William King? He was about a hundred-year-old Senator when he died, and his death was violent, so what’s left of him ain’t pretty. But he’s become a powerbroker to be reckoned with. And he hires any Authority Enforcers or Inspectors who get killed in the line of duty, so he’s growing a nice little army let me tell you—and he’s connected, all those dead inspectors got friends.

“Anyway, we didn’t care about his operation—nobody did. Everything he did was involved with afterlife stuff—skin-stretchers. He does some smuggling, illegal drug sales. But he stayed on his own turf. That’s the only rule we follow. *Stay on your own turf*. And he was dead, and dead guys only go so far. They aren’t the same as us.”

“He didn’t see it that way.” My sarcasm was obvious.

“Hard to say.” Willieboy looked evasive.

“You were at the Morocco because of Cotton not Billings. *Regenerics*?” My face fell, I’m sure I heard it hit the floor. “You took up a position in the lobby, and hoped for the answer to walk through the door. You did your desk clerk act, and all that talk about Van Reynder was so much smoke.”

“No.” He looked at me gravely. “I gave you the story we got from the real desk clerk. Lucky little bastard said he got into her panties, too. Anyway, since Authority is so broken up inside, well any case with clout is over-investigated. Everybody gets a look to see if it matters to him. My group, let’s call them the *Businessmen*, had a special interest in this one.”

“You moved in fast... didn’t the other groups get wise? Someone would have recognized you.”

“Authority is big, and I don’t always look like this.” He waved a hand across his face.

“Cotton was hiding at the Morocco.” The whiskey was taming my pain. “He had something for you.”

Willieboy leaned back. “Yeah, and whoever whacked Billings was the only witness to Cotton’s murder. Billings was in Blacktime when it happened.” He paused. “About a couple weeks before the murders we started getting calls from a guy who said he needed protection. Well, he called a lot of people since every phone at HQ is tapped, so everyone

inside perked up. He said he needed protection for a valuable item but didn't know who to trust. I guess most educated people approach Authority with caution."

He shrugged. "In one of his last calls he said he created *Regenerics*. Said he'd share the spoils if someone would help him out.

"Well the Businessmen have tech people and they laid it all out for us. If this thing worked there would be plenty of folding money for all, right? We had to get it onto our turf though. If it was right—if it worked, well we knew we were talking billions. So we wanted to try to bring the guy in.

"Records showed us that Cotton was the leading authority on *Regenerics* and he worked in town for King Industries so we knew we were going to have some trouble. Not our turf right? But when we finally put a plan together to grab him he was gone. That night he calls us says he needs protection. And there it ended." Willieboy fell silent, studying his nails. "He's dead the next day."

"How the hell did *I* figure into it?" I grabbed another cigarette. "You must have linked the two murders."

"You've got to remember. Everybody in Authority is on a special team, and each team watches the next team. And the Businessmen are not a very powerful team, *yet*. Anyway, there was a ban on investigation of the Cotton murder that came down the chain so anything we wanted we had to get without drawing attention. The smaller groups, we can still get a shit kicking. I put Billings onto you because you can work autonomously. You were unconnected and expendable. Anyway, if I got you working, I could begin to find out who had killed Cotton. The link was obvious."

I smiled. "I beat the bushes; you shoot anything I scare into the air. Why not just tell me about Cotton? You knew he was dead, but you let me go after Billings' killer."

"Let's face it. I knew about Cotton, and from that it was easy to put the two murders together. I thought you were a down and outer, but with you out snooping around I knew you'd draw attention away from me. The fact that you actually cleaned up the Billings case surprised me." Willieboy leveled his gaze at my wounds. "Who worked you over?"

"My girlfriend. Listen, you haven't explained why you would let me solve the Billings case, and then just sit back on my ass." I was annoyed. It wasn't nice to find I'd been somebody's tool.

"You solved it but you didn't produce Adrian *or* Van Reydner. We needed *them*." Willieboy stared. "I hoped you'd find something that would lead you into the Cotton murder, but the fire and news gags from our leaders, the Primes, kind of fucked everything up. We all know that the Primes just take orders from the biggest groups anyway and so we knew the King didn't want anyone else finding what Cotton lost—so he pulled strings, right? You didn't know about the other murder because the story was suppressed. That made it hard for you to find Adrian or Van Reydner. You thought it was over—then you disappeared."

A sheepish grin bent the scar on his face.

"I didn't think Adrian would try to snuff you—must be your personality. He pretty much gave away his hand with that. Whatever he heard, or picked up that night must be worth a lot. When you disappeared I figured he got you." He smiled around a new cigarette. "Now, answer *my* questions. There is an avalanche getting ready to fall on your head. And a lot of nasty people are looking at you right now. I'm pretty sure you're

investigating Cotton. I want to know who you're working for and what you've dug up. It's the only way I can keep you alive."

I looked into Willieboy's eyes and tried to imagine any compassion residing behind them.

I shook my head.

"Then you're dead," he leaned forward hissing. "You're dead."

I could feel Elmo tense beside me.

"Then I'm dead," I said with as much nonchalance as I could muster.

Chapter 45

Willieboy made claws out of his hands, and then wedged them between his knees. His eyelids fluttered with mock compassion.

"I'm just a lowly bush beater. Any tigers and the clown gets it." I tried to change the topic.

"You already said I was expendable." I straightened. "The fire at the Morocco makes more sense. If one of your teams didn't want the murders investigated, they'd just torch it. Do you have any idea who ordered that?"

"No." Willieboy leaned back in his chair, apparently willing to wait for his report.

"How long have you been following me?"

"A long time." Willieboy was reluctant to let that cat out of the bag. He studied his nails. "Shit, we lost you in the landfill. A couple of the boys I'd sent to tail you to Simpson's fucking lost you in the fog."

"I talked to Cane."

"Oh, don't worry about Cane! He wouldn't tell us anything. He's got his own deal going on the inside."

"When did you pick me up again?"

"Not long after you got back..." His eyes were earnest.

"You made the call... put me onto Cotton."

"When the time was right, yeah. I didn't think you'd give up like that."

"I guess I wasn't doing my job," I said this absently. I saw all the threads of intrigue winding themselves into a noose. Would I put my head through it?

"The note for the warehouse—Cotton's laboratory. I assume you left that for me." I watched Willieboy nod. "If Cotton died at the Morocco...why was his lab torched?"

"It's the King," said Willieboy. "Or his people. Someone was trying to provide convincing answers. There's a lot of money at stake. Fewer questions the better."

"You lost me again last night." My shoulder had begun to throb.

"One of our boys must have been sleeping, or scarfing around with some whore. Shit, you live in a rough neighborhood. This morning we spotted your friend," he said, gesturing at Elmo, "and followed him to the church. We were outside for about half an hour."

I tried to count the facts he didn't know. The only thing I knew for sure was he probably didn't know about the missing detective, Owen Grey, or Van Reydner's note for me to meet her at the Arizona. I realized the Handyman and his partner were members of the Twelve Stars Group—so they must have had a team working in Authority, but how

big were they? I conjured up the picture of the odd charm I'd seen on the Handyman's wrist, and on the thin arm of Adrian's secretary.

"Who killed Cotton?" I gave Willieboy my serious face.

"I don't know and he couldn't tell us. When we talked to Billings, he was no help because he was in Blacktime while Cotton was getting murdered. There was a lot of activity revolving around Billings so we couldn't give a real search for Cotton without attracting attention. We finally found what was left of him out back, but by then, all the groups had boots on the ground and we had to play by the rules or take the shadows."

I stared at Willieboy hard, trying to detect any subterfuge. I had to admit the scar over his lip was an imposing characteristic. That married to his black eyes made him unreadable.

"So, here we are."

"Here we are. And you're playing hero." Willieboy let out a cloud of smoke. "I just wanted to get hold of you and look you in the eyes while you can still look back. You've pissed off Inspector Cane. He's a bad fucker who will kill you if he takes it into his mind to do it. I don't know what his beef is, but he has an 'all points' out on you. He says detain at all costs. Which means he'll question you when you're dead if he has to. He's going ballistic, so he must have a pretty big gun to the back of his head. When we heard a call on the radio ordering five cars to the Mother of Christ Cathedral to apprehend a known felon we stepped in. Lucky we were there."

"You might take me for a sap, but I know you must have something to gain by this."

"Regenerics." Willieboy's face drew into a serious set of lines. "And listen, I'm the closest thing to justice there is in Greasetown. If you can trust anyone, it's me. I just want business-as-usual. People start getting cut up, and it's no fun any more. I genuinely believe you're unconnected. Christ, the way you've bungled through all this attests to that. But since you're unconnected you're free to operate. I've still got to work with some of these boys so I don't want to push from my end...and as I said we stand to make loads of cash, if Cotton's Regenerics is real and it works. We tossed his room at the Morocco and came up empty. Whatever he needed protection for was gone. Someone has it."

"By what you say, no one in Authority does." I was still trying to read Willieboy.

"Van Reydner's the only person who was there that night who hasn't turned up dead. I figure the people that mangled Cotton were at the hotel to get the Regenerics secret, too. They must have been some pissed off when he didn't have it."

"And then Adrian suffers a similar fate to Cotton's. Look you want to help me, tell me who the King's Men are. Who does Cane belong to?" I didn't want to give anything away.

"With the King's Men, you never know. He's got people in so deep that you never recognize them till they're pulling your liver out. Just avoid the King if you can."

Willieboy's eyes wavered. "And Cane, he's with Twelve Stars."

"Twelve Stars..." I echoed, then looked away. "You'll be watching me, won't you?"

"Oh yeah. But I'll be wearing a helmet. There's a Hell of a lot of attention coming your way and I don't want to catch any shrapnel." The scar across his cheeks blazed crimson. "See it doesn't kill you."

"Can I have my gun?" I held my hand out.

“Yeah. I’d sleep with the fucker if I were you.” He retrieved it from the pile made by his armor. “I wouldn’t go home. And I’d take that makeup off. Fuck, you stand out like a sore thumb.”

“That’s funny, did you make that up—that thing about the thumb?” I slipped the gun through my belt. “I’m not going home, but I’ll be damned if I’ll give you directions. We’ll see if your operatives can keep up with me for a change. I don’t want to make it too easy for you.”

“You’re an asshole!” Willieboy sneered.

“Yes.” I gestured to Elmo and we left Willieboy in the office. His partner let us out and we drove down toward the dock. I watched for a tail. None. Of course, there had been no trace of them before.

“Where to, Boss?” Elmo worked the wheel.

“I feel crazy today, Fatso. Let’s go buy ourselves a new car.” I settled into my seat. I knew a couple of things. I had momentarily entertained the notion that Cotton had information to give out. But, by the sound of it, Regenerics was fairly common knowledge in the scientific community. The only reason I could figure they cut Cotton to pieces was to keep him quiet after the fact. Regenerics was already out of the bag, so whatever Cotton’s secret was, it was related to *but not the science*.

I sighed, and thought of Van Reydner’s steamy eyes. I had to find her.

I stared blankly out the window at the passing buildings. I stopped blinking my eyes, and the city turned to a blur. I rubbed my chest feeling old and tired. That finger of doom had suddenly appeared and it was pointed right at me.

Chapter 46

I was in a hallway in a rundown building in Gritburg. Elmo waited outside in our new car. It was a rusty remake of the Chrysler 2000, long lost cousin to our deceased Newport; it was also a wreck but it had only cost two hundred dollars. I had to use up a good deal of my savings and got nothing on the trade in. The old car had been so riddled with bullet holes you could have used it to grate cheese. I was certain the new car was stolen.

I had to call in an old debt to get one that Willieboy couldn’t trace. I knew a back alley machinist who worked over boosted cars. Saul Wise. I had snapped pictures of his wife humping their dentist, doctor, and a young kid in an alleyway. Funny thing about Saul: he didn’t get mad, just excited as he put the photos away for later viewing. He also didn’t pay me all he owed. That was how I got a good deal on the car. Elmo finally shook anyone who might be tailing us with a white-knuckle turn on the far side of a streetcar.

The new Chrysler performed well for a wreck.

Elmo was downstairs admiring it, while I waited inside for a blind superintendent to open the door to an office. I wore my clown outfit, but had managed to disguise myself somewhat with a compromise of fedora and a long gray overcoat that I had picked up at the Salvation Army. The time was about six o’clock. The streetlights had just buzzed to life.

It was Friday. The weekend had arrived. Those who could afford it would be whisking away from town on bullet trains to their cottages in the north—all nine of them. Authority maintained special animal-free preserves for such purposes.

“Joost a minoot!” the little fat blind man said. He was bent over at the lock clicking his tongue and working his way through an enormous ring of keys. I looked down at the back of his head in an eerie half-light from a dim bulb over the stairs.

His hair was slicked back with a concoction that smelled of axle grease, lard and rosehips. I tried breathing through my mouth but found I could taste it.

“Der, der, der, der—ah!” That had become his mantra. He had only got my spirits up the first ten times he had said it. This was the fifteenth.

“Maybe you could put a light bulb out here,” I said impatiently. “You might not be blind after all.”

“Joost a minoot!” More jangling. “Der, der, der, der—ah!”

I steadied my temper by running a finger over the lettering on the door. It was painted in plain script in an arch. *Owen Grey Private Investigations*.

I’d found Grey’s office number in a phone book at a drugstore where Elmo had dropped me off to eat. Simple as that. He worked at 299 Gritburg in the Horowitz building. I called the number. The phone rang and rang.

I called the superintendent of the building, the same fellow who was saying, “Der, der, der, der—ah!” again.

He had been all but unintelligible on the phone, but I did make out that an Owen Grey rented an office in the Horowitz building. I hadn’t been able to find a place of residence for Grey. I’d have to take a trip to the hall of records when I decided it warranted the risk of being so exposed.

I’d gone into the superintendent’s office and quickly bribed him with twenty dollars. When I told him I was a detective, he got all secret agent-like, lowered his head and hunched his shoulders. He slinked around the office. I half-expected him to turn his collar up. Apparently he observed some unwritten detective brotherhood because he seemed quite willing to help.

Boredom probably and life after the Change made too many demands upon sanity to allow long periods of introspection. I assumed that the isolation had already pushed him over the edge. Judging from his demeanor and his appearance, I guessed he had not been visited by a living human—or a dead one for that matter—for months, just renters, all business or avoidance. He had not laid eyes on Grey in two years.

“Der, der, der, der—Ah ha!” he cried, and the door swung open. He gestured with a broad hand. “Der, now as simple as dat! You take a look around, Mizter Wiltclown. I weel be beck at my offiss.”

“Yeah, simple as that.” I nodded my thanks, then entered. The waiting room stank of neglect. The carpet had that slightly sticky feel of one that had long gone without a cleaning. Mold and dust. A lengthy wooden bench stretched along one wall. A small coffee table stood in front of it with a number of old magazines. I glanced at their dates. Two years old—January of ‘48. Across from me was an inner door. I walked to it, grabbed the brass knob and entered.

I found a small office inside. Everything was covered with dust. Three black filing cabinets lined one wall like senators at a photo opportunity. A large desk sat before a

window shuttered with blinds. An empty ashtray had been placed on it to the left beneath a lamp.

I crossed to the desk and snapped the light on. Nothing. I grabbed the cord. It came free. I crawled behind the desk at an awkward angle and jammed the plug in. The light came on. I stood up. A large well-padded leather chair sat behind the desk. I ignored it and pulled on the first filing cabinet drawer I came to.

It was unlocked and empty. I tried the next drawer. Empty as well. I knew it would be. The fact that the lamp cord was pulled out told me that. No one in his right mind would plug the thing in more than once. The place had been frisked, that was obvious. And whoever had done it had said the hell with the lamp cord. Everything else had been put away nicely.

The files were taken. That told me that whoever searched the room had done so without authorization from the higher-ups and had to do the methodical investigation of the case files somewhere else.

I tried the other drawers. Nothing. I sauntered over to the desk and dropped into the chair.

The action was answered by a distinctive crushed clink of broken glass. I reached into the crack between the cushion and the arm with my right hand, and cut the first and second fingers. Someone hadn't cleaned up completely. Sucking blood from the wound, I detected the slightest smell of whiskey. The glass ground beneath me.

I pulled open the top drawer and found it empty. There was a deep, broad one on my right. I pulled that open. A dark brown bottle of whiskey rolled into the light. I smiled at it. *Old friend*. I grabbed it and set it on the desk in front of me. It was about quarter-full. I read Canadian Club beneath my bloody fingerprints.

I took a handkerchief from my overcoat and bound it. Not a bad cut, but it would be messy for a while. I grabbed the bottle, twisted the top off, sniffed, then upended and drank half of it. The whiskey burned my throat, but I loved the sensation. I belched absentmindedly, then crossed and uncrossed my legs, rolling the bottle around in my lap.

I studied the office and wondered what had happened to Grey. There were no plaques or diplomas on the walls. The two pictures were of a mallard duck and the other a pair of Canada Geese. So he liked his wildfowl, maybe a hunter in the good old days when you could shoot a duck without being murdered by the flock.

Then I had a strange sensation—a powerful feeling of familiarity. Things seemed a little pat, too predictable. Grey's was very much like my own office. But I was a detective. He was a detective. Our offices were decorated in Detective style. All function and mold.

I lifted the bottle and drained it. My belly started burning at the last gulp.

I lowered the bottle, but noticed a silhouette of something through the brown glass. I peered in, then flipped the bottle. In the slight depression on the bottom, there was a small neatly folded envelope. It had been flattened thoroughly and taped into the recess. I suppressed a grin; I repressed a Eureka! I congratulated my boozehound's nose.

First I licked any remaining blood from my fingers and then dried them on the leg of my coverall. I flicked the tape loose with a fingernail and pulled the envelope free. I set the bottle down and moved my chair close under the light.

Gingerly, I pulled the envelope apart. A key fell onto the desk blotter with a muffled rattle. I picked it up. It was a key to a locker. Someone had stamped 'Greasetown Transit' on it.

The terminal was not far off. I would go there.

Chapter 47

A bus with a 'Dead Only' sign over its door roared away from the terminal. I saw a collection of dead faces looking out through the flyspecked windows. The air was thick with exhaust fumes, the smell of oil, and people. The great roofed-in departure area was sour with the scents of travel.

I had no idea where a bus full of dead people would be going, but they still managed to conjure up the hopeful, worried, anxious expressions of travelers. Probably going down the coast to Vicetown: gambling, roller coasters and prostitutes. A huge carnival for the kids when there were kids.

A wheezing transit bus pulled up and disgorged its passengers onto the dirty cement ramp that ran around the terminal. A collection of bodies living and dead moved in a pulsing mass to the stairs and down toward the subway.

The practical considerations of mass transit negated notions like prejudice and intolerance at least until everybody got home. I mused over the idea of a vacation as I walked into the main terminal. Heavy glass doors just managed to keep the breathable air inside. I headed toward a long bank of lockers, big and small. My key said 'A21.' I found the group of lockers in the 'A' section. They were an enameled orange.

I rattled the doors with my fingertip as I walked along underlining the numbers: 18, 19, 20, and 21. The door was just like all the others. There was no 'X' marked on it in red paint.

The key fit perfectly. It was a little sticky but turned eventually. I paused, resisted the temptation to draw a hopeful breath then opened the door.

A musty scent. On the locker's one shelf was a book. A thin leather-backed journal. I snatched it up, shut the door and walked quickly back to the car.

Elmo's eyes were hopeful.

"Back to Grey's office," I said, hugging the tome with all the answers to my chest.

Chapter 48

The superintendent had been obliging this second time. He only charged me ten bucks admission. I asked him who paid the rent for Grey. He said he assumed it was Grey since he had received a series of money orders in the mail without a return address—just a note saying *Owen Grey's rent*, but that it had been paid up for two years. He told me he didn't keep the notes before I could ask to see them.

The rent was due, and the superintendent wondered when more money orders would arrive. He showed me a stack of flyers and bills that the post office had been delivering to Grey's office. I took a quick look through the envelopes, and found only creditors: a gun shop, a bill from a grocery store.

I smiled at the superintendent and told him not to worry. I went up to the office. Elmo came with me this time. My dead gungel looked around wide-eyed before remarking, “Just like home.”

I walked to the couch and lifted a cushion. A hide-a-bed. I pulled it out. Musty blankets and mattress. I turned down the covers and found a few dark spiral hairs, nothing more. I glanced at the coat rack. There were a handful of wire hangers—empty.

I surmised that Grey lived at the office. The fact that there were no clothes piled up anywhere gave me hope that he was still alive. He may have run.

I asked Elmo to wait in the outer room and keep an eye open for trouble. He was engrossed in an old magazine when I left him.

I had a pint of whiskey, and a couple of sandwiches in front of me. I’d dusted off the ink blotter to use as a place mat then bent the lamp over and set the journal down in front of me. Biting into a sandwich I paused.

Tommy hadn’t protested at all. I had been in possession of his body for a full day and he had not complained. I shrugged, and then yawned. It was about eight. I had to make sure he got some rest. The beating the Handyman had given me still told; but the absence of bacteria did wonders for my recovery time. It was another of the few benefits of the Change.

The bacterial extinction centered on the types that caused infection and rot, while miraculously allowing the survival of species that produced alcohol. Maybe it was proof there was a God—if I were God I would have worked it that way.

Regardless it left me mainly tight muscles and tenderness. I’m sure my shoulder could have used a couple of stitches but I didn’t have the time. And whoever had worked me over might be keeping tabs on Greasetown’s hospitals.

To work. I opened the journal. The first page was covered with handwriting. It was in blue ink in a strong hand.

February nine, ‘48. Received phone call from Mr. Wilson and Mrs. Helen Hawksbridge. I talked to Mr. Hawksbridge. He sounded worried. Told me they had to see me. Needed my help. I told them to come over.

They arrived at ten p.m. Mr. Hawksbridge a real stuffed shirt. Mrs. Hawksbridge a fine looking piece of womanhood. Too young for the old guy. Might be plastic surgery. Both felt out of place in my neighborhood. Made sure I knew it.

They want me to look for their daughter: Julie Hawksbridge. She is 25 pre-Change age. Blonde hair, blue eyes. Disappeared two weeks ago. Authority won’t take them seriously. She is old enough to get lost if she wants.

I took the job.

They went quiet. Then the woman spoke. She said Julie is pregnant. I try not to laugh.

I go along with them and ask about the father. She has boyfriend, Victor Davis. They gave me his phone number: 555-1536

She has been pregnant before. All miscarriages. They gave me photo of girl.

Very pretty.

I dropped my sandwich and riffled through the journal’s pages. No photo. I quickly realized Grey would have carried it with him if he were trying to identify her.

February 10, ‘48. Talked to Inspector Borden. He is not interested in my questions. None of my business. Prick. He works in records at Authority HQ.

Same day. Tried calling Victor Davis. Number disconnected. Nothing in phonebook or information.

Same day. Followed home. Dark car. Drove off when I approached it. Talked to John Harker. Reporter-Greasetown Gazette. Let me see files on phantom baby. A lot of wild rumor. Strange calls. Nothing specific on pregnant women.

Same day. Talked to Dr. Arthur Klingspon. I did double-check on baby problem. Assured me, many women have hysterical pregnancies. Knows of no genuine cases since the Great Stillbirth.

Same day, talked to Dr. A. Forrester. Hawksbridge family doctor. Tall, thin bird—all arms and legs like half a spider. Said Julie had miscarriages. I told him about Dr. Klingspon and half medical profession. His answer: I know what I know. No evidence. Probably a flake.

Same day, spotted Authority Inspector in doorway across street. He ran when I approached. I didn't recognize him.

February 11, '48. Talked to John Harker again. Said no new reports on babies. Thinks I'm an asshole. Probably right. Said I should talk to someone in Twelve Stars Group—they're baby crazy.

February 13, '48. Talked to Ingrid Hloren. She is mistress in Twelve Stars. Crazy as a bedbug. Said they are waiting for Him. Unsure which Him. That would be Him up or Him down. They expect the Him 'up.' Will come soon, will be baby. They call him the fifth horseman.

February 15, '48. Got a call. Voice said to stay out of it. Did not say what 'it' was. Also followed to office. Tall man in coat and hat. No positive I.D. Took off in car when I approached. Got another call. Wouldn't say who it was. Just told me to drop case. Prick.

Same day. Hawksbridges called. How things going? I asked them if they knew the whereabouts of Julie's boyfriend. They hadn't heard from him. Didn't like him.

Same day. The King called. Said he had had enough. Prick.

Same day. Friend in Authority comes up empty on Victor Davis.

February 16, '48. Went to Davis' apartment. Empty. Been stripped. Just walls and tile. Landlord says rent's been paid up with money orders.

Same day. Got a call. Same guy as before. Said I'd be dead if I continued. Prick.

Same day. Called again. Repeated threat. Prick.

February 17, '48. Saw John Harker. Have to let him in. It's getting too hot. Followed again. I know how this works. Have to get out of town. Will talk to the Hawksbridges before.

I set the journal down. That was it. The rest of the pages were blank. My whiskey was half gone. It felt like it was half gone. I had managed to stumble onto the same case Grey had been on—or part of it. But why hide the journal? There was nothing ground breaking in it. Unless he wanted to leave town, and hid it where he knew it would be safe and easy to retrieve on his way out. Which meant he didn't get out of town. And he mentioned a friend in Authority. Maybe it was for him.

I called the operator and asked for a number for Wilson Hawksbridge at a New Garden address. I had it in minutes. The phone rang with a far off rattle. A couple of *bonk-bonk* sounds and someone answered it.

"Hello, Hawksbridge residence."

“Hello, I’d like to speak to Wilson or Helen Hawksbridge.”

A pause. “That will be quite impossible. Who is speaking please.”

I froze a moment and then lied. “Owen Grey. I work for them.”

It was his turn to pause. “Mr. Grey. *The detective*. Really, well I assumed you had finished your employment with the Hawksbridges.”

“Still tidying up a few loose ends.” I rubbed Grey’s journal for luck.

“Well, I’m surprised you haven’t been informed. I certainly should think you would know. The Hawksbridges are deceased. They passed away in a terrible car accident. Oh, it must be two years ago. There was a fire—nothing left. It was all quite tragic.” He paused. “Wait now... Yes, I’m sure of it. They were on their way to meet you. That’s it, yes. You called and told them you had information about Julie. I’m surprised you don’t know. Authority said it would have to speak with you. I talked to them myself. I gave them your number. Miss Hawksbridge’s brother is here. I’m sure he’d be pleased to hear news about his sister. Have you found her?”

“Actually, I’d like to speak to Mr. Hawksbridge.”

“Of course, I will bring him to the phone.”

Another *bonk-bonk* as he put the phone down. I imagined a pink marble table with angels carved into its legs. Their little wings would be beating frantically. They had to keep the tabletop level otherwise the bowl of glass fruit in the center would go toppling.

Heels clicked on a polished floor.

I immediately suspected that the Hawksbridges were victims of foul play.

Through the receiver, I heard a number of footsteps approaching.

Bonk-bonk and:

“Hello Mr. Grey, I’m Robert Hawksbridge. I understand you were employed by my poor parents.” The deep voice of Robert Hawksbridge was full of curiosity.

“Yes, well. To be honest, I’m Wildclown, also a detective. I’m investigating a related case, and would like any information you could give me. Can I drop around to talk to you?”

A pause, then. “What was the name again?”

I gave it.

“Wildclown? That’s an interesting name. Is it European?”

“Yes,” I drawled, “Bulgarian.” That sank in a moment before I continued: “Would it be all right if I came by to ask those questions?”

“Certainly Mr. Wildclown. Drop around tomorrow afternoon—say two o’clock. I’ve always been curious about the way things turned out. I’ll make certain I have no appointments.”

“Thank you. And your address?” I jotted it down, hung up the phone. A vision of a well-heeled, but decent enough couple burning alive in a car passed before my eyes.

More bodies. I grabbed up the journal and tore through its pages.

There it was:

The King called. Said he had had enough. Prick.

The King called. And I was supposed to avoid him. He was going to make it impossible if his name kept cropping up.

I was beginning to wish I’d never met Conrad Billings.

Chapter 49

Getting into the New Garden District was easy. Getting out was another matter. There were no roadblocks, and business there depended on the rest of Greasetown's inhabitants so people were free to visit. You just had to be sure you were there on business and that you behaved.

Authority transports and sedans patrolled every street, so there was little chance of someone getting in for long and staying who didn't have a legitimate reason for being there.

There were stories about people, troublemakers entering New Garden, who had been made examples of by Authority, and who either returned in body casts or didn't return at all.

Elmo had been only mildly reluctant to come, since it was well known that New Garden's citizens had no use for the dead. They were only allowed entry in the company of a living sponsor, and it was illegal for them to be on its streets past midnight.

An old-style cop in blue uniform with red pin-striping, heavy black granite shoes, shining steel buzzer, high-peaked hat and mirrored sunglasses met Elmo and me as we pulled up to the gate to Arcadia, an upscale New Garden residential complex.

The security man had one of those large, veiny noses that had snuffled around the tops of one too many whiskey bottles. He was harsh and angular in form, had gray hair to match the pallor in his cheeks and stood with a certain rugged confidence that told anyone approaching that not only did he know how to use the large gun at his hip, he liked to.

He wandered out in front of the Chrysler with a meaty hand raised. The gates behind him were heavy with intricate ironwork. Depicted in hard black curls were two happy people, man and woman, smiling as they stroked a reclining lamb and a lying tiger. Flowers and blowing trees grew all around them as they blithely enjoyed their pets. A part of me longed to see the tiger rise up and eat them.

"Hello," I said to the guard's belly. It had appeared at the window over Elmo's shoulder.

The guard bent low. He looked at Elmo first, stared at my partner with his mirrors until the dead man trembled. When my happy reflection appeared in the glass, I knew he was studying me.

"What the hell have we got here?" He smiled beneath his nasty blood-streaked nose. "Looks like a circus."

"No, not a circus." I could feel Tommy rise toward the surface like a wave of nausea. "I'm Wildclown, a private investigator. I'm here to see Robert Hawksbridge at 41 Arcadia."

The sarcastic smile melted. His face went blank and for a second he silently regarded us both.

"Just hold on a minute." He sauntered back to his little guardhouse. I watched him through the tiny arrow slit of a window. The guard held a phone to his face and clenched his jaws behind it mumbling. He watched us without expression.

He put the receiver down, walked out of the guardhouse and stood in the doorway for a minute, just staring. Then he walked back in, and out of sight. There was a groan, and

the loud whir of an electric motor. The scene of iron Eden slid slowly out of sight on a track. The guard reappeared, walked toward us, this time to my window.

“It’s okay, you can go on in.” He squatted by my door. “Listen, tell me. I used to do a little private investigating myself.” He scratched the side of his head. “What the hell is with the makeup?”

“It’s a customer-relations thing. I found if you keep them happy, they keep coming back.” I smiled, then motioned for Elmo to drive ahead.

We left the security man scratching his head at the gate.

The asphalt in the Arcadia Residential Complex had an oily, freshly scrubbed sheen as it wound in and around a national debt’s worth of stately homes. The sky was its usual overcast, but for some reason, everything looked a little brighter and cleaner here.

Huge oak trees reached out to make a green promenade of the street. Lawns, finely clipped and manicured, grew out to lightly stroke sidewalks as white as marble.

A pair of old women in gaudy, floral-print dresses doddered along in sun hats, of all things. I watched their old hands move fluidly, and their rouged lips jerk mechanically around tired old stories.

Some brownstone salesman had made a killing here, because the majority of the homes were built of the impressive stone.

House after house, crisp in new paint and gardening—walled in like monetary gulags. Enormous black limousines sneered as they passed the Chrysler.

Watching the noble elegance in the architecture of Arcadia, I felt uneasy. Despite their impressive and monolithic qualities, they had an element of the transparent to them—an ephemeral aura that all their weight could not deny. I felt that I could walk up to a house, open its ornately carved door and find nothing but an empty lot inside—like you would find in the imagined western streets in Movieland.

The trees, though beautiful, shimmered like a special effect in the nonexistent light. I got the feeling that if I were to approach one of the front lawns, I could lift it like indoor-outdoor carpeting, and view the struts and buttresses of construction underneath.

I felt that if I looked past that I could find the long dead faces of ghosts of the Industrial Age—these homes and the illusion they represented were built upon the unstable ground of exploitation.

I shook my head, and flicked my cigarette out the window. My mood was a little off.

Long, dull Authority vehicles, black as an overcast sky at night cruised the streets. There was a lot of money in the New Garden District. And there were rules hanging from every tree.

Rule number one: if you don’t have money, you won’t be staying long.

Rule number two: see rule number one.

New Garden sickened me. It was an example of greed that transcended the mere pedestrian greed. New Garden hadn’t changed much since the Change, and that was what brought on the nausea.

They had enough money here to maintain the simplicity of the Old World. The doggy on the leash, a cat wetting in the garden, here grandma could set the apple pie on the sill to cool off. All this normal day-to-day—this incongruous mediocrity—while the bulk of humanity continued to struggle in the violent current of its impulse toward extinction.

New Garden was just the same denial that had so long plagued the world. If you had enough money, and the power that went with it, the world was and always would be the

same lovely place. Death, sickness, and poverty were merely the plot devices for a novel or a really good film. More illusions.

I lit another cigarette and watched with hazardous expectation, as though the mere knowledge of the illusion would cause it to shimmer and disappear. My thoughts spiraled downward.

It was the case, and my own struggle against forces beyond my control. I was being pushed along, and I had been used. Not only did that gall me, it frightened me—though such an admission runs contrary to the detective handbook.

If I didn't soon get control of this case, it would kill me.

Chapter 50

A rhinoceros head looked dumbly at me from where it hung on the wall. It sprouted from the center of a shield-shaped sheet of polished mahogany. The thick lips were twisted into an embarrassed grin.

That didn't bother me half as much as the stork, whose snaky neck deposited its head—beady eyes like pellets of glass—six inches from my face. The bird had been stuffed then placed beside the large olive, wingback chair where I was parked. Its spear-like beak was half-open, poised for a fish or frog. Why the owners of the house had pointed it at this chair, I didn't know. I was just glad they had nailed the crocodile to the wall where it menaced an ancient black and white family portrait.

Apparently, there had been a hunter in the Hawksbridge family. The entire house was filled with stuffed animals. Out in the hallway I had passed a cramped looking lion in a case. Its dead eyes held a forlorn expression staring four inches from the glass. One of the eyes was milky.

Elmo and I had arrived only moments ago. I had told him to wait in the car, and then sauntered up to the large oak door of 41 Arcadia. A handle, like a miniature doorknob, grew out of the wall beneath an oval stained glass window. I had pulled it, and was alarmed by a deafening school bell *clang* inside.

It was a large house, 41 Arcadia, with a long semi-circular driveway, so no one would have to wear himself out shifting into reverse. It was brownstone, as I had suspected, and wore about forty glittering windows in its face.

A butler had answered the door, by his voice the very one I had spoken to. His face was ancient, two tufts of fur at his temples was all that remained of his hair. The old eyes had bulged momentarily at me, before he slipped into his long practiced professional courtesy. He had asked for identification, and I showed him my license. As a compliment to him, he handled it all very well.

This Jeeves remained professional and courteous despite the fact that a large clown displaying an ugly sidearm showed up at the door when he had expected a Bogie character with khaki-colored trench coat and low-slung fedora—with bullets instead of eyes and a punching bag for a face. Well, I was wearing a trench coat, and I did have a hat. The rest was extra.

He showed me to the wingback chair and stork to wait while the seconds ticked by. I sat in the midst of the menagerie and smoked a cigarette, as Noah must have done after dinner on the Ark.

I couldn't help but wonder if the old boy had felt it a little close amongst all those animals, maybe on the thirty-third day or the thirty-third night. I also had to wonder what could have possessed an elephant to donate his foreleg to serve as the ash stand on my left.

The doors opened. The butler shuffled in and announced in his best voice: "Mr. Hawksbridge will join you shortly. Business has delayed him."

I waved my cigarette, smiled as the butler backed out of the room and let my eyes rove over the animals again.

I wondered if Grey had sat in the same chair and whether the dead animal zoo had impressed him or if he had found the glass-eyed menagerie depressing too.

He had been hired to find a missing girl who was pregnant—an impossibility in the world after the Change. He would have been filled with a general skepticism like I was.

If I suspended my disbelief for a moment, a pregnant woman—even a woman threatening to be pregnant—would be hot property among the special interest groups Willieboy went on and on about. I also had to admit that I had only scratched the surface, so far as crazy baby religions and cults were concerned. There were all kinds of people who would want a pregnant woman.

Alan Cotton was working for the King of the Dead. Both of them would like to get their hands on a baby—Cotton was dead and gone—but, the King had control of people in Authority. He was out there somewhere.

Even Richard Adrian of Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased would have coveted such a property—if he hadn't been filleted. First, if he had heard about Regenerics, and secondly, because a real live baby might mean the end of business for him.

What else was there? The business with the Twelve Stars Group and the *fifth horseman* mentioned in Grey's journal. I had this terrible feeling that I would soon find out more about Twelve Stars than I wanted. Cane was a member. The door opened.

Mr. Robert Hawksbridge was a shorter than average man. He had stiff iron-gray hair that was meticulously groomed and polished. He had a large, hatchet-nose and deep circles under his eyes that, at first glimpse, might be taken to be the result of too many sleepless nights. Upon closer examination, I saw that the brow of his nose peaked far out from his face; the result was that his cheekbones slid away beneath his eyes almost unnoticed. This phenomenon caused the permanent bags and appearance of insomnia.

He looked at me quickly with fine blue eyes, and then whipped them away to guide him toward the chair behind his desk.

He wore a dark blue, cotton suit with a deafening yellow tie. Mr. Hawksbridge dropped into his chair, put his left elbow on the arm, made a fist of his hand and then set his weak chin delicately upon it. His lips worked as he studied me.

"I see the 'clown' in your name represents more than a state of mind." His voice was grave with precipitous depths to it.

"Yes, Mr. Hawksbridge. The makeup is part of my detective shtick. Some use deerstalker caps, others, sword-canes and exploding cars." I pressed my cigarette into the elephant's foot.

"You misunderstand me, Mr. Wildclown. I was not attempting any judgment. I may live in New Garden, and enjoy its protected confines, but I understand the changes that

have come to the world without.” He repeated his chin-resting procedure with his right arm. “We all survive as we can.”

I smiled because I hadn’t expected that.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about your sister, Julie—her disappearance. I’m investigating a murder that might be related. Did you know Owen Grey?”

“Ah, I see. No doubt...” He waved a hand. “You are trying to avenge the murder of your detective friend, Mr. Grey. I read the *Maltese Falcon*.”

“As a matter of fact, I didn’t know Mr. Grey; but his name did come up during my investigation. He disappeared about two years ago. I don’t know if he’s dead and needs avenging.” I lit a new cigarette. “I would like to know what happened to your sister.”

“That would be difficult. Oh, I’ll tell you what I know, but you have to understand, I was traveling at the time of the disappearance—in the old country—so I wasn’t around when the actual events transpired. Frankly, I thought Julie had eloped with that fellow she was seeing, Victor Davis, and he was, well, not quite New Garden material let alone of Arcadian stock—so far as my parents were concerned. I assumed they ran off together, and I didn’t take the whole affair very seriously. I did speak to my father concerning the steps he was taking, though. He said he had hired a detective, a Mr. Owen Grey, to find her. It seems Father felt Mr. Grey maintained a low profile, and so would not attract unpleasant attention to my family.”

“So you never met Grey.” I was watching another blind alley forming.

“No, in fact, I didn’t. I only returned after the tragic event of my parents’ death. It was quite unexpected. But, I was told that they were traveling to meet Mr. Grey when the mishap occurred. All attempts I made to reach the detective after the fact failed.”

“I assume Authority investigated. Who was in charge?” I leaned forward slightly, expectant.

“An Inspector Borden handled the case. He said he was one of the first on the scene.”

I again imagined a hundred Inspector Borden.

“And he told you that they died in the crash and were consumed in the flames.”

Again, no evidence.

Everything was burning up.

“Yes, and do you know that little bastard didn’t even seem the least upset when he told me. Seriously, I know you fellows who deal in death all the time get accustomed and somewhat hardened to it, but that Borden—stood right here and said they had died without even having the decency to take that ridiculous metal toothpick out of his mouth.”

“Then you saw Inspector Borden?” My mind reeled. “He chewed a brass toothpick and he had glasses, right. He was short, about five foot two, and had a face like a pig, and a head like a toad, sort of.”

Hawksbridge laughed long and loud. He smoothed his tie with a flat hand, then dabbed his eyes with a knuckle. “Yes, Mr. Wildclown. That is the man exactly. That’s *him*. A pig! Head like a frog! Ha, ha, ha. Oh I wish I had thought of that.”

“It’s yours, Mr. Hawksbridge.” I put my cigarette out. Adrenaline rushed along my nerves. “What else did he say?”

“He just told me that the car lost control on the elevated highway, and jumped the wall. It fell forty feet and burst into flames. There was no escape for them. The chauffeur died too, I might add. Borden told me there was not enough left for identification, other

than through dental records.” He looked downcast, rubbed the arm of his chair with a trembling hand.

“Did you ask him about your sister? Did he say anything about her?”

Hawksbridge frowned. “He seemed quite anxious when I told him, as a matter-of-fact. He said he had only heard rumor about it; but because my parents did not officially request an investigation by Authority there had been none.”

“Did you tell him about her being pregnant?” I was beginning to want his answer as much as I wanted a drink.

“Funny that, of course I mentioned her condition, and when I did, it peaked his interest. I told him that the family had put an ad in the paper concerning her disappearance, and I believe they had made a few queries about her there.

“It seems Mother and Father shared my suspicion that she was only angry, and hurt. So they printed a nice apology in the *Gazette* pleading with her to come home. They had quarreled before...” Hawksbridge paused and picked a pen up from the leather blotter in front of him. “Borden said that he could remember something in the paper about her disappearance. But he didn’t know that she was supposed to be pregnant. Funny...”

Hawksbridge studied the pen in his hand, tapped the index finger of his left with it. “He laughed it off then, but there was something so fake—so strange—that I was a little disturbed. After all, it was the first emotion he showed here, and his laughter was forced—I’m sure of it. He told me that in all probability she had eloped with her boyfriend, and that she would probably show up when her parents could not interfere with the nuptials. But he asked me to give him a call if she returned.”

“And the *pregnancies*.” My mind was rushing around tying threads together. “Grey wrote in his journal that your parents told him of a number of miscarriages.”

Hawksbridge paled and the circles under his eyes became dark rings. “Yes, I was here on two occasions when she had these phantom ‘pregnancies’. I can’t tell you if it was ever proven that she had actually been pregnant. The whole affair quite disturbed me. We hushed it up again, or my parents did. They were always concerned with the image, you know.”

“I know.” My gaze fell, and I studied my boots. “Tell me, your family physician, the man who made the diagnosis, he is missing, or dead?”

“Why *yes!*” Hawksbridge’s mouth dropped open in amazement. “He died, one of those accidents in the tub, or something. He fell off a ladder, I believe. Then, well it is a little unnerving having a dead physician examine you, so I sought another. My parents were gone, after all, and he really was *their* doctor.” He rolled his eyes up to scan his memory. “Dr. Avery Forrester. I believe I could get you his address.”

“Thank you.” I felt around for another cigarette. “Has the Inspector ever called again? I’ll bet he calls regularly.”

“Well, he does, in fact. He said he has sort of taken it on as a personal crusade—Julie’s disappearance. Calls once or twice a month with updates. I don’t take the calls myself any more. I let Johnson my butler handle it. Seems to me he, Johnson, mentioned a recent increase in frequency.”

“Victor Davis,” I said abstractly, cigarette dangling unlit from my mouth. “Did you know him?”

“Oh, he was someone Julie met while I was away. Never did meet him. He worked for, what was it, a pharmaceutical operation of some kind. I think he delivered prescriptions.”

“Can you remember the name of his employer?”

“What was it?” Hawksbridge rubbed his chin. “Something ridiculous. Sprint Prescriptions, or Speedy Prescriptions, something like that. I can only remember that there was something fast-foody about the name.”

“And you’ve never heard of him again?”

“No.” Hawksbridge leaned forward on his elbows. “He never turned up?”

“Grey couldn’t find him.” I lit my cigarette. “Among Julie’s things, did you ever find a picture of Davis or any information about him?”

“No, I assumed Mr. Grey would have looked at anything of interest. Father said he went through her belongings... Borden took a look as well.” He paused. “I don’t suppose it would do any harm if you looked through her things. Her room is exactly as I found it.”

“Thank you, again, Mr. Hawksbridge. If I could have your permission to call again, if I have a question, I would be grateful.” I stood up.

“Oh certainly, and I’ll get you Dr. Forrester’s address. But please, you must forgive my manners. I have been quite ungracious. Would you let me offer you a drink now, unless matters are pressing.” He seemed genuinely embarrassed.

“Nothing’s *that* pressing.” I envisioned an expensive imported Scotch whisky. Hawksbridge summoned Johnson and in moments we were both sipping a fine single malt, neat.

Hawksbridge talked a great deal about his late Uncle Henry after I asked him about the stuffed animals.

“Hank loved hunting, he had the real blood in the family.”

I accepted another drink and then another before I frisked Julie’s room. She was certainly a clean freak.

A shoebox full of birthday cards had titillated me at first, but left me cold—just aunts and uncles, and a granny in Wales. It was obvious that Julie Hawksbridge had wanted to keep her affair with Davis a secret. Not a Valentine, or a birthday card, nothing.

Of course, Grey may have taken anything pertinent, I know I would have.

I shared another drink with Hawksbridge before I left. I found it a pleasant diversion to hear about someone bagging a lion on the Serengeti, or spearing a hippopotamus on the Nile.

I believed Uncle Hank and I had something in common. We were both hunters.

In Hank’s case, his prey had been dangerous and difficult to find, but he knew what he was looking for when he set out.

In my case the prey had chameleon qualities. It could coalesce out of nothing, or leap out of a friendly face. I might accidentally offer it my throat. No, you had to be careful who you trusted when hunting murderers. Any dark alley you pass could swallow you up forever.

Chapter 51

I looked into a pair of beautiful blue eyes. They sat in a long face, almost too thin to be gorgeous, but somehow making up for physical substance with a naive essence that brought into mind the seductive image of tussling on a couch after school, around four-thirty, just before the parents got home. A lengthy straight nose, with the right nostril curving up just a hair more than the left; a narrow mouth with delicate pink lips, the type that look thin until they kiss you; and dark arched eyebrows like wayward question marks—all this framed by straight light-brown hair.

Hawksbridge had told me that Julie colored her hair when the mood hit her—but what I saw in the picture was her natural shade. He had given me the photograph of his sister moments before I left.

I looked into its celluloid eyes as Elmo drove us toward Dr. Forrester's residence.

I was surprised to hear that Forrester was still in one piece. I had expected to find out that he had had an accident with a high-speed blender, or had cut his head off while shaving.

Whoever else was looking for Cotton's Regenerics secret was doing a real butcher job in the detective department. They were killing, mutilating, and burning everything.

Maybe dead was good enough to keep Forrester out of the picture. He was a minor player after all. So I knew he couldn't tell me much. If there was a court that I thought was legitimate, I knew my lack of evidence would leave me making my case with shadow puppets and shoulder shrugging.

It was about eight-fifteen in the evening. I was hungry, and a little light-headed from Hawksbridge's friendly scotch bottle, or it could have been the half-pint of whiskey I had consumed at Grey's office. I certainly attributed the blame to Hawksbridge. I hated to start so early in the day, but once started...

After returning to Grey's, I had put a call through to Forrester. He was skittish at first, but relaxed noticeably when I assured him I had absolutely nothing to do with Authority. He was busy though, and had asked me to come over at eight-thirty.

The Chrysler's headlights counted trees as we turned onto Comte Avenue. It was strange when one stumbled upon streets with names that had lived on past the Change. The majority of them had slowly melted and dissolved into something stickier and nastier. All the better to fit into Greasetown. What was Greasetown's pre-Change name? It didn't matter. All cities had become Greasetowns if what the news said was true.

My stomach grumbled and burned hungrily, but the way this case was shaping up, supper could wait. I knew that the more time I let pass the better my chances of turning around and finding myself dead.

We drove along Comte Avenue until we found 1675. Comte Avenue was in one of the besieged and embattled neighborhoods huddled just outside the border of New Garden District. Nice little place, but decay was setting in, and the residents didn't have the money for denial.

Forrester's was a large, red brick house with warm orange windows.

I told Elmo to park the car under the long, low boughs of a maple tree whose roots had slowly lifted the sidewalk at its base into a mound.

I got out, smiled at Elmo, told him to wait, and then walked up to the front door.

A record was playing. I heard that plain enough. The song was sad. Whoever sang it was wondering what she would do when someone, I supposed her lover, was far away. I disregarded the sympathetic wave it generated in me.

Overhead, a porch light designed to resemble a coach and four was hung from a heavy brass chain near the door. I pulled my collar up, and my hat down, then knocked once, twice, three times, and waited. I heard the distant creaks and groans of movement come from inside. I waited.

The door slowly opened on a chain. A thin slice of a person appeared at the crack. A cutting of eyebrow leapt up and away from a piece of eye. A sliver of mouth opened.

“What the...” The voice was thin enough to slip through. “Who?”

I held my license up. “Wildclown, I’m a private investigator. I called earlier. Dr. Avery Forrester?”

The fragment of eyebrow lowered over the eye then leapt up again. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Well, it’s a, a...” I started to reply, but it suddenly seemed as though my tongue was screw-nailed to my jaw. “I’m, uh...” I stopped talking and worked my mouth. My hands suddenly achieved independent life, the right one whipped out and pushed at the door.

“A, a!” The chain banged tight.

Someone had cut the power off to my mouth like it hadn’t been paying its bill. Tommy had staged a mutiny. My vision doubled, I groaned in a very unprofessional manner.

My left hand whipped down below my gun and grabbed the swollen bulge that was growing there. I seemed to retain some control of my right because with it I grappled my left away from my groin.

“N-n-not, n-o! T-T-T...” I twisted inside; my thoughts took on eight dimensions. I saw the face at the door; then, it disappeared. I reeled back and slid into a garden rake and broom, we fell in a clattering pile.

“I-I-I!” was all I could manage, like a wiener dog half-crushed by a car.

The left hand now made a grab for the gun; I tackled it with the right. The left whipped the gun out and turned it to my face. I pushed with all my strength against it. I felt veins popping out of my neck.

My breath went out of me. I choked, and gagged, fighting for control. The gun wrenched around, the barrel gaped at me. I pushed, but it seemed the right lost impetus and the hand dropped. I squirreled my head away from the barrel of the gun.

I heard three things: a deafening boom, a terrified voice screaming “No!” and a roar of silence as a black vacuum engulfed me.

Chapter 52

A Maruichi band was playing a frenetic song in my head. Funny, instead of guitars and maraca’s everybody played drums. Oh there was some joker playing the xylophone but he was using the bones that covered my temples to strike the notes.

I realized the band grew louder, the closer I came to consciousness, so for a moment, I stopped resisting the warm darkness that tried to cover me.

Transition.

Walls of jade-colored ceramic tile bulged in at me. The grout was very dark, rust-colored and from all corners came the reek of mildew.

“Please relax now, Jimmy.” A voice to my left. I was strapped into a dentist chair of some kind. A hunk of rubber was fixed between my teeth with a belt that circled my skull. I turned my head as far as I could. I looked up and into the blue, unshaven jowl of a man holding a pair of metal paddles with wooden grips. His nose was long and pointed, and his armadillo eyes peered out of thick, horn-rimmed glasses. He smelled of sweat and aftershave.

“If I am to put these demons to rest, you must, relax. You shake the paddles each time I have applied them. *Cooperate*. You’ll never forget him if you don’t cooperate.” His breath stank of sugar and vomit. His teeth had rotted down to black nubs.

I felt the paddles on my temples. They were cold round circles. I tried to growl or speak, but nothing came. Then, my back was arching uncontrollably as the electric current was applied.

Transition.

A brief moment of blackness, and the Maruichi band started up again. I opened my eyes, and listened to the pounding staccato music.

A hazy brilliance was all I could make out, strange blurred shapes moved through it. Dancers!

Morris Ackerby and Shelley Donaldson turn and turn on the dance floor out on a cruise away from their spouses. They fall in love in the sunny south when they see the Prince and Princess Charming in one another—until it all ends with Morris ejaculating prematurely, as they rut like pigs on some trash strewn beach.

Eight brown-skinned street urchins watch from inside a cardboard box. “They’re all the same,” whined the dissatisfied housewife, her hands a blur on her damp pelvis.

“Where am I?”

Transition.

“Christ, stop it! Stop it!” I growled between teeth clenched tight enough to shatter. The hallucinations fell like broken glass. Then I heard a voice.

“Take it easy, Mr. Wildclown. You have had a seizure of some kind. Try to relax.” Then through closed eyes I heard the voice speak to someone else. “That is his name: *Wildclown*? Has he ever had a seizure like this before?”

“No sir, not really like, with the gun and all.” It was Elmo. “He has moments when he feels kind of poorly, I think—sleeps standing up type of thing. But he never tried that before.”

“It’s difficult in a seizure, to draw a relationship between intent and action. Dangerous, in fact. The body does strange things when it loses control. I had a patient once who suffered temporal lobe seizures and when in the midst of one, he might do anything. On one occasion he found himself hopping up and down in the middle of the street. The honking horns brought him out of it.”

“Well,” I grumbled as I raised myself with Herculean effort. I levered into a sitting position on a couch that was covered in rough tartan fabric. “I don’t think you’ll get any action like that out of me. But we’ll see how I’m feeling later.”

I opened my eyes.

Elmo knelt close by, beside a coffee table stained with pale cup rings. A thin weedy individual crouched on the other side of it. He wore a stethoscope around his willow neck. From the slow cautious way he climbed to his feet, I could tell he was dead.

“Dr. Forrester, I presume.” I rubbed my temples. The Maruichi band seemed to have taken a break. “You’ll have to forgive that one. I’ve been waiting a long time to use it.”

“Yes, Avery Forrester. You had quite a moment there, Mr. Wildclown. You’re very lucky to be alive.” He smiled. The doctor was one of those lengthy, angular people. He was all bone and skin. His legs and arms grew on and on, as though he had some procrastination gene for growth that could never get around to finishing off the project.

The skin on his face was sagging somewhat in a dead man’s jowl, but aside from that he appeared quite youthful.

He had thick black hair, and long rubbery ears to match his nose, which continued to point accusingly at me. Dr. Forrester’s mouth was wide, and eyes deep and dark. He wore denims, a plaid shirt and a comfy wool cardigan.

“I haven’t been eating well.” I shook my head. “Do you have a drink doctor?”

“Certainly,” he said, turning to Elmo. “Friend?”

“Yes sir,” Elmo said in his Sunday school voice.

Dr. Forrester disappeared through a door he had to duck to get through. I looked around. Elmo still stared at me worriedly. I smiled at him then scanned the room. It was a cozy little place.

Two walls were completely covered in books, and the far end was a fireplace. I looked at some of the titles. *Great Expectations*, and *Last of the Mohicans* sat uncomfortably cheek and jowl with medical texts: *Treating Fatalities*, *Advanced Rigor-Treatments to Prolong Flexibility in Dead Connective Tissue*, *Psychology of the Deceased* and *Health for the Exhumed*.

The doctor reappeared with a crystal decanter and three glasses on a tray.

“It’s brandy.” He sat down across from me and poured us a drink. “Take it easy.” He handed me a half-full glass of the ruby liquid. “You don’t want to go too fast.”

“I just need a little anesthetic, Doc,” I mumbled, then threw the tumbler’s contents into my guts. They jumped, but steadied themselves around the burning liquor. I held my glass out. The doctor started to shake his head but poured me another anyway. I socked that one away, then felt around for a cigarette, pulled one out and lit it. Human again.

I felt Elmo’s worried presence pressing the seat springs to my left.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions about the daughter of Wilson and Helen Hawksbridge. Their son, Robert, is still looking for her.” I pulled the smoke into my lungs and slowly let it out. My vision was clearing. I really didn’t want to talk about the episode on the porch. I still had to sort that out. “Julie’s disappearance is linked to a case I’m working on.”

Dr. Forrester’s look of confusion was replaced by amusement as he read from my tone that I had just become a closed book.

“Certainly. You understand I no longer work for them. They died so suddenly—and finally. Their son, it seems he was unnerved by my condition.” He pointed at his chest with both open hands then made one beating wing motion down toward his knees as if to say ‘look at me I’m dead.’

“I understand he was unnerved, but I don’t understand why,” I said in way of consolation. “Tell me, Doctor. Julie had become pregnant a number of times after the Change. You’re supposed to tell me how that is impossible.”

“Again?” The doctor leaned back and studied me for a moment. “Am I to go through this again?”

“I see.” I leaned forward, felt my bowels turn to water, leaned back again. “Authority was here. They questioned you.”

“Yes, numerous times, in fact. The day after the Hawksbridge’s met their end. You see, I remember it all so well, because it was the day I died.”

“How did that happen, if you don’t mind my asking?” I was eyeing the brandy.

“Oh, it was stupid. I was painting my main hallway there—you can just see the ceiling, up those stairs. It’s still unfinished. The last or what I hoped would be the last of the Inspectors left at around five-thirty. I tried to hurry and finish my painting, climbed a ladder carrying a big can of paint, got to the top of the ladder, and the next thing I remember was waking up dead.”

“You don’t remember falling?” I crushed my cigarette in a blue ceramic ashtray shaped like a puma.

“No. I don’t. It was probably a combination of fatigue, paint fumes and bad luck. I blacked out.” He fell silent. “I must say I thought that would be the end of the questioning. Of course, I had thought the same thing after that detective, what was his name—oh damn; I’m usually good with those things. Grange, or... what was it?”

“Grey. You talked to Owen Grey.” I watched his eyes light up.

“Yes. He was a large fellow, about your height. Short dark hair, kind of a plain dresser. Grey showed up about ten days before I died. He was looking for Julie, and asked me about her pregnancies. I still feel bad about that. I told him that, well in the strictest confidence, that she had had miscarriages. I compromised my Hippocratic oath, but I felt that under the circumstances anything might help. Julie was missing, after all, and this Grey fellow was here by permission of her parents. And they were so worried. I sometimes wonder whether that didn’t figure into my dismissal. Then a little over a week later the Hawksbridges died and Authority came here and questioned me about that. They gave me a warning too.”

“Which was...”

“Actually, Authority told me to speak to no one about my relationship with the Hawksbridges while things were under investigation. But I suppose two years is long enough for that.” He topped up all our drinks, then leaned back and slipped into a professional pose. “Julie Hawksbridge, contrary to all current medical studies, continued to ovulate after the Change. You see what seems to have happened was that women ceased to ovulate, and men to produce sperm. For as yet undetermined reasons, normal *meiosis* has halted in humans and most animal species—meiosis being the division of sex cells. But here we had Julie, a woman with a pre-Change age of 26 producing ovum.”

“If men don’t produce their part, then how?”

“That’s not entirely true either, and I did say ‘normal meiosis has halted,’” the doctor corrected. “Some men produce a minimal amount of sperm—in very substandard quantities and those grossly mutated. Nothing healthy enough to create normal offspring, but one learns in medicine that there are always exceptions.”

“How many miscarriages did she have?”

“Three that I am certain of. But for some reason, she would not tell me who the father was. At first I thought it was because she couldn’t be sure who he was, then I realized there would not be enough men producing sperm for her to know more than one. The chances against it were astronomical.”

“So that was it. And the...the offspring?”

“None viable. They terminated in the second month—though my post mortem examination showed they had been developing normally. Julie would just begin to suspect a pregnancy and it would be over.”

“And, did you save any specimens?”

Forrester produced a smile then let it drop off his face. “Normally, I would. But the Hawksbridges’ were tremendously concerned about their privacy. As a professional courtesy to them I destroyed any specimens I had.”

“So, no one in the medical establishment found out about it.”

“Mr. Wildclown. I assume a detective has a certain responsibility to his clients. I take my Hippocratic oath quite seriously. Talking to Grey, and Authority, well those were unique situations. Julie was missing and remains so.”

“I wasn’t finding fault. Just making an observation.” I sipped my brandy. The first two had warmed my blood wonderfully. “What do you think, Doctor? Is it possible that someone could have researched this phenomena enough to attempt to breed a human?”

“Mr. Wildclown, so far as my believing in the impossible; well, I am a dead man, your partner is a dead man, and yet we’ve all just sat here and shared a bottle of brandy.” He smiled. “My answer is, that there is no reason for me to believe that this would be impossible.”

“Julie Hawksbridge was pregnant at the time of her disappearance. Is that correct?” My head ached momentarily—just a twinge.

“Yes, but during her last check up with me, she was showing every indication of miscarrying again. It seems that whatever strange forces are at work upon the human race, there is a willful attempt to stop it here.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” I gestured to the brandy as I stood. My head reeled momentarily. I steadied myself on Elmo’s shoulder. “And for earlier.”

“Certainly, no trouble whatsoever. I haven’t had company lately, and there is a certain excitement to entertaining a detective, even if he is not your average kind.” He smiled shyly.

I picked my hat up, put it on. “I’ve got a feeling about this next question. There were numerous Authority investigations after the deaths of the Hawksbridges?”

“Why yes, as I said.” Dr. Forrester cocked his head at a strange angle. “Numerous.”

“Oh, what the hell!” I shook my head. “There was a funny thing about those investigations wasn’t there. A couple of the investigating Inspectors, different guys...”

“One was a woman!” Forrester broke in.

I paused, *a woman*. “Okay, a guy and a gal, and the funny thing about it is they all had...”

“The same name, yes, that’s astonishing. I’d almost forgotten that but it’s true. They did—but it was *two* men and a woman. I had thought it odd, and then attributed it to my hearing, which has never been the best. When I died later that day.” His eyebrows screwed up. “Such synchronicity was suddenly irrelevant.”

“B-something,” I said, adjusting my coat.

“Borden.” He smiled sweetly. “They were all named Borden. I remember bringing that up to the second Inspector. How funny that was. How odd—and what did she say? Oh, she said it was a common name in Authority, and she asked me for a description of the first Inspector I had seen.”

“What did he look like?” I asked already forming a picture of him in my head.

“Short, round and mean.” The doctor’s eyes flared at the unpleasant memory. “I warned him, in fact, I couldn’t help but say something about this terrifically bad habit he had. You see there is a lot of evidence that suggests that though the living are granted this strange immortality since the Change, they are still prey to certain degenerative processes. This first Inspector Borden had the ridiculous habit of chewing a brass toothpick. I pointed out the problems he was going to have, and well...” Forrester looked embarrassed. “He became extremely rude.”

“Was the third Inspector tall, muscular and balding—long scar across his cheeks like a smile?”

“Yes—that’s him. A very blunt individual. Though he was remarkably congenial despite it. He was most conciliatory actually, and in fact, prompted me to put it behind me. You see: I was upset, and I had known the Hawksbridges, well—for years. This tall Borden told me to get on with life... Quite ironic really, when I think of it...the events later that day...”

“Thank you again, Doctor. I’ll tell you what. If I see any business, I’ll send it your way.”

I staggered slightly as I followed him to the door. I felt Elmo’s hands give me gentle shepherding touches on my shoulders. Dr. Forrester smiled and nodded his head vigorously as we left. I noticed a bullet crater in the bricks where I had fallen.

As Elmo led me to the car, I got the feeling that my hunt had taken a strange new twist. The creatures of the jungle were dangerous.

And some of them had found their way right inside my head.

Chapter 53

We got back to Grey’s office at around midnight. I was going to give Tommy his body back after I made a call. For the first time in a long time, I actually wanted out. I didn’t desire any more of the physical world. I wanted the peace my intangible state gave me. No more pain, no more murder and fire. I sat behind the desk, again noticed the crushed glass sound coming from the cushions then dialed Mrs. Alan Cotton, 333 Sea Heights.

“Good evening,” I heard the butler answer. His voice had its characteristic pissed and snotty edge to it.

“Hello, Edward. Sorry to call so late. It’s Wildclown. I’d like to talk to Mrs. Cotton.” I lit my final cigarette of the possession.

“It is very late. May I take a message?”

“Edward, you’re not doing your job again. Mrs. Cotton told me to call day or night.”

“Mrs. Cotton is entertaining.”

“You know, Edward, I found her a lot of fun myself.”

“You misunderstand me, Mr. Wildclown, she has company.” He cleared his throat.

“It’s important.”

“But Mr. Wildclown, the time...” Suddenly I heard a voice in the background, muffled at first then rising with intensity accompanied by the squeaky handclasps of a wrestle over the phone.

“Oh, for God’s sake, Edward, let me talk to him.” A pause. “Mr. Wildclown?”

“Mrs. Cotton. I’m sorry to call so late.”

“That’s quite all right. Edward and I were playing a little canasta. He keeps me busy that way.”

“That’s fine by me, Mrs. Cotton. There’s nothing I like more than a little canasta before bed. To calm my nerves.”

She was silent for a second, looking for affront. “What is it, Mr. Wildclown?”

“I just wanted to give you a report, and ask you a few questions.”

“This couldn’t wait until morning?”

“It’s important. I want you to know how you’re spending your money.” She had already given me a package containing a post-dated check for the first two weeks.

“Very well, Mr. Wildclown.” Her tone was beginning to gain a level of interest.

“I believe I know who killed your husband, and why. I’m not going to name any names yet, because I’m not positive. You’ll be the first to know when I’ve finished checking a few things out.” I paused for a deep drag of smoke. “May I ask you a personal question?”

“If it will help.”

“Did you and Alan have any kids before the Change?”

“No, we tried, but were unsuccessful. It seems my, well—this *is* personal. I simply wasn’t able. It hurt Alan a great deal, but he seemed to adapt to it. In fact, he even froze some of his, well...”

“I know, carry on.” I did know, and I didn’t feel like hearing it.

“Anyway, he froze some so that he could have a child with me, if there were some medical breakthrough or in the event something happened to him, an injury, whatever. Anyway, I always thought he began his work with genetics in an attempt to solve the problem.” She paused. Then her voice honked. “What does this have to do with Alan’s death?”

“A great deal. Tell me, Mrs. Cotton. You and your husband. Were you getting along, before he died.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

I hated coyness. “Were you playing canasta with Mr. Cotton, before bed.”

“*Mr. Wildclown!*”

“Please, Mrs. Cotton. It is late. I am obviously in a foul mood. Were you and Mr. Cotton...”

“No, no. We hadn’t been together as husband and wife for years before his death.” I heard a barely suppressed sob. “He was always away with his work, and he just didn’t seem interested in me any more.”

“I wonder—have you called Authority again? Have they called you?”

“Why, no.”

“Well expect a call. I believe I saw Mr. Cotton’s lab, or what I was expected to believe was his lab. It all looks very convincing.” I paused. “They’ll probably offer the grieving widow a look now.”

“Was there a fire?” Her voice was tired.

“Yes, and no. I have the feeling I saw the setting for an act in a play that got rewritten along the way. There’s no point to going into that now. I’ll fill you in later. Thank you, Mrs. Cotton. I’m sorry to disturb you.” I listened to muffled honking noises. “I’ll keep you informed.”

Suddenly Edward's voice came on the line. "Mr. Wildclown. I must ask you to make your calls earlier in the day. Mrs. Cotton is still fragile from her husband's death."

"Sure Edward. But an emergency is an emergency. I hope I didn't spoil the mood."

He slammed the phone down.

So that was why the butler was so protective of the Cotton manor. He was lord of it.

Now, for sleep.

Elmo was in the outer office reading old magazines. A brown-bagged bottle of whiskey was twisted up in front of him.

"Come on, Fatso. We can't stay here. I need sleep. But not here." I knew that I needed one more day to solve this case, and I wouldn't get it if I were caught napping. I knew that my time had run out. "Let's go for a drive, Elmo. You and I should find a place to hole up."

Chapter 54

We traveled a winding course into Downings, taking extra caution to lose any tails that might be on us, and ever mindful of Queens. It was easy. The streets that led in and out of the Downings District were littered with torn up cars and trucks, abandoned roadblocks and festered with detours.

The office buildings in that section of town had not fared any better. Many were burned out relics of the world before the Change, corpses of a dead civilization. It was fitting that gangs of the dead commanded them now as squatters and thieves.

The real money had long since abandoned this part of Greasetown.

I knew of a place, where Tommy had taken me once, when I had been nothing more than an irritated afterthought.

He had approached three tall buildings in Downings. The one in the center was ancient, and the shortest. It was a flat-topped number with all the old gothic scrollwork over the windows. Apparently whoever had owned it had been reluctant to sell, because on two congruent sides had grown up a pair of enormous skyscrapers of plain concrete and glass now abandoned.

They dwarfed the older building, and were erected so close to it that there was a little under a cramped foot of air separating them. Juxtaposed in such a way, the old building's roof became a tarry diamond set into the corner formed by these two massive abutting buildings.

The deepest point of the diamond was dark, sandwiched by the mass and shadow of the gargantuan twins, facing east. The tall buildings had few windows now—just jagged sills and warped aluminum framing.

The winds howled through the cramped spaces like demons.

Tommy's secret place was atop this short, flat roof that stopped at the twentieth floor. Shaded from whatever weak sun there was; it became a perfect place for mosses and lichen, and the three short cedars that grew there.

Tommy had brought me here once, and I had seen stars; now I sought this sanctuary for a night's sleep in a city that had grown deadly for me.

I was concerned about my last episode with Tommy, so gave my gun to Elmo and told him to stand guard at the top of the stairs and the broken door that served as roof-access.

I walked wearily to the three cedars, sat myself under the rough shelter of a dilapidated plastic and aluminum hobo hut that had been erected beside them, opened the bottle of whiskey, set a pack of cigarettes down and let go of Tommy. He immediately mumbled something about Caesar, then attacked the bottle with a vengeance.

I watched apprehensively as he smoked and drank voraciously. When a quarter of the bottle was gone, exhaustion took its toll and he fell asleep on a tumble of garbage and small, moss-covered rocks. He snored weakly.

I relaxed and let the hollow darkness absorb me.

Transition.

I was naked in a sterile hallway. Sweat soaked my brow. The lights had gone out. Someone had scrubbed me clean again. My cheeks were raw from the plastic bristles. Whenever the power went out the doors automatically swung shut in a long rolling thunder: boom, boom, boom like a giant stamping closer on enormous killing feet.

I was left in the darkness.

I pressed my back to the wall; the bricks were cold against my skin. Fear chattered in my ears.

The sound of breathing reached me from a short distance down the hall prickling my hair at the scalp.

If only the clown were here. The clown could help. He'd make the fear go away.

From the darkness someone screamed—hot iron on flesh.

I scuttled on all fours toward the TV blueness of a night-lit window. A swollen moon pressed against the upper corner, and punched rectangular holes repetitively down the hall where other wired windows allowed a tantalizing view, but no freedom.

In the eerie light, I saw strange naked shapes moving slowly toward me dragging mottled, twisted limbs.

I opened the window on hinges.

Fall branches scratched at the air outside like creaky hands that were buried alive. A wind moaned. Leaves whirled.

Approaching all around me was the silent motion of madness. But I could feel an unusual magic now. The clown was here. He had arrived. There was more to the darkness this time, to the moon's light, and the shadowy forms that crept near.

I knew that the power and the lights would not return. Something had happened and they were out for good. Something had happened out there in the world beyond the black line of trees.

I reached up and grasped the steel mesh screening. I gripped it with my fingers until the skin began to tear. I pulled until it stretched toward me, its blister-shape filling up with moonlight. My arms and fingers ached, the knuckles bled. The screen stretched, swelled inward, anchored to my torn claws, and finally burst free.

I slipped outside.

The moonlight glittered on the dewy grass. A field stretched before me to a thick stand of trees atop a hill. I ran in a crouching lope, dropping to all fours in a panting rhythm to feel the warm dew splash my cheeks and soak my body. I reached the hill and turned.

I watched the window I had escaped through; saw it birthing sinister monkey shapes into the night. I looked toward the city in the distance. Its many lights did not twinkle like a star field now. Violence had replaced them, lights red as blood howled along the streets. Fire burst out—an explosion.

Transition.

Sweat boiled out of my skin, and my mind whirled with flashing red images. I was in Tommy, had entered during the dream. I could not feel his presence as I often did—lurking there beneath my consciousness like a Freudian nightmare.

I tried to remember the dream's fleeting images. Flickering lights and red motes like incandescent blood cells danced and sparked inside my skull. I remembered a moon, then slithering, scampering dark shapes.

I calmed myself with whiskey and cigarettes, and fumbled for the sandwiches I had brought along. It was dawn. I had been out for about five hours. The sky slowly lightened.

An unusual rosy light began to color the clouds to the east. Unusual in the sense that I had not seen such a thing in all the time I had been in partnership with Tommy.

From my vantage point, I could see the long lancing orange cloud shapes forming and stretching from the horizon toward me. Red, as ripe as apple, as raw as blood, began to grow in intensity in an angry bar beneath the cloud.

It shot long bands of sparkle across the water—scoring furious grooves in the gray ocean. Perhaps that was why Tommy had chosen this place.

Perhaps he had glimpsed the sunrise this way—the harsh sharp glory like a flag wrested from the hands of a dead soldier and waved over the battlefield. This perch was perfect for seeing the spectacle. Below me, the alien rays set fire to the mist that boiled through Greasetown's streets and peopled it with chromium sparks and embers.

The streets followed the burning beams back toward the sea.

The asphalt glimmered for a moment, and then the clouds grew dark and dropped heavily on the red—snuffed out the light. An empty coffin boom of thunder fell. Darkness grew over Greasetown like scar tissue. Drizzle began tapping the plastic roof over my head.

I climbed to my feet and watched it all with keen interest because as the sky lightened the pieces had started to fall into place. I had plenty of motive. I had suspects. I even had culprits.

I had only two problems left.

I had to find someone I could tell my story to, and I had to find Van Reydner.

She could clear away all of my doubts. She could prove my claims. I would find her soon, if my hunch were right. But the first thing I had to do was get in touch with Richard Adrian.

Chapter 55

The telephone buzzed. I drummed my fingers on the desk.

It buzzed again then: "Hello, Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased." A man's voice tired and bored.

“Hello, I’m Armando DeHavilland, proprietor of Nouveau Vogue, an art congregational in New Garden.” There really was such a person and place. I took a bit of artistic license and gave him a German accent. “I’d like to know where I should send Mr. Adrian’s Asia collection. He purchased it some months ago, and it only now cleared Authority red tape.”

“I’m sorry, any outstanding bills should be sent to his executor...”

“Dear me. This is paid for, Mr. Adrian bought it himself, for a friend, I believe. I heard about his sad demise and the circumstances surrounding it, and since he is now unable to appreciate the pieces, I’d like to know where to send them. They’re paid for.”

“Well, you could send it to his uncle, Theodore Demarus. He has apartments at 1100 Galaxy Tower, 1000 Main Street North—New Garden. Mr. Demarus has been acting as executor of the will. Since Mr. Adrian cannot see to it himself.”

“Thank you, you’ve been a great help.” I looked across the desk at Elmo.

We were in Grey’s office again.

I crossed another name off my checklist. I had already looked up Victor Davis’ place of employment. A Speedy Prescriptions *did* exist, and they did indeed have record of a Victor Davis in their employ. He had disappeared without picking up his last paycheck about two years ago. An interesting, and not wholly unexpected twist was that Speedy Prescriptions was a subsidiary of King Industries.

I called the operator and asked for the main office of King Industries.

Another buzzing phone. Another secretary. This one a woman with a voluptuous voice.

“Hello, King Industries.”

“Hello, I’d like to speak to Mr. King.”

“Who’s calling please?”

“Owen Grey.” I was going to try to light a fire.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Grey. I can put you in touch with one of his personal secretaries.”

“I want to speak to Mr. King.”

“Nobody speaks to Mr. King without an appointment.” Silence. “What firm do you represent?”

“I represent *Regenerics*. It’s the latest thing going. I’d really like to speak to him.”

“Mr. King does not handle calls without an appointment, Mr. Grey.”

“Funny,” I said. “I don’t think so. Just tell him I called. I’ll get an appointment. Just tell him I’ll call again.”

“Very well, Mr. Grey.” She hung up. She had sounded so curvy and officious, I could have listened to her all day—just smile and count the syllables.

I looked at Elmo. His eyes were round and his face held disbelief.

“Don’t worry, Fatso.” I gave him my confident look, then sat very still for a while tossing the dice in my mind. I picked up the phone, dialed Authority.

“Authority Crimdiv. Sergeant Yanik speaking.” This fellow sounded angry.

“Inspector Willieboy, please.”

Silence.

A pause while Yanik matched fake names to real ones. “Just a sec.” I was put on hold.

“Yeah, Crimdiv.” Willieboy sounded all business.

“Inspector... I just can’t say Inspector Willieboy with a straight face. I’ll have to stick to Willieboy. This is Wildclown. I’ve got my man.”

“Don’t say anything on the phone. It’s not clean.”

“Which phone, exactly. Yours or mine?”

He paused. “Where have you been? You slipped us again.”

“My driver knows his job better than yours.”

“Can’t argue that. Where can I meet you? I’d like to use another venue.”

“I’ll decide that later. It’s my turn to call a few shots. Just don’t travel too far from your phone.”

“You bastard...” But I cut him off.

I smiled. That felt good. I had half a mind to call him back, just to hang up on him again.

Now, the Twelve Stars Group. That was how they were listed in the phone book. They actually had an ad in the yellow pages. “JOIN US FOR EVERLASTING LIFE—HELP US MAKE WAY FOR THE HORSEMAN!”

I dialed the number. The phone made a faraway rattling sound.

“Hello, Twelve Stars Group. Your call is important to us. Please wait for a moment, all of our lines are busy.” I was entertained for a few minutes by an orchestral choir doing something like Handel’s Messiah. Then a female operator answered—she sounded saved.

“Hello, Twelve Stars Group. How may we help you?”

“I’m curious. I recently found a little charm, just a wee little thing. It looks like a swastika cradled in the oval or circular part of an Egyptian *ankh*. A friend told me that it belonged to you people.”

“Why yes, sir. That is our Eternal Reich symbol...where?”

“Tell Brother Cane, or whatever he’s called, he’s an Authority Inspector in your group that chews brass toothpicks. Tell the ugly little prick, are you writing this down? Tell the ugly little prick that Wildclown has some information about a baby. Tell him I’ll call him back.”

“If you could hold the line, sir, I’ll...”

I hung up and leaned back in my chair.

I smiled again. I resisted the urge to call back and hang up out of spite. A wave of giddiness surged through me. I had the distinct feeling that I was playing with what remained of my life. I would have to move fast.

The King would know where Grey’s office was. After all he had paid rent on it. The finger of doom stroked my chest like an old girlfriend might, if she wanted to get back together. The safari was nearing its completion. The grass was full of tigers; the trees were crowded with pythons and spiders. I was standing hip deep in brush with only one bullet left in my gun.

I grabbed the phone again, dialed the *Gazette*.

“Ms. Mary Redding, please.”

“Just a moment, sir.”

A second of Muzak. “Mary Redding.” Her voice sounded as fresh and clean as a breeze in Eden.

“Hello, Mary. It’s me.”

“Well, where have you been, Mr. Business? You sure don’t know how to treat a girl. I’ve called and called. Even stopped by your place. Hey, what’s with the Authority transport in front of your office?”

“I hope you gave them my best.” I had expected that. “Friends of yours?”

“Where are you calling from? I’ll play a hunch.” Her tone was playful. I could imagine that fine line between her eyes darkening slightly. “I think you’re up to your ass in trouble.”

“I was curious.” I smiled at the receiver. “You mentioned justice to me once, as though you knew something about it, or had in fact seen it at some time. I know that it’s an illusive bird, but was that true?”

“It’s a fantasy of mine, yes.” She paused. “It may be true.”

“Well, other than myself have you ever met someone with a similar concept of justice? Someone, say, in a position of authority. Oh, at this point, I’d take just about anything. An irate meter maid or school crossing guard with a chip on his shoulder?”

Mary Redding laughed, then sobered. “It’ll cost you another date, but, yes, I do know some people.”

She was good. That much was certain. She had only slipped up once, and I had almost missed it. I remembered her then, naked curves and all. She was good in many ways.

“What are you up to?” She had read my silence right. “Something’s going to happen.”

“I’ll call you back...” I hung up catching a muted “When?” from Mary. The order of the phone calls was the tough part. I had to play this perfectly. First a meal, yes, a condemned man always gets his last meal. Then the calls. The King first, he was dangerous, but the key.

I called Elmo in.

“Elmo, go round me up a couple of sandwiches—the crushed plankton with dill on rye will do, and a big deli pickle, you know the kind I like.” He nodded and turned to go. I called after him. “Don’t let anyone see you, and don’t take the car.”

He smiled a “Yes, Boss” and was gone. I stared after him, and then leaned back remembering my night with Mary Redding. Her strength was the most memorable part.

Chapter 56

Galaxy Tower was big, and designed in such a way that it appeared poised to launch itself into space. Tall, and glass-covered, it glittered when the light hit it—even Greasetown’s weak rain-swept facsimile of sunshine. It rose one hundred stories on the North end of town where main street entered New Garden.

The lower floors held offices; the upper reaches cradled expensive apartments. Its giant glass doors looked tall enough to shatter under their own weight.

I pulled up onto a long black necklace of asphalt that swooped around its base. I climbed out as a tall man in scarlet tunic—brass buttons gleaming—walked quickly to the car. He glanced at me like I was unworthy of the golden epaulets on his shoulders, then climbed into the Chrysler with a disgusted sigh, and drove it none too gently to a large car-covered square of black top about a half mile away. He parked it.

I walked up to the mammoth doors and felt a powerful rush of air as they opened automatically before me. I sauntered across the lobby and to a reception desk. Towering arches of steel and glass met high above me. A crystal chandelier the size of a tugboat hid their point of interception overhead.

The desk was a wide violet oval with a hole cut in the center. Within, a black woman with depthless eyes smiled professionally through pink lips. Her perfume was lilac. She wore a crisp sky blue suit and lavender shirt. My eyes were drawn to a thin silver chain that formed a suspension bridge across the deep, dark gorge between her breasts.

I lifted my gaze and smiled back. I could tell by the look on her face that she thought I was a joke.

"I'm here to see Mr. Demarus." I removed my hat. "I'm Wildclown, a private detective."

"Really," she said and smirked, looking me up and down. "May I see your clearance?"

I slapped idly at my pockets. "Oh, clearance, right."

She frowned. "Mr. Demarus occupies the penthouse suite. I'm afraid no one is allowed to visit any floors above seventy-five without a security clearance."

"I know. It's in the mail, I'm told," I said, looking around the enormous lobby. "I'm in security myself. I know how these things work." I leaned over the desk and saw a closed circuit TV monitor. "I see! That looks like a standard, uh—A-131 security admission setup with red filtered monitor and high-speed access thingy, there...you give the green light with those buttons. They're slick. That's slick!" I pointed at a panel bearing about thirty buttons beside a coffee cup smeared with lipstick. "All the security runs through the main desk."

"What was your name again, sir?" She looked genuinely suspicious now and had placed a hand on her telephone receiver.

"I'm sorry. I'll make sure my clearance is in order before I return. Thank you very much." I started to walk toward the main door as though I were really sorry. "Keep up the good work."

"Just a minute, sir..." She was cut off by a shrill voice singing.

"Keep right on to the end of the road, keep right on to the end..."

I threw a corner of my eye at the receptionist. She was looking to the rear of the lobby where Elmo had staggered through a fire exit. He had entered right on schedule. I could see that he had dowsed himself with the whiskey I had left with him—his lank hair was pasted to his skull, his jacket hung from one arm, and his shirt was rumpled and untucked.

He flung his head back and drank from the bottle. "*When your day be long, let your heart be strong...*" He cackled like a drunken witch, and then sat down hard on the tiles. He fumbled around with the bottle, and slowly tried to regain his feet.

The receptionist hurried away from her desk toward Elmo saying, "Hey! Hey, you can't..."

He crawled across the floor, mumbling to himself.

I moved quickly to the desk, scanned the panel, pushed the last ten buttons, and then hurried to the elevator. Luckily the car was waiting. I jabbed the button for the penthouse and soon left the receptionist behind with Elmo. He was just breaking into his rendition of *'Mammy!'*

It was a little past seven when we first approached New Garden's impressive skyline. The money that abandoned the real world had migrated north to the New Garden business district. It fluttered in the air, that money. You could fill your lungs with it. There were breezes of cash—gusts of green.

And in the places it had settled, glass towers were growing. So far, Galaxy Tower was the largest and most prominent, though cranes atop the stumps of gargantuan rivals promised more. All the new growth and activity was centered there. It was the core—a lot of green had landed here. Main street south, or Greasetown proper, still held the ancient City Hall and a large nest of green-roofed government buildings but it was just a matter of time before all reputable institutions and businesses shifted to this moneyed end of the city. Elmo and I had approached Galaxy Tower, and then drove by it nonchalantly, formulating a plan. Elmo could pick any lock—at least I'd never seen one beat him—so our plan was for him to jimmy a rear entry door, and come through the back of the lobby pretending to be as drunk as a lord.

He would provide a distraction.

The elevator purred around me, the faraway hiss of an air exchanger was my only company. I appreciated the lack of Muzak.

The elevator stopped only once to allow an elderly Asian on. He wore a heavy wool coat and scarf that smelled like cats. He rode for two floors then got off on the twentieth. The higher the elevator climbed, the more isolated I began to feel.

I wanted to surprise Mr. Demarus, but I didn't want to die in the process. Things would happen fast. I knew I would be one hundred floors from the street and help—if any was coming. My plan was full of risks, but I had my professional pride to think of.

I still resented being used. I had to steady myself then, not against the motion of the elevator, but against the notion that someone might still be pulling the strings.

I lit a cigarette, stared blankly at the numbers, and then checked my gun where it was thrust through my belt in back. My overcoat hid it well enough. It wasn't for the welcome I was going to get. I knew the receptionist would have called ahead of me by now. I kept the gun for a scene I hoped would come later in the act.

If everything went according to plan, enough firepower was converging to raze Galaxy Tower. My .9 mm wouldn't help me much.

As the elevator approached the top of the building I placed my hat on my head, then straightened it. I peered into the polished brass doorframe. I looked sufficiently ridiculous—my makeup freshly applied—though I had to admit the hat had a humanizing effect.

The elevator dinged abruptly at the same instant it stopped. I heard the low hum of power gather at the doors before they rumbled open.

I was not surprised by what I saw, merely satisfied. There is definitely something gratifying about having a hunch play-out correctly. At least for a detective. I didn't reach for my gun, just opened my hands and smiled at my reception committee.

"You're not going to try to pass for a long lost cousin, are you, Mr. Adrian?" I asked him where he stood smiling in deep pile ivory carpet between two tall gentlemen with machine guns.

My mouth was bleeding. I hadn't expected that one.

Adrian had reached out and decked me. He had a good solid fist that I would respect next time it was thrown at me.

I was dragged into the penthouse and thrown roughly onto a black leather couch. The gunmen took up positions behind it; their weapons ready—occasionally nudging my shoulders with the barrels.

Adrian sauntered over to a long chromium and glass bar that ran the length of one wall. He reached over, grabbed a towel, used it to wipe my blood and makeup off his fist then threw it at me.

I pressed it against my lips and counted teeth. One on the top felt loose, but I still had a mouthful. My winning smile remained intact.

Strange, the things one thinks about before the hangman comes.

"Let's not draw this out, Wildclown." Adrian used his commanding voice from where he mixed a pair of drinks behind the bar. To his left, the penthouse opened onto a large games room containing the requisite pool and poker tables and dartboards. A wall bearing three dark doors ran the length of that. Various paintings, either original or copies of the masters hung on the plain beige walls.

"Sorry about your boys..." I mumbled behind the towel referring to Pigface and the Monkey twins.

His brow furrowed. "Oh, Jacky and the others! They were well paid." He carried the drinks over, set one in front of me, and then sat on the chair opposite with his. He looked elegant in his dark green wool suit and red tie. But there was something different about him. He still retained his aura of power, but the red in the tie spoke of a ferocity that had been unleashed.

Adrian managed to look casual but couldn't hide a primitive desperation in his mien. He crossed his legs—the mannered pose belied the carnal viciousness in his movements.

His suit went well with the easy chair he had chosen—it was gray, the color of my future.

"You knew your secretary was working for the Twelve Stars..." I said slowly, my jaw still numb.

"I knew that, yes." Adrian smiled. "Though I don't think she intended to become a spy for them. I believe her involvement with them began as a fad. It was just her bad luck that she tried to be a good little trooper for them. Her line was tapped, had been from the start. Not for any particular suspicion on my part, I just think it's good policy... one has to keep ahead of the competition."

"For someone who's ahead of the competition, you're starting to look like someone who lost the race."

"What do you mean?" His eyes flashed fire. I saw my incisor print on his fist whiten.

"You're not in control of the situation. You faked your own death." I tasted my drink. My lip throbbed immediately. I took another drink.

"After you visited, I realized that the timeframe for my original plan had become slightly truncated." He sighed, "In plain English—I needed to buy myself some time, which was unfortunate for my secretary." He drank, and then made a motion to one of the men behind me. A cigarette flipped through the air. Adrian caught it.

"That was her on the highway..." I worked a hunch.

“Yes, she donated the majority of the flesh. I provided several liters of blood that I had stored for emergencies, operations and so forth. Oh yes, and some hair and nail clippings so they could positively identify me. One trip to the landfill netted plenty of male body parts to put in the blender after certain distinctive organs were removed from her anatomy. Authority is notorious for its failure to pay attention to detail, so I didn’t expect they would discover my ruse.

“Most bodies, especially one treated as roughly as that was, are sent to the landfill as soon as the coroner signs the death certificate. It is a violent world we live in. Death is cheap these days. And, Authority expected to find my body sometime. They were willing to believe it was me.” He smiled grimly. “How did you know I was still alive?”

I rubbed at my face. “Call it a hunch. I know that must be frustrating to you, and that may very well be why I say it.” I watched Adrian’s face. “I remembered the security at Simpson’s, for one. I found it difficult to believe that anyone could get to you that easily. The impressive nature of the buildings might be working against you there. I bought it at first, then I began to count bodies. Your dying at that time when you had exuded such confidence just didn’t fit. I realized that my showing up at your door must have caused you some concern. If I knew about your method of collecting clients you would realize that it was likely that someone else did too.

“You figured the game was over, so you moved to Plan B. You disappeared. Maybe that was what put me onto you. At first I thought you were running from Authority, or a mob of angry customers. But, you’re too powerful for that. You disappeared for other reasons. I suppose you used that time to construct this new identity? Or, no, you already had it waiting.”

“Yes, I did.” Adrian chuckled. “I should not have underestimated you. In a simple disguise—a wig and false moustache—I took an airliner to the old country. It was a deception that worked without my having to bribe anyone. That’s what I liked about it.”

“So no one knew you were out of the country. I’ll bet you made no secret of returning as Demarus. Sure, you wait it out there. Your cronies chop up your secretary when you give the say so, dump her on the highway with male body parts, a bit of mangled ID, your hair and blood, they give a call to Authority. You return as Demarus, grieving uncle to the poor deceased. What did you look like, a fake nose and beard?”

“I used some of the technology we employed at Simpson’s.”

“Why didn’t you just bribe Authority? We both know they don’t represent anything resembling *real* law and order.” I watched Adrian for weakness.

“I was not willing to cut them in. They no longer represent a single powerful entity.”

“Treating the dead is a multi-million dollar business!” I threw in. “They wouldn’t be greedy enough to shut you down. You must have been making payoffs already. What’s another point?”

Adrian simply smiled. “It keeps me from holding one hundred per cent. There are far too many palms to grease. And as I said, with the internal disintegration of Authority no one was powerful enough to guarantee my safety any more.”

“So you wanted to shut down. Sure, you’ve got enough money socked away, and you have something bigger, I’ll bet.”

“Then we share a secret, Mr. Wildclown.” Adrian butted his cigarette out.

“The Twelve Stars must have missed her though...your secretary. They had to be dealt with. They have a good deal of pull in Authority.” I put the towel down, pulled out

a cigarette and lit one. I sensed gun barrels following my movements. “And, they’re nuts. They don’t do business in the usual way.”

“As I understand Authority, all special interests groups within it work behind the scenes. And the Twelve Stars can’t act until they’re given orders from their Eternal Fuhrer, or whatever he calls himself,” Adrian said, rising and taking a position by the bar. “They can’t openly challenge things—at least they can’t openly challenge the combined groups inside Authority—the whole thing works with loosely formed alliances, I’m told. Whoever has something to lose calls in favors, gives out favors or threatens the right people. Oh, I have no doubt that the Twelve Stars were working on the mystery of my disappearance—they were very interested. That’s part of the reason for providing them with my body. As for my secretary, we hoped to cover that with a note and some theatrics from Ms. Van Reydner. Jan assumed her identity and made sure she was seen leaving town.”

“To buy time...” I was uncertain. “So Van Reydner returned.” I had harbored a secret hope that she had turned against her master.

I was such a romantic.

“Yes, due to the nature of certain recent acquisitions... it became impossible for her to check in at the prearranged time as you and I discussed in my former offices.” He smiled. “I might add she helped set you up at the Arizona Hotel.” Adrian showed his teeth.

“You knew I would go, and you made certain that everyone else who was looking for her knew she was there. Then, you sit back and watch your enemies eliminate each other.” I took a long drag of my cigarette until my lips stung. The pain cleared my mind. “So what did the Twelve Stars want with you? What did your secretary tell them?”

“Enough.” Adrian managed to look wounded. “She started with the inner workings of my organization and ended with your ridiculous accusations.”

The elevator hummed and began to descend. I hoped there would be something in it for me. Adrian stared bullets.

“Who else did you tell, Mr. Wildclown?” he snarled viciously and then turned to one of his gunmen. “No call from the desk! It must be Authority. Go quick! Get Miles and Stephan in here fast, and armor up. Get the others ready. Tell them to play it cool. You’ve got two minutes.” Adrian pulled his own gun and checked its action, and then he looked at me. “Wildclown, regardless of how I play this out. I will win.”

In moments Adrian’s palatial penthouse produced two more gunmen. They were just slipping into the last heavy pieces of Authority Enforcer armor. The gunman sent to get them followed doing the same. They turned over a couple of end tables and took up position in a fan shape in front of the elevator. The elevator dinged. The doors slid open.

Inside, Douglas Willieboy stood to the left of Inspector Cane. Both wore the long black leather of Authority Inspectors. Both held their hands up and empty, palms out. Both of their faces had the strained look of having struck a truce.

“Don’t shoot!” growled Willieboy. “I want to make a deal. We’re businessmen, Adrian!”

Cane spoke up. “We’ll offer you twenty million.” He licked the fear off his lips.

Adrian smiled. “Miles, Stephan! Frisk them.”

As they moved I shot a quick glance over my shoulder. One gunman had returned to his position there, though his attention was on the proceedings.

In moments, both Cane and Willieboy were stripped to their shirtsleeves. The search had yielded up a pair of handguns. In addition, they found brass knuckles and a lead sap in Cane's pockets. Both Inspectors looked naked and uncertain without their weapons. Still, I had to admit that neither looked scared enough.

They had some wild cards.

"You clusterfuck!" Willieboy exclaimed by way of greeting me.

"Glad you could make it, asshole!" I said, but fell silent when Adrian speared me with a look.

"I will stay in charge of these proceedings." He rubbed his palms together.

"Gentlemen, I assume you both have something to offer. I cannot think you would approach me empty-handed. I hope Mr. Wildclown's presence does not bother you. He did broker this little meeting after all. Since he has been a thorn in all of our sides for so long it would please me that he should stay. I would like to hear his observations. His contempt is so thinly disguised, equal only to his naiveté." Then all humor left him. "And you might want to participate in his punishment."

"You're the boss!" Willieboy took a cigarette from his pack on the table, and smiled at me around it.

Cane chewed his toothpick. He pointed a finger at me. "You fucker." He grinned and licked his fat lips. "I should have killed you..."

"After all the help I gave you." I had a definite urge to see Cane bleed profusely. "I put you onto Adrian in the first place. It was obvious Willieboy knew about him. He told me how to find him. But he kept it from your group. I gave him to you, but you let him slip away."

"Dog meat, you're fucking dog meat..." Cane raised a fist.

"Please," Adrian interrupted, glancing at Cane. "Now, you offered twenty million. I believe that was dollars. Ludicrously low, but let's call it ante."

"Hey, hey!" Willieboy spoke up, agitated. "The bidding hasn't started yet."

"True. But that's what it will cost to enter the game." Adrian finished his drink, and then motioned for one of his men to fix another. He smiled at me, then at Cane. "You gentlemen seem to have a great deal of animosity for each other."

"Cane introduced me to a friend of his." I frowned at Cane. "How is the Handyman? I hope he's having a tough time adjusting."

Cane growled and instinctively clenched his right hand.

Adrian chuckled.

I turned to glare at him. "I suppose I have you to thank as well, and Ms. Van Reydner. Cane and his bullies were waiting for me at the Arizona Hotel. The Handyman tried to torture information out of me." I smiled at Cane. "I gave him a bit."

Cane's face lost all emotion and paled. "I should have cut you up myself."

"Yes, I think you should have. But you missed your chance." I clenched my fists. "I believe Adrian is going to have the honor now."

"Gentlemen. Let's not turn this into a bar room brawl." Adrian had sauntered behind the bar and poured himself a drink. He took a gulp.

"I've got a question," I spoke up. "Who killed Alan Cotton first?" I jabbed my chin at Adrian. "You and Van Reydner just stumbled on it, didn't you? You were doing your sick business on Conrad Billings, and you overheard something in the next room."

Adrian snickered and said: "You are a savant!"

“And you were just lucky. That was all it took. You were there. You shot Cotton, then you stole whatever it was that he was selling, and left before his prospective buyers arrived.” I lit a new cigarette. “I think it was Cane who was next. He got there and found Cotton just coming out of Blacktime. Cane represents a concern that very much wanted what he had to sell. Cane gets there, maybe the Handyman’s with him, and they work Cotton over really bad.

“They torture him, and since he was already dead, they had to be extreme. The problem is that Cotton had no idea where his *Regenerics Secret* was at that point. He died quickly the first time. Isn’t that right, Mr. Adrian? So he could only tell Cane that he opened a door and saw a gun barrel. Then Blacktime! But he did tell Cane what his secret was. Am I right? And that’s why you decided to turn him into blood pudding. So no one else would ever know.”

“That’s a fucking lie, Wildclown!” Cane took a step toward me. “He was already...” But that was all he choked out because Willieboy brought down both his heavy fists on the back of Cane’s neck. There was an audible cracking sound, and he dropped on the carpet.

Guns clicked all around me, barrels pointed at Willieboy. He held his hands up. His voice was shrill. “No, no goddamn it. I thought he was going to take a swing at Wildclown. Don’t shoot.”

I knelt by Cane. He wasn’t breathing. I felt his neck. It was as loose as a rag doll’s. I looked up.

“Jesus, Willieboy, remind me to never ask you for a massage.” I wiggled Cane’s head. “A bit excessive, don’t you think?” I wiped my hands on my coat.

He shook his head turning to Adrian.

“Don’t worry about Cane. He was small time. The group I’m representing is willing to pay one hundred million dollars for the *Regenerics Secret*, plus percentages on the gross.”

Just as Adrian’s mouth was turning up into a big happy grin, the penthouse roof exploded over the pool table and it started raining Authority Enforcers.

The couch around me began to erupt in chunks of bunting and wood. I leapt behind it, grabbed for my gun.

I found my guard. I *think* it was him. His head was missing.

Chapter 58

The air was alive with staccato machine gun fire. There were the trademark repetitive chewing booms of Authority auto-shotguns. I glanced around the room, and immediately saw one of Adrian’s men, decked out in Enforcer armor shooting from behind a pillar.

I was in his line of fire, if he turned it on me, so I had to be sure. I saw a thin pale groove at the base of his neck where the Kevlar and plastic met skin. Gun leveled, I fired at the edge of the mask.

There was a simultaneous metallic whine and groan. He slumped over in a heap. I swung around in time to see Adrian dive into a room behind the bar.

Two other rooms opened onto the battlefield. Authority bullets were eating up my barricade so I snapped two shots over the couch then ducked and rolled into the room after Adrian.

I spun onto my stomach.

Willieboy had taken refuge in a room opposite me. He smiled as he barked into a miniature transceiver.

A foot stamped down on my hand; my gun rattled behind the door. I looked up, and caught Adrian's fist behind the ear. I rolled seeing sparks.

Outside, the gun battle raged. Adrian must have had more hired guns in the penthouse because the invasion force was preoccupied. They had expected a massacre and had found the beachhead at Normandy.

I slugged Adrian in the face doing my best to wipe his nose off. Blood burst from it. It was a weak hit because I was fighting from the ground, but it threw him off enough, and the gun he was holding popped once at my left shoulder.

I felt a slap of pain, and then nothing as my arm went numb. I shifted my body onto his gun hand, and slugged Adrian with my right; he kicked at my groin. I caught his foot and knocked him over.

His gun flew onto the bed.

He toppled into a coffee table and dresser.

I was up. We were in an enormous bedroom. It had its own living room.

I ran at Adrian, leapt on and off an overstuffed easy chair. My fist caught his chin hard. He buried his knuckles in my guts.

We went down, rolled against the bed.

Adrian's face glared at me. I glared back.

"Join me, Wildclown!" he growled angrily, blood spraying from between his teeth. "I have millions. I have the..."

I threw a fist at his temple.

Adrian was no slouch.

I suddenly felt his arms turn to steel, then caught two of his punches on the left cheek. My left arm was wood. More sparks flew. My vision jumped.

I wrestled one of his arms to his side.

"Wildclown!" Adrian threw a glance at the door. I noticed the gunfire had become sporadic. A fog of acrid smoke rolled over us. "They'll be in here to get us. We're both dead if they do. I have a way out. Join me. At least don't stop me!"

"Where's Van Reydner?" I choked as his forearm slid across my throat.

Suddenly Adrian smiled. He had managed to push my right shoulder under the bed, pinning it. The best my wounded left could do was flail like a landed fish. His forearm suddenly weighed ten tons as he found leverage. He chuckled and whipped his right arm onto the bed. It came back with a gun attached.

A dark light filled his eyes.

"Where is she you stupid clown?" I could smell the cordite; the muzzle was so close. My blood had splattered the barrel like paint. "The first place..."

But that was all he said. A fountain erupted out of his chest. I gagged as blood gushed over my face. Adrian rolled forward off of me, and lay still. I pushed the gore from my eyes and looked at Willieboy. He stood in the doorway smiling, weighing the machine gun in his hands.

“Help me get his body. We’ll question him later.” Willieboy’s eyes were stern. He took a step toward me.

The gunfire had stopped outside. Authority Enforcers were closing in on the room. Someone had shot out the lights, but I saw a glint on gunmetal.

“Willieboy!” I hissed and pointed.

Willieboy swung around already shooting. Bullet holes pocked a ballistic trail along the wall as he turned. He concentrated his fire on the facemask at the door. It erupted in sparks and blood. My hair stood up; I sensed motion behind me. I kicked Willieboy in the calf, and ducked. He swung his gun around still firing.

Adrian was out of Blacktime.

Standing, his corpse took the withering blast in the abdomen. Bones and blood burst in a wide upward gash, the body toppled back, the hole in his chest ate into his face. The heavy caliber bullets pushed him as they tore him apart.

Then he was gone.

His body slammed into the window and out. There was a great crash, and then dark smoke from the penthouse battle rolled in the door and filled the room.

“Fuck!” barked Willieboy. He shook the machine gun.

“Fuck!” he roared as he spun and let a blast go at the door. “Wildclown! Move that fucking dresser and overturn that mattress on it. Quick!”

I was still bleeding from the bullet wound in my shoulder, so I was a little slow. Willieboy kicked at me as I climbed to my feet. “Hurry, we’re running out of time!”

My arms were leaden as I pushed the large oak dresser near the bed. I idly looked out the shattered window and thought of Adrian one hundred floors below—smashed to sleep now, beyond any worldly cares. I envied him as I pushed the dresser, felt my head throb against the weight.

I heard Willieboy yell “Fuck!” again, when a tear gas canister thumped and rattled into the room.

Still firing, he dropped to one knee, grabbed it and threw it out again. He thrust his steaming hand into his armpit, face twisting with pain.

With what seemed the last of my strength, I upended the mattress against the dresser, then the box spring. I collapsed into the rectangle formed by the body of the bed. I heard Willieboy yell again, then felt him thump into place beside me. Despite the extremity of the situation, he smiled.

A few bullets whizzed overhead and knocked out pieces of glass—began to eat into the mattress with harsh chuffing sounds.

Willieboy pulled his transceiver out of his pocket turned it on, then smiled at me again. “I’d cover your ears if I were you.”

He barked orders into the device, then dropped it to cover his own.

There was the sudden faraway thudding of a helicopter. I was wrong. They were just out of the way sounds. It must have been waiting high above Galaxy Tower, hidden in the clouds. A large Authority Attack Helicopter appeared at the window.

It looked like an armament show with helicopter blades. Its long black fuselage shone dully in the overcast light. The flying weapon dropped enough to center its cannons on the broken windows. All its killing power was pointed into the penthouse.

I looked over at Willieboy. He still smiled, though there was a definite tension in his black eyes.

“The stakes are high!” he bellowed.

The helicopter’s machine guns roared. The walls around us vanished. The ceiling overhead was chewed to pieces in the blink of an eye. Then followed the heavy gut sickening concussion of missile launchers. Fire exploded all around us, I felt the floor come up and kick me in the head.

Incredible light blinded me. Another roar and I knew no more.

Chapter 59

I smelled creosote, or cordite, or gasoline. At first I thought it was in the air, then realized the smell was coming from me.

I was still in Tommy so had to bend my neck to look down.

My coveralls were burnt and charred. The blood on them had been baked black. My left arm was useless. I couldn’t get it to bend. I sat up quickly. A dark orange light glowed above. My head throbbed noisily, and then I realized it was not my head at all.

It was the sound of an engine.

My first suspicion was that I was lying on the steel floor of an Authority transport. A chill went through me like *déjà vu*.

Willieboy smiled down at me from a bench seat. I wanted to kill him. I wanted to kill someone. I reached for my pink skipping rope belt, but found only a line of melted plastic fused to my waist. No gun.

Willieboy chuckled. “Here.” His large hand held out a pack of cigarettes. From a compartment beside him came a bottle of Canadian Club.

“Drink?”

He needn’t have asked. A part of me, that part that wasn’t shell-shocked, was experiencing an odd sense of familiarity. But I was too numb to place it.

We were in the cargo bay of a transport. Both walls held benches over which ran streamlined weapons’ compartments.

Authority used these big monsters when they were called in to break up a riot or start one. Transports could carry equipment, weapons and Enforcers. The benches running the length of the bay were of molded high-impact plastic. I counted places for twenty armored bottoms.

Struggling onto an elbow I took the tin cup offered me—downed the drink then held it out again. I also grabbed the cigarette offered and let Willieboy light it. He was being nice to me for a reason. My singed nostrils ached.

“So there wasn’t enough left of Adrian to question?” My voice trembled.

“I didn’t mean to take him out so bad in the first place.” Willieboy smiled fiercely. “Gun jammed! Heat of the moment. He’s done.” He gestured with his chin.

I turned my head and saw a clear plastic garbage bag smeared with red. It crackled as a pile of hamburger moved inside. A lidless eye peered out. The gristle around it twitched. “You never know. The King’s got some good stitch men.”

“Lovely.” I tried to shift my body away from the monstrosity. “Speaking of heat. You were playing it pretty close to the candle.”

“We were surprised. Cane’s people came in through the floor. Blew a hole and up they came. I suspected something like that. But whoever that first group was that came in through the roof, I’m still trying to figure them.”

“King’s people?” I grinned.

“Maybe...” Willieboy offered me another drink.

“The Businessmen?” I struggled onto an elbow again to accept the drink.

Willieboy gave me a hard look. “What do you mean?”

This time I smiled. “They should have been there. But, that would mean your helicopter fired on your own group. I know the stakes are high, but you can’t buy that kind of loyalty. You know it wasn’t the King’s Men in the penthouse because you know the King’s Men came in the helicopter.”

Willieboy stared, then ruined the whiskey by drinking from the bottle. I tried to register distaste in my features.

He worked the liquor in his mouth and asked, “What makes you say that?”

“You said yourself that the King was a big player. Yet, I never bumped into any of his people. Why would that be?”

“Maybe they only tailed you.” He drank again, and lit a cigarette. “It ain’t over yet.”

“The King’s a leader, not a follower. You said he was bigger than the Businessmen; yet the King would be happy with a tail, and only a tail?”

“Maybe Adrian...” He took a deep drag.

“Adrian was involved because he was lucky, or unlucky seeing how things turned out—same with Van Reydner. Besides he had his people with him at the Penthouse, and the Enforcers coming through the roof weren’t playing any favorites. They fired at everyone. *You included*. Adrian stumbled on Cotton at the Morocco Hotel, the same night he was there to kill Billings and collect himself another client. I think his luck finally turned on him and he got squashed between bigger players.”

“Maybe Van Reydner turned on him.” Willieboy’s eyes were evasive.

“Sold him out? No, I don’t think so. Like every loser who thinks he’s a winner, Adrian had to gloat. He talked before he passed away. He had a deal worked out with her, and she was a solo artist. I can’t see her commanding the party that came through the roof.

“Adrian would have known. He was a paranoid man, kept all of his phones tapped. He knew how much Van Reydner had on him so he wasn’t going to let her go anywhere without keeping tabs on her. Also, if she had wanted a double-cross she could have done that right at the start. Adrian lost track of her for a while after the Billings murder. She could have walked—*peacefully*.” I pulled on my cigarette studying Willieboy’s face. Emotions tightened the muscle on his jaws.

“I guess it wouldn’t be Cane,” he said lamely.

“Come on Willieboy, you already accounted for Cane’s people! There was another invasion force, but it wasn’t the King’s. Cane could turn Cotton into soup, but he didn’t have the motive. He needed the scientist because he didn’t have the research. Whoever pureed Cotton already had everything they could get out of his head. And Cane worked for the Twelve Stars Group. They wanted the Regenerics Secret for their own reasons. I’m sure they believed that Cotton was hiding something that somehow fit into their religion. Cotton was killed and mutilated by someone who either had the Regenerics Secret or he had Cotton’s research to fall back on. Cotton was not needed.” Willieboy

shifted his eyes. "You gave me far too much direction for someone who was a small player. The King had to be represented, but I never saw his people. Who was the one recurring character in this nightmare?" I paused, then crushed my cigarette on the floor. "I called the King just like I called you and hinted that I might have some interesting things for him, Regenerics, for example. Then, when I was ready to move I called *him* back, told his secretary about some action at the Galaxy Tower." Willieboy's smile broadened. "Well, Inspector Willieboy, I never did call *you* back."

Willieboy pointed a finger. "I've got other methods of collecting information—I sure as shit don't need you to hand it to me. Anyway, that just proves that the force coming through the roof could have been his."

"No. I know whose force that was. And it wasn't the King's." I was playing a hunch, and I hoped he wouldn't notice. "Mr. Willieboy. You're working for the King of the Dead. That was his helicopter. And this is his transport."

Willieboy scowled and studied his shirt cuffs. Then, a smile spread over his face. He produced another cigarette, offered me one.

I continued: "I wasn't even convinced of it at first. I actually tried to hang the King of the Dead's involvement on those three dead arsonists who torched the Morocco. Then I realized whoever had the Regenerics Secret was the only individual that needed to cover his tracks. Those arsonists were hired by Adrian to clear away any evidence. He was the only one who had something to hide, since the other players were Authority. Adrian was the only one who could be harmed by evidence."

"That proves fuck all!" Willieboy's face held genuine ire.

"Oh, I'm aware of that. Believe me. I know the thin tissue of a case I have. It's just that I don't see myself surviving the next couple of hours, so I wanted to get these things off my chest." I puffed on my new cigarette. It hurt.

"Anything's possible, Wildclown." Willieboy's smile was an admission.

"You were there too often to be linked to a group like the Businessmen." I decided to accept another drink. "I've never heard of them, but I have heard of the Twelve Stars, and the King of the Dead. Cane was all over me like a bad rash. But I didn't see the King, though you admitted he had people in Authority. The King paid for Cotton's research. He owned the results and could personally benefit from Regenerics if it worked. But he was nowhere to be found. Odd. I was surprised I kept waking up without a foot on the back of my head." I glared, then smirked. "You gave it away completely though when you killed Cane."

"Oh, you noticed that." Some of Willieboy's easygoing manner was returning.

"He was going to say that he wasn't the first Authority at the scene at all. That he got to the Morocco Hotel after Cotton had been butchered," I said, watching Willieboy. He had a formidable poker face. "You both missed the mark because Cotton never talked to either of you. I think Cane was waiting for years for the opportunity to get what Cotton offered—it was his religion. But you, you were just trying to reclaim what your boss already owned."

The transport took a sudden lurch, there followed the sensation of turning.

Willieboy shook his head then said: "Why don't you tell me all about it. Of course, you know, the more you talk the more difficult it will be for you to live through this. It's your funeral."

“Just over two years ago, the King of the Dead read about some scientist of little renown and his new theory, Regenerics. The King, being a dead man, is understandably excited by the notion of life. He contacts Cotton and sets him up in a lab. The only thing missing now is a woman who can ovulate and a man who can produce sperm.

“It just so happens, and I don’t know what sort of luck was working against her, but sure enough, Julie Hawksbridge just happens to be able to conceive, and she happens to be dating a nobody named Victor Davis. Davis happens to be able to produce viable sperm, so he and his girlfriend soon surprise themselves and the family doctor by conceiving a child. Now three times this happens, and three miscarriages follow. The family doctor seems to be one of the few men left with scruples, so he doesn’t tell anyone about it while its happening. But I envision Davis hanging around the lunchroom at Speedy Prescriptions bragging about his masculine prowess.

“In any other lunchroom, he would be laughed at, but it just so happens that Speedy Prescriptions is a subsidiary of King Industries owned by your boss, the King of the Dead.”

Willieboy nodded, feeding me lots of rope.

I continued: “So Davis happens to brag in the hearing of someone who does deliveries or is connected to Cotton’s lab. *He* in turn brags at Cotton’s lab. Soon Davis is approached by one of the King’s Men and I don’t know why Davis went along but with his assistance Julie Hawksbridge gets kidnapped. She disappears. Then Davis disappears. I’m sure if you were to sift the Landfill you might find an arm with his watch on it.” The transport roared and lurched again. I struggled into a sitting position, took more whiskey. “Alan Cotton now. He’s really just a scientist. It is possible that he was duped all of the way through the operation, but I find that difficult to believe. He must have talked to the girl, after all. She must have let him know she was being held against her will. Cotton, maybe he goes a little mad scientist at this point. I don’t know. Maybe he doesn’t have a choice. Whatever, he incorporates this young woman into his project. Now, I know that Cotton had some frozen sperm, in case he and his wife ever could have had a baby, and I believe he used this to fertilize Julie Hawksbridge’s viable ovum. She was pregnant when she was kidnapped, but I expect she lost that one. Her doctor believed she would.”

I levered myself onto the bench opposite Willieboy and said: “Cotton attempts to inseminate Hawksbridge. I don’t know how many times. Whatever, nothing happens for at least a year. Eventually Cotton—with Hawksbridge’s unwilling participation—meets with success, and produces a bouncing baby. A real live bawling infant in a world where there just aren’t such things. I have a feeling at this point that Julie Hawksbridge had to be taken out of the picture. It’s not likely that she would cheerfully hand away her child, no matter how it was conceived. I’m sure being the world’s only fertile female must have made some impact on her. It’s more likely she was drugged or controlled in some way. You may still have her.” I sensed new tension in Willieboy. “You drug her and then the truth hits the fan. Cotton sees that the realization of his dream, Regenerics, has changed entirely for him. It is *his* child after all. He takes a good hard look at the King of the Dead. Not a pretty sight, so the rumor goes. And Cotton decides that the King will not return to life using his baby for raw materials. So late one night, Cotton bundles up his child, and disappears.”

“Why did he phone my people then, if I’m with the King? How did I find out? Or Cane?” Willieboy’s expression was bruised.

“He had to talk to *someone* in Authority. It was just his bad luck that unscrupulous men who abuse their positions work there. I think Cotton was trying to call someone in Authority who could help. And he got filth like you Willieboy, and Cane. I don’t know if he ever did get anyone who was clean. But that’s the truth, isn’t it? He called Authority, yes but not to sell his Regenerics Secret. He wanted your *protection for his child*.”

Willieboy leaned back chuckling. “Fuck, you’re way off. Why would I show you his lab? And if it’s true, what you say, why would we burn it?”

“If that *was* his lab. You may have been trying to destroy the evidence or Cotton’s methods, and equipment. After all, you had the baby. You just had to reclaim it, how long would that take? Sooner or later the rumors would come in and you had the competitive interests inside Authority to placate. You avoid any turf war and the King of the Dead would get his new lease on life.” I paused. “The burned-out lab was for the audience. It conveniently explained Cotton’s untimely demise, and might keep newshounds and loved ones off the track. Enough people had read his work on Regenerics that someone would miss him. The burnt-out lab was a piece of scenery. I think Cotton was always going to die; it was just a question of when. The fact that you showed it to me was just grist for the mill. You knew I wouldn’t accept it because I knew Cotton had died at the Morocco. It was important that you drive the idea of a conspiracy into my head so that I’d be more willing to believe you were the Maverick Inspector trying to do the right thing...”

“Well, you got it all figured, haven’t you?” Willieboy’s voice had lost that good-old-boy appeal. He was deadly serious. “We’ll see what the King has to say about your theories.”

I sat silent. I was anxious to meet the King. Something deep down inside me wanted to meet him too. I turned away from Willieboy, hunkered down to go over my theory one more time. I wasn’t really doing this for anyone but God, I supposed.

The closest I was coming to a court of law was a meeting with an executioner.

Chapter 60

I toyed with the idea of overpowering Douglas Willieboy, and going from there to taking control of the transport. But an arm like a sack of grain, and ears that rang every time I turned my head, convinced me to sit out for a round. Since our last conversation, Willieboy’s manner toward me had changed noticeably. He had become distant, formidable—his good-old-boy demeanor was gone. His actions began to more resemble his behavior during our first encounter.

For the remainder of our ride, the movements he allowed himself were hard and muscular—violence lurked beneath his features. There was something terrible in his gaze. His whole persona had altered, eyes awful, menacing; they thinly disguised the terror of survival. The stakes were high indeed. It was clear; Willieboy would do anything to live through this and he had no guarantees.

Despite this, I still managed to retain reserves of optimism. I was feeling hot to trot, injured but high on adrenaline. My hunches had played out well. I wasn’t happy with the way the last act was shaping up; but it didn’t really matter that people knew justice was done—so long as justice was done. Of course, I knew a lot of people would go

unpunished, *officially*, for their crimes; and I was likely to suffer severely for my involvement.

Times like this I had to be philosophical. There was no point to getting upset about how nice it would be to put someone behind bars. Perhaps Greasetown had evolved away from that type of justice or devolved toward the primitive law of the jungle.

Certainly, the crimes that had been committed were capitol offenses. Since there were no judges or juries that I could trust, perhaps in rather democratic fashion, justice had returned to the individual. One vote. Life or death. Right or wrong. Did we need a committee for everything?

If I could, I would see that someone paid for the murders. Likable or not, Conrad Billings was an innocent. He certainly didn't deserve to die. Then there was Julie Hawksbridge; she had the right to live her own life. No one should be able to turn her into a baby-making machine.

Then there was the baby, if it really existed. I got the creeping fits just imagining the process the King of the Dead intended to inflict upon it.

There was still the possibility that evil existed. There was a chance, however small, that it wasn't simply a poor innocent driven by social or familial turmoil to act out against his fellows. Perhaps evil could still be done.

Were our social compacts our downfall? The scientists had sold our souls, objectified us. Not that the soul was an angel without wings or a devil minus horns, but the spiritual unknown inherent in religion gave us something. It allowed for justice; there was the possibility for balance.

Science would not allow evil, nor would it good. It pushed us into a gray area of vulnerability. People locked their doors because of their compassion. The odd farm family sacrificed a daughter to rape and dismemberment in the hope that one day a criminal would get help. It was just a mistake.

Choices, good or evil had nothing to do with the immortal soul. They were just factors in a sociologist's equation. I had to think. I had to get rid of my emotion. There was too much chance of screwing up, slowing down, if my feelings got involved. Justice was justice. It was a cold thing like the barrel of a gun.

I knew what justice was. I had to see that it was done.

My optimism came from the fact that already the wheels had begun to turn. Adrian had paid horribly for his crime. Cane died for his abuses. Was that the best justice? Let the criminals devour each other. I had to believe there was another way, especially when I gauged my own position. When criminals consumed one another, they did so with violence that ravaged the innocent as well.

I had to sharpen my edge. The emotion had to go. I had to hug justice to my breast, and force it into my flesh.

Things were going to happen fast.

The transport screeched to a halt. Its heavy iron walls were hot, and they groaned against the speed of the rapid deceleration. The impetus forced me hard into one of the uprights. Luckily, it was my right shoulder. My left, and the arm attached to it, was still numb—throbbing intermittently. They seemed to be coming around a little, but behaved like broken radio-controlled toys. Willieboy growled at me. "Come on."

He walked half-crouched to the rear of the transport, and then twisted a handle set in the steel. A light flashed, a horn droned quietly. The door levered open forming a ramp.

Outside, night was falling fast. A heavy fog hugged the walled-in courtyard. A wave of exhaust hit me, made me nauseous.

Suddenly a pair of Enforcers appeared outside the door. They carried auto-shotguns. Both were strangely at home in the darkness that enveloped the world. Their facemasks glinted demonically.

Willieboy stepped out of the transport to relay some orders.

“Take the hamburger to the lab.” He gestured to Adrian’s remains. “Then fortify the gate. Trouble’s coming.”

They disappeared with Adrian into the gloom.

Willieboy turned to me.

“Come on. Let’s get this over with.” He reached in and grabbed my left arm. It almost came off. He should have just shot me. I winced and let out an angry hiss of air.

“Goddamn it. Last time I take a drive with you...” I mumbled against the pain.

The King of the Dead lived in a castle—it was a three-storied mansion about two hundred feet wide built of large brown stones. Copper-roofed towers rose into darkness on the north and south ends of the structure.

I spotted movement in the shadow of their open windows.

We had come to a stop well inside the tall stone wall that circled the perimeter of the castle courtyard and grounds.

I could remember rumors of a huge wooded acreage that enclosed the manse supposedly containing a herd of man-eating boar. I looked around and saw silhouettes along the battlements on the outer wall.

There was an open lawn before the castle that contained a crushed gravel drive one hundred feet long flanked by topiary knights on leafy steeds.

I glanced back down the drive toward the stark iron gates. Guards moved back and forth in a glaring spotlight against the black bars of a portcullis. Smaller stone towers stood on either side of the gate. Authority transports with cannon mounted on them patrolled the grounds.

“Get going!” Willieboy shoved me. I stumbled.

My clothes were in shreds and let the cooling air in. It was refreshing, but irritated my scorched skin. We approached a pair of heavy iron and oak doors set deep in the face of the mansion. I saw that a little bridge ran over to them, crossing a moat about fifteen feet wide. I looked down; the dark water dimly mirrored my face.

“A moat?” I asked Willieboy. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

He shrugged and pushed me on.

We entered a high vaulted hallway. A huge stag’s head with an eight-foot rack of antlers hung on a heavy shield on the wall opposite the entrance. Below that a pair of battle-axes were crossed. An intricate suit of armor sagged under these, looking tired. A stone hallway ran to my left and right. The manor had been designed in gothic fashion, punctuated with many high-pointed arches. The buttresses disappeared in shadow over my head.

Willieboy pushed me painfully down the hall to the right. We passed works of art sporadically placed along its length. On one stand was the noble brow of Caesar Augustus, on another Hannibal. Farther down the hall was a portrait of Napoleon, farther still King Henry VIII. I turned to Willieboy, raised an eyebrow.

He kept his eyes straight ahead. The muscles at his jaws bunched. This place was not to be mocked.

Willieboy pushed me up a broad flight of stairs, ending at yet another tall set of doors. A life-size human skeleton in armor was carved on each mahogany door, wooden broad swords in bony hands. Willieboy knocked on a shield carried by one of the skeletal guardians.

Seconds later, the doors swung inward.

My nose hairs tried to crawl up into my brain the moment the doors opened. *Formaldehyde*. Sour, sickening formaldehyde. A mist of it hung in the air—or its scent had been added to the clammy fog that swirled in the motion of the doors.

Willieboy gestured with his head.

I entered.

The fog settled on my skin like airborne excrement, and soaked into my clothes. I resisted the urge to retch on a point of etiquette. It just wouldn't do to vomit at that time. I was a guest.

The doors thudded shut behind us like dirt dropped from a gravedigger's shovel. I shook with a chill—blood loss, and the fact that the place was easily a balmy 55 degrees. Ahead of me were broad circles of light running the length of a long damp Indian carpet. Through the stinking fog, I could just make out a raised dais. I detected movement from within its faint illumination.

“Do come in, Mr. Wildclown.” A voice as cool as the room spoke from the mist-shrouded dais. “You may approach.”

We approached. Willieboy showing some hesitation.

The cold voice spoke again. “Excellent work, Mr. Willieboy. Excellent. I would prefer to have Mr. Adrian in speaking condition, but accidents happen. Wildclown will do if what you reported is true. Most unfortunate Mr. Adrian's demise. Most unfortunate. I am certain Mr. Wildclown will be only too pleased to help us locate our property. If, as you say, he knows.”

“I saw them talking,” Willieboy said. “During the gun battle. I saw them talking.” Sweat gleamed on his brow. “He sure acts like he knows.”

I approached a great foggy tub about ten feet in diameter. In front of it were three wide steps. They were carved from a dark, polished marble. I hesitated, trying to pierce the masking mists. I could see movement within.

A round pale head, skeletal arms moved wraith-like. I walked up the steps. I saw now that the King lay in a gigantic tub. Powerful whirlpool jets churned the surface of its contents: formaldehyde, and something else that reeked of sulfur.

When I looked into the tub I almost went back on my decision not to vomit.

Chapter 61

The King was deathly pale where he floated in his bath. Despite the preserving fluid, his corpse had a desiccated, rotten look to it. His features were sharp and gray-veined; his body wasted by age. Stitches of dark green cord held him together. The King had been a rich man at the time of the Change, but he had met with a violent death. It was obvious from looking at the corpse that he had been reassembled.

As his limbs moved in and out of the fog, I noticed that his skin hung on him in patches that were slightly different shades, and that on one hand, he had two mismatched fingers.

He only wore two things: a ridiculous brown wig that clung to his head like a drowning cat and a golden crown over that.

He was so contemptible I wanted to laugh. Was existence so precious that he would cling to such a battered and run-down excuse of a body?

I caught myself, remembering the body I had borrowed.

The King paddled around his shallow pool, alligator-style. My guts jumped when he unconsciously drank a long draught of the liquid. Little puffs of vapor blew from his withered nostrils. He looked like something that had crawled out of a rusty can.

“Mr. Wildclown. I would like it very much if you tell me the whereabouts of my property. After that, you may go.” He leaned against the rim of the tub. I noticed that a console of buttons, dials and video monitors was built above the rim.

“If you don’t mind taking a walk down a two-way street. I’d like to know what happened to Owen Grey.” I tried to search my battered pockets for cigarettes. My left hand moved out of sync. Willieboy produced a pack and handed me one.

The King squinted at Willieboy.

He paused while lighting my damp cigarette. “He was the private dick hired by the Hawksbridges to find the girl.”

“Oh, yes.” The King’s dead face registered real delight. “I remember him now. A dinosaur. They are rare, you know, so it troubled me to have him killed.” His features froze. “Now, where is my property?”

“I don’t usually use language like this but *fuck you*.”

The King showed broken teeth. He was used to dealing with hard cases.

He pressed a panel under the console. A drawer eased open. His gray hand reached in and retrieved an automatic—something old and powerful from Smith and Wesson. The smile had remained dead upon his face. “Now, shall we do this while you can still draw a breath? Or will we do it when each injury precipitated upon you will become an eternal scar that will not heal. A hole or tear that remains open—jagged—baring your raw red secrets to every prying eye. Do not toy with me. I have an understandable contempt for all things living. One look at me should dispel any doubts about whether or not I will take great joy in killing you.”

I smiled. He was correct. His dead face held secret anticipation.

“What do you want to know?”

The King sighed two clouds of formaldehyde gas, set the gun down on the edge of the tub beside him and nodded his head. “Where is my property?”

“Look, I’m not stalling or anything. I just don’t think I’ll be around long after I talk. Would it be possible for you to explain how Grey met his end?”

The King smirked. “You posses hubris, Wildclown. I’ll give you that.” He sighed. “Grey became a nuisance. He was pestering me, and he was drawing the attention of one or two factions in Authority. Now, the Hawksbridges are not of my stature, in wealth, but they did have enough pull to cause me minimal damage. I couldn’t have that. So I encouraged Mr. Willieboy to hire a gun to take Grey out. Who was it?”

“Some psychopath. Wiry little guy called himself Jimmy Jay. I don’t know much about him. He talked a mean streak about religion, and the end of the world. He was in an

asylum before the Change, killed his little brother, or some soap opera. Drank like a fish, and oh shit, there was something..." Willieboy rubbed his chin. "Can't remember. Anyway, he was homicidal, pure and simple. Kill at the drop of a dime. He did Grey for a hundred dollars. Something must have happened to him after, because he never collected the money. Grey was out of the way though. I saw the body. Jay called me, told me where to find it. Fucking psychopath. Grey was burned up pretty good."

"Why did you pay Grey's bills?" I was beset with weird images of Grey's ignoble end. The gasoline dousing the body. The vapor igniting. "It's not unusual for someone, especially someone in Grey's line of work to welsh on a bet, or skip on the rent."

Willieboy smiled. "That was the King's idea."

I turned to him. "Bought you time."

"Certainly. I didn't know how much trouble Grey had already caused, or whether or not he actually enlisted some aid. If his bills were paid, the chances of someone missing him were fewer." He laughed, "As it turned out, he didn't have a friend in the world. But, I don't believe in taking chances, and his bills were so small as to be nonexistent. It was an excellent investment."

"Who made the call to the Hawksbridges?" I stared at Willieboy. "Why kill them?"

The King spoke to my back. "They had become a nuisance as well. I believe Grey convinced them that they could find their daughter if they looked hard enough. They turned out to be a larger threat than Grey. Mr. Willieboy called." Willieboy gave the King a dark look.

"What did you do? Fix their brakes, or just run them off the road?"

"That's inconsequential. They pushed hard at something that was bigger than they were, and it rolled back on them. It's simple physics," the King chuckled.

"And the girl. Is she alive?" I turned to the corpse.

He shook his head. "You're boring me." The King bobbed in his tank. "Now it's your turn to answer a few questions."

Transition.

I was floating over Tommy's head. I immediately tried to possess him. He was a wall. I tried again. Below me Tommy had dropped into a catatonic state. His jaw dropped. His lips seemed to try and work around a word.

"Where am I?" He winced as he experienced his wounds for the first time. He reached up to his left shoulder, hissed.

I watched the King. He stared, fascinated and then swam in for a closer look. Perturbed amusement writhed over his crosshatched features.

"Wildclown?" The clown's face had become feral, apish. The King frowned. "Oh God! Willieboy would you look at..."

But Tommy was already moving. He leapt up the remaining steps and landed on top of the King—pushing the dead monarch beneath the surface. His hand moved lightning fast to the gun by the console. It whipped up, pointed at Willieboy. Willieboy had his half out of his holster. He froze—a queer smile on his lips.

"Now, just a minute... hang on Wildclown. We're both bit players here. This is perfect!"

I watched as the King's hands reached out of the bath to climb spider-like up and down Tommy's legs. Tommy looked down.

He murmured, "Spiders..."

Then he looked up. Willieboy had used the split second to get his own gun clear, but he hadn't moved fast enough. Tommy fired six shots into Willieboy's chest. The .44 slugs tore his rib cage to pieces. The gun almost kicked itself free of Tommy's damp grip in the process.

Willieboy staggered back, vomiting blood until the volley ended. He stood in place a moment looking down at the ruin that his chest had become, befuddled. He looked up—anger gripped his brow, then he grinned. Willieboy sat down with his legs crossed. His head fell forward. Blood spilled from his mouth.

Tommy threw the gun onto the stairs, and then looked down at the King's scrabbling hands.

"What have we, what have we? Demons from the pit?" He reached down and grabbed both arms by the wrists. He yanked the King up and out of the formaldehyde. The corpse hung there looking grotesque and fragile. Fluid poured from its orifices. His face was an inch from Tommy's.

"You can have anything. Anything." Formaldehyde spattered from the dead King's lips. Tommy held him higher. The King's legs had withered and atrophied in the constant bath. They were bowed and twisted like driftwood. I realized in a moment, how ridiculous his notion of a new life was.

"Please," the King said, his voice was soft. "Please, I will pay you any sum. I will give you anything."

"You stink..." Tommy sniffled.

The King smiled, chuckled even. "Oh, yes, oh yes, I do. That's right I do. Just tell me what you'd like. I'll do whatever you want. Just let me go, that's all I ask."

"I killed your friend." The clown roughly twisted the King's head toward Willieboy's body. The cadaver's neck clicked audibly.

"Oh, that's all right. He and I weren't close. I didn't even like him. That's okay, what you did. I'm not angry, Mr. Wildclown." The King forced a ghastly smile.

"He was your *friend*," Tommy said, then with righteous fervor rising. "You're disgusting!"

Tommy pulled the King's left arm off. The body was fragile, and the shoulder tore like boiled cabbage. The King shrieked. Tommy took the arm by the wrist and mashed it against the console. The King cried aloud.

Tommy tossed the severed arm, wrapped his own around the King's torso, and then with a loud twisting wrench pulled off the King's right. He nonchalantly dropped that member into the bath—it bobbed, fingers twitching. Tommy sat on the edge of the tub panting, bewilderment on his features. His right hand held the King's body by its neck. He bent the King's rubbery legs and sat him on his right knee.

The phone started ringing. Tommy looked at it, sneered.

The King was sobbing.

"Oh God. I'll do anything. I'll do anything. There's still time. Don't do this. Don't do this. There's nothing after this. Nothing. Please, I beg of you. I have riches, I'll give you anything." His weeping face twisted into a mask of grief.

"Anything?" Tommy asked. He smiled. I noticed now that the formaldehyde had dissolved much of his make-up. Tommy's face was blotted with black and white. The features streamed away distorted—skull-like. "Anything at all?" He shook the dead king's corpse.

“Yes, Mr. Wildclown. I will give you riches.”

“So Satan said to Christ.”

The King frowned. “Not riches then. I will give you what you want.”

“Give me death—the death I deserve.” Tommy’s face was close to the King’s now. He slapped behind him, grabbed the gun. They sat poised like lovers. The phone continued to ring. The clown held the gun out to the King, then realized the dead man had nothing to hold it with. “An end to the noise.”

“I-I don’t know what you mean? Death? That’s a trick. You can’t want death!” The King’s face distorted. He glared at the gun offered him. “You don’t want death. You want to trap me.”

Tommy pulled the King’s face closer now. His dead legs thrashed. He screamed incomprehensibly.

The clown set the gun down and said: “Oh, but I can want it. Death is the sleep I am denied. Nothing follows us there. Not money, not love, not guilt.” He stared momentarily into the King’s dead eyes. “I want the old death. The old death that will lead me to Hell. You’re lucky. See, I betray you with a kiss.”

And Tommy pressed his lips against the dead king’s. As he did so, both hands gripped the corpse’s wormy neck.

The King’s legs thrashed. I heard a muted scream. As Tommy kissed him, his hands began to tighten on the neck, then pull. The King screamed long and hard. The head twisted. There was a sickening ripping and tearing of cartilage and bone. The body fell away, leaving the clown standing—lips still intimate with those of the gruesome head in his hands. He pulled the head back then, and smiled at it.

“I knew him well...” The King’s hideous head sat in Tommy’s outstretched hand. Its features worked horribly. The eyes rolled; the jaw worked. The tongue lashed.

Tommy cocked his arm back, kicked a leg up out of the formaldehyde and muttered to himself. “You’ve gotta watch that Tommy Wildclown, Bill. He’s got a hell of a fastball!”

Tommy pitched the head at the wall about fifteen feet from him. It struck the stone with a sickening smack, and then fell in a sliding pile of gore and gray matter.

Transition.

The smell of formaldehyde hit me squarely in the face again. I was back in Tommy. I could taste formaldehyde, and the source of that made my guts twist. I gagged—spat.

The King’s body thrashed against my leg. I climbed out of the pool. A chill shook me. Why were there no guards? I picked up the gun on the steps. Four shots left in it. I looked over at Willieboy’s body. He would be up soon. I resisted the urge to dismember him.

I turned back to the King’s console, reached out over the kicking corpse and flicked on a video screen. Buttons were well marked.

One said: “Main Gate.” I turned that on.

The screen showed the main gate under siege. A large Authority Tank was positioning itself on the street outside the wall. Its long barrel was pointed at one of the towers. There were a number of Authority transports parked across the ironwork on the inside. Others were taking up position along the perimeter. I looked at the phone. Its ringing had become a part of the panic that gripped me. I picked up the receiver.

“Yes?” I tried to make my voice old and bitter and worn out. It was easy.

“King, sir. This is the main gate. We’re going to lose it. There’s a strong force out here. We’ve already lost twelve of our men. The others want to run for it.”

“Hold the gate!” I realized how ridiculous that sounded. “Is there transport for the girl?”

There was silence for a moment. “Your private vehicle, sir. In the underground garage. Only way out.”

I hung up. Then flicked a button marked, *Laboratory*. There, in black in white, was the usual machine and test tube-filled lab. There were tables and utensils—Bunsen burners and devices for measuring other things.

What interested me most sat at the back of the room on a cot in an eight by eight cage. It looked just like Julie Hawksbridge.

Chapter 62

I picked up Willieboy’s gun. Half way through the action I had a sudden creeping fit. His corpse rested in an incredibly lifelike position, legs crossed, head hanging into his bloody lap. I waved a hand in front of his face—nothing—so I knotted his shoes together.

I had lost my hat when the Galaxy Tower exploded so I searched the King’s room for something to hide my face—nothing.

I pulled the collar of my tattered overcoat up under my nose. My hair was scorched and turned to powder when touched, but enough of it remained to push forward over my brow. I had a gun in each pocket. A quick check put four bullets in the King’s clip and two in Willieboy’s. That left me six between life and death.

The way the front gate looked, I would need a bazooka or a tank to get out alive.

I yanked the door open, ran past the wooden knights and out into the hall letting my instincts work for me. The King was really into the medieval thing, so where would an evil King keep a captive princess?

In a tower or a dungeon.

I’d seen Enforcers in the towers affixed to the north and south ends of the mansion, so I wrote them off as part of the King’s elaborate security measures. They probably had sniper rifles and rocket launchers—no princesses.

I had a hunch that she’d be kept upstairs, just the same. I could always visit the King’s dungeons in the basement, if my search came up empty. The guard at the gate had hinted that the lab was not far from the underground garage. I couldn’t remember anything resembling a garage attached to the main building, and I suddenly thought of the moat.

The King would have planned for that.

I raced down the hall.

As I passed the front door, an angry hail of gunfire struck it. There were explosions and rocket blasts—something hit the wall that shook the floor under me. Violence was eating its way through.

I gritted my teeth and ran.

There were four doors that stood closed on my right. I expected one to fly open and vomit gun-toting King’s Men—nothing.

At the end of the hall, a set of stairs ran up, and a set led down. I ran up; doors like those opening onto the King's room awaited. Instead of knights, there were skeletal ladies-in-waiting carved into its panels. They held black lacquered roses.

Too easy.

I pushed the doors open. Another long hallway. A man stepped out of hiding at the end of it. He carried an auto-shotgun. He wore a long rubber trench coat, bulletproof vest and Enforcer helmet. The gun blazed in his hands.

The door to my left exploded.

Stone archways opened every ten feet on both sides of me. I dove into the closest arch on my right. The door inside it was locked.

The auto-shotgun roared again, three times. The oak paneling opposite me was blown to pieces.

I was showered with splinters. That made four shots. I looked up. A light over the door illuminated the sad dead bridesmaids. I shot it out. The guard's gun roared twice. The wall came away over my head. Shadow fell with plaster and lath, and with it came enough calm to think.

The guard was wearing a protective Kevlar and plastic mask. Masks had eyeholes. I was a good shot, but only good. Hitting an eyehole at twenty feet would require an excellent aim. I had five bullets left, so I would have to be accurate. Just my luck, both guns were unfamiliar.

Farther along the hallway were two more lights designed to resemble flickering oil lamps. I used Willieboy's gun. Two shots later and darkness held half the hall—I tossed the empty gun toward the guard. The auto-shotgun roared three times. The big slugs tore into the wall closer to the guard so I felt a little satisfaction with my plan. His aim was off or he suspected that I was on the move toward him.

I pulled out the King's gun. I had three shots and none of them clear.

The guard was about forty feet from me, and I had to shoot through an overgrown plastic begonia. I aimed, and fired.

The first bullet must have gone in the right eye slit, because the second scored a sparking groove over the brow of the nose and ricocheted. The guard fell heavily, and hard.

I ran up the hall, gun pointed at the fallen man. He was a tall one. His body covered a lot of floor space. I stepped over him.

The door he had protected was locked. I knelt. There was a key on a chain at his belt. I pulled it.

It was attached by a foot long piece of cable that I wasn't going to be able to chew through. His belt would have to come off. I grabbed the buckle with my free hand and a heavy fist smashed into my left ear.

I said something like, "*OOOF!*"

My gun fired with a spastic squeeze of a finger. I whipped up both arms to block his. The iron mask looked at me. I could see one eye peering out. My shot had been good.

I just happened to have a shot a dead man.

Black syrupy liquid drooled out of the ruined eye slit. As his heavy cabled muscles came into play, I began to curse my recklessness.

Of course, the King of the Dead employed dead men. Willieboy had already told me that. And so far this was the biggest and strongest dead man I had ever seen.

He slipped two hard hands around my neck, and stood straight up with me. I started punching and kicking automatically. I grabbed his baby fingers and heard them crack as I turned them back and twisted. I couldn't sneak my grip under the others. They were as hard and unyielding as steel.

Acting on impulse, I grabbed his elbows, pulled him closer. I could hear him grunt against the strain. I straightened my index finger and jammed it into his left eye. I'm sure I tore the nail off doing it, but it fit. The guard screamed in terror, aware that I was about to blind him.

He dropped me and clutched at his face. He pulled at his mask. The auto-shotgun had fallen behind him.

I had noticed a pair of swords hanging on the wall over my right shoulder. They crossed behind a shield bearing a coat of arms.

I leapt up, and ripped one from its scabbard, then brought it swinging around at the guard's neck. Hands and head flew into the air in a fine black spray. The body lost its balance, then spent a few horrible moments trying to stay upright stabbing the wall with its drooling stumps.

It dropped drunkenly.

The head had rolled down the hall and under the table that held the begonias. I picked up the auto-shotgun, pointed it at the door's lock mechanism, and fired—the wood splintered. The door was of heavy oak. Two more shots and the lock fell away.

I kicked it open, sword in one hand and auto-shotgun in the other.

The lab was dimly lit, but it appeared exactly as it had in the monitor. Across from me, I saw a silhouette move. I ran over hard tiles, head whipping back and forth—casting around for enemies.

My hair was on end. I was painted black with blood. Red swam before my eyes. I realized I was growling. I could still hear gunfire and explosions outside the building. The King's guards were putting up a hell of a fight.

But most of them were already dead, had been hired for that reason. That would explain the duration of the battle.

I was at the cage. Julie Hawksbridge looked as pretty as her picture. She appeared to be well fed and clean, though her eyes had a hollow shadow of horror under them.

I grinned.

She looked terrified. I understood why. She had heard gunfire outside her prison, then closer at hand, and then to have the door burst open and a blood-soaked clown run in.

I must have been a pretty sight. I broke the ice, before she went mad.

"I'm Wildclown, a detective. Your brother hired me to find you!" My voice had a jagged edge to it.

"Hurry!" was all she said. I noticed that her voice had managed to retain a tone of innocence despite her treatment.

"Stand back," I ordered, motioning her out of the line of fire with my hand. The lock shattered after four shots. I pulled the door open.

"Hurry."

She ran out of the cage. Her lithe figure was covered in gray pajamas and slippers. Her face held a determined look.

"This way," I hissed, then turned to lead her out of the lab. She screamed when the guard's body stumbled in front of us. It pawed the air with its spurting stumps. I *half-*

backed him out of the way, and continued along the hall. We got to the top of the stairs. The front doors were under assault; the noise was terrible. They shuddered.

Harsh black smoke burst through growing cracks. Sparks leapt from the heavy ironwork. Terrific explosions shook the building.

I led Hawksbridge down the first set of stairs and then the second. I shouldered the door open. A damp, low hall awaited. A single light lit its dark length. At the end of this, another set of stairs. The deeper we went, the harsher the concussions from the war outside. I ran ahead of the Hawksbridge girl stabbing the darkness. The shadows were deep.

At the end of the stair another door. Two roars of the auto-shotgun later and we entered a garage. A cylindrical Authority transport about thirty feet long glowed in dim red light. My boot slipped on grease. I slashed the concrete, and was up again.

“Hurry!” I peered into the darkness, but was still flash-blinded by the action of the auto-shotgun. Long shadows stretched through lurid emergency light. I ran up to the transport.

Authority transport vehicles are built strong from front to back. The thick bodies are cast from solid steel. A single loading door opened in the rear.

I led Hawksbridge to the back of the transport, and found it unlocked. I twisted the recessed handle, and the door levered open as a ramp.

I ran up, wiping more grease from my hand.

Inside, there was a low orange light. A muted warning horn insinuated caution.

In the back of the transport was an open steel sarcophagus containing a liquid. Strange oily reflections rippled over its surface. Then I gagged on the smell.

Formaldehyde—of course, the King’s getaway vehicle. There was still room in back for his guards.

I motioned for Julie to follow me, then activated the internal lock that raised the ramp and shut us off airtight. When the door boomed shut, I heard the faraway purr of an air exchanger. The formaldehyde fumes began to disperse.

I ran past the sarcophagus and around a steel bulkhead to the driver’s seat. I motioned to the passenger chair, and leapt behind the wheel. Gas, clutch, shift, and an awkward joystick to steer by. I grumbled, looked around.

The keys were in the ignition. I started the engine. It kicked over with a powerful roar. Then, I activated the window. A heavy steel plate slid away from a thick shatterproof glass strip that ran around the front of the vehicle. In front of us was a long dim ramp leading upward at about 25 degrees. A light flashed on the console.

“Warning: Doors Closed. Activate Over-ride.” I glanced around the console, but could see no over-ride switch.

I turned to Hawksbridge. She had taken the passenger seat.

“Don’t worry, we’re almost there.”

“Where are you taking me?” Her blue eyes were round with fright.

“To safety, I hope...” I tried to sound confident, but wasn’t sure we’d live to see the next five minutes. I stepped on the gas, the engine bellowed, and with rapid acceleration we flew up the dark ramp.

Two strong screeches warned me when we tagged the wall. I noticed the ramp was capped with a flat panel of steel. It flew toward the windshield.

“Hang on!” I yelled more to myself than to anybody.

An explosive crunch of metal and we were through. The doors were hidden flush with the ground about twenty feet past the moat. Our speed tore them out of the way, and then we were airborne.

There was a sickening moment when I thought the transport was going to fall back on itself, but our momentum took over and landed us jarringly on our wheels.

A quick look around, and I saw carnage.

An Enforcer with a machine gun opened fire at our window. He disappeared under the headlights. We were about one hundred feet from the main gate. There, I saw the angry flash of Authority lights, and many mangled bodies and machines in their flicker. I saw a pair of Authority Tanks angling their big guns toward us. I veered away from the scene and pointed us at the perimeter wall. It was built of heavy gray stone and about twenty feet in height. I tramped on the gas and pulled my shoulder harness over me, buckled it. Julie Hawksbridge followed my lead.

“You might want to grit your teeth.”

“Why?” Her face was white.

“You’ll bite your tongue off if you don’t.” I closed my eyes as the wall came at us flat and impenetrable. We hit. The harness ripped into my shoulders and waist. My head rang with the heavy iron concussion of steel on stone. Then followed a heavy hail of broken rock. The engine caught, choked, the transport rocked and kicked, but our speed, and the weight of the collapsing wall, pushed us through.

I opened my eyes. The windshield was cracked. I saw a car in time to swerve clear of it—then three pines whisked by on my right.

I tore off to the south away from the entrance as fast as the transport would take us. It ran roughshod—like one of the wheels had been ripped off and there were deep metallic groans—but I only needed a few miles.

I didn’t know who was in charge of the army that was attacking the King’s fortress, but I had no wish to meet them when guns were blazing.

I looked at Julie Hawksbridge. She appeared stunned. I reached over and patted her hand.

“We’ll be home soon...” That was all I got out before a cold strong arm dripping formaldehyde slipped around my throat.

Chapter 63

I jumped on the brakes. This is an extremely effective way of dealing with an attack from behind in a moving vehicle—more so, if you’re not traveling at eighty miles an hour. Eighty’s probably pushing it. I was flung forward. My neck folded, drove my chin down—as the momentum forced my assailant on top of me.

Something wet spilled into my ears.

The long body of the transport did not travel well with its wheels locked up. It began to careen wildly. I dragged my foot off the brake and the transport popped out of its skid. It lurched forward again then up and over a pair of parked cars. The steel body sparked and crashed as it struck a building, its armored side tight to the brick screeching.

I took a second to unfasten my harness—the canvas straps pulled away as my attacker fell back with the bucking change in direction. I twisted and kicked off the dashboard and

fell grappling. I was fighting an unidentifiable silhouette. I sprawled on top of him. The floor of the compartment was slick with formaldehyde.

In the darkness, I could feel the cold clamminess of my attacker's hands, and the sour damp of his clothing. The transport lurched again, dowsing us both with a wave of preserving fluid. My eyes burned. We lurched again, and then sped up. I had to guess Julie was taking a crash course in transport driving.

Two hard fists struck my face. The blows landed like steel on bone. My head rang; my bruised face was as fragile as broken crockery. I whimpered as we wrestled in the cramped space beside the sarcophagus.

Waves of formaldehyde sloshed over its rim as Julie wrestled for control of the vehicle. I tried to rise to let a few punches fly. My elbow struck the bench behind me—went buzzing numb. I shifted.

I put a hand on, and into a chest. Wrestling frantically, my hand passed through shattered bone, and into something that felt like a wicker basket full of macaroni and raw liver. A strong hand choked off my gasp. My shadow moved off, I recognized the smile.

“Not yet, clusterfuck!” Willieboy laughed, and then punched me repetitively on the chin. Three good solid punches—my ears hummed. He slammed me into the bulkhead—teeth rattling. I tasted blood; my eyes were swelling. But, it didn't matter any more. I was an angry sore ready to burst. Pain was all I could feel. I was so badly bruised only a bullet would stop me now.

I flew back at him.

“Soon!” I yelled, smashing my fists into his face. I kicked him in the chest as he tried to rise.

He rolled with unexpected agility toward the rear door, leapt to his feet. He wiped old blood and drool from his shattered teeth. “Then do it!”

I remembered the sword. I had placed it in between the driver's seat and the passenger's. My peripheral vision picked up Julie struggling with the joystick. There was a hissing noise; it was my breathing—or Willieboy's.

The dead Inspector looked down at his ruined chest, and pain crossed his features. His full lips contorted.

“Look what you did to me!” he sobbed. One of his fists went to his temple. His face twisted into anguish. “Christ, I'm going to make you pay!” He looked up and saw that I had the sword. I leapt at him, point level with my hips. The blade slid easily into his abdomen. He snarled fiercely and gripped my neck.

“No, no, no, clown!” His eyes were crazy. “That's not going to work any more. It doesn't even hurt.” His grip tightened, and I began to feel the full strength of his massive shoulders. His dead thumbs started to crush my windpipe.

I whipped a hand out and wrenched the door handle. A horn sounded repetitively—louder now. A yellow light flashed. I felt an immediate air pressure change. My head stuffed up. I swallowed, couldn't get it past his thumbs.

Willieboy tightened his grip.

“That's how it's going to be, is it!” he snarled, spittle and blood spraying.

I grabbed his wrist with one hand; the other still twisted the sword in his guts. The transport lurched and we stumbled against the ramp. Our extra weight forced it down with a bang and shower of sparks.

The ramp's iron surface was pocked with holes and corrugated for traction; I drove the fingers of my left hand into the holes while still gripping the sword hilt with the other. Willieboy's face was close to mine. His hands tore at my throat.

This time I smiled.

“No. *This* is how it's going to be!”

With all the strength in my shoulders and back, I twisted and sawed with the sword until it struck his spine. The sword was sharp and the newly dead muscle cut quickly.

Completely independent, the legs suddenly began to kick spastically. Their motion tore the sword from my hand, the hilt struck the road—there was a snap. The lower half of Willieboy rolled messily off the ramp with the spine severed.

It hit the road wetly and was gone.

Willieboy looked at the horrible mess of entrails spilling out of him. He reached down with one hand to keep them in. Pieces that fell off the ramp burst as they hit the road.

Willieboy looked up at me, true horror on his face. His dark eyes deepened, vacuuming darkness in. He started screaming terribly—wildly—like the damned soul he was.

His strained features twisted unimaginably. I watched his hand trying to gather together the ragged edges, like the remnants of a torn and bloodied butcher's sack.

He screamed, released my neck, and then clutched at his abdomen.

We hit a bump and he tumbled off the ramp. The last I remember of him was his cackling terror as he cartwheeled bloodily down the road.

I climbed back into the transport, heard a horn honk and turned around. A long dull Chrysler dropped back from where it had kept pace on our right.

Elmo waved through the windshield. I waved back, and then staggered up to Julie.

“Excellent, Ms. Hawksbridge.” I reeled against the bulkhead dripping blood. My head spun. “My driver has finally caught up with us. If you wouldn't mind applying the brakes.”

Chapter 64

“*The first place...*” Adrian had said before he died and I was about to find out if he was a liar. I drove up to the ominous front gates of Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased then sat listening to the rustling whispers of the dead in the Landfill below.

I drew deeply on a cigarette, and let my mind catch up.

My partner had looked as happy as a kitten when we climbed out of the battered transport, but I'd given him little time to enjoy the feeling. After shoveling Julie Hawksbridge onto the seat between us, I told Elmo where to go. As he drove, he told me how he had found us.

After I hopped the elevator at the Galaxy Tower, the receptionist and doorman had promptly ejected Elmo from the lobby. He hurried to the car where it sat in the parking lot and waited just like we had planned. After fifteen minutes two Authority Enforcement vehicles had arrived.

“Troop Transports! I thought they come for me.” Elmo had scrunched down in his seat as the transports converged in the parking lot. There were a few tense moments as the troops deployed into two lines facing each other. “It looked like armies about to fight!”

“Well,” Elmo said. “Just as I thought they was about to set to, this sedan pulls up and out jumps that lanky fellow—the tall one, that Willieboy. He comes out shouting—all waving arms and stuff.” Elmo’s eyes had turned angry. “Then that little fellow that pushed you around the office, he come forward, argued a minute, shook hands and walked into the building with him like best friends. The armies stopped glaring at each other and stood there watching them go—staring at the building now, like that would bring it down—maybe forty of them or so just staring. Then the one bunch went around the side of the building and up the fire stairs, and the other went in the lobby. Well, I’d just lit another cigarette, when another bunch comes up in two transports. These ones jumped out, took a look at the other transports, then ran into the building. And I thought, ‘Oh Jesus,’ good-bye, Boss!”

Elmo had looked momentarily weary at this point in the tale. “Then I heard gunfire, somewhere, like it was faraway, and echo-like—and I’m thinkin’ I don’t know what to do! You needed back up, but only an army can back you up. Then, a man falls from the top and goes splat on the driveway!” Elmo’s nose had wrinkled. “He hits hard, and I know that even dead, his life is over. I got out of the car and looked up, I was sure the fellow hit the pavement wasn’t you so I think, Oh Jesus, good-bye, Boss! And kind of half-expect you to c-come flying down after.

“Then out of the clouds—way, way up there—comes this big helicopter. Soon as the thing gets level with the windows at the top it blasts away until there’s fire everywhere. I had to get back in the car, there was so much stuff raining down. I was sure you were gone then. But I thought well, maybe I’ll wait. I could go up and check once things quieted down. The helicopter flew off then, and about fifteen minutes later, a group of Enforcers come out of the building, all of them smoking and steaming, carrying you between them. Then I see that Willieboy again! His Enforcers put you in one of the transports and he points at the body that dropped out of the building. Some of the Enforcers bag it and Willieboy drags it into the transport too and away they go. So I start the car and followed.

“Then, we came up to this big place that I wasn’t sure, but I thought it was the King of the Dead’s place. Cause I heard, well you know fellows talk. So, I had to be careful because people don’t speak well of the King. I just got parked, and saw them take you in. Then another bunch of transports come up and Enforcers get out and start arguing with the guys behind the bars at the front gate.” Elmo had smiled then, because he realized the story was growing overlong. “Anyway, I’m waiting when this war breaks out and again I’m thinking, Good-bye, Boss! Then just when I guess I better go, or do something, there’s that transport crashing out of the ground like a monster or something. And when it goes smashing through the w-wall I’m thinking, that’s something the Boss would do, so I follow! I wasn’t sure, but I knew I couldn’t do anything else. And here I am. It was a hunch!”

“Just a hunch,” I had said. “Just a hunch, and a thousand syllables. Thanks Fatso. Good work!”

By the time Elmo had finished his story, we had arrived at the address I'd given him. It was the bar, Berlinz. There were rooms for rent upstairs. Elmo walked in, got a room and then we took Ms. Hawksbridge up, much to the pleasure of the little Latino bartender with the gold tooth.

I let Elmo dress my left shoulder—the wound had bled clean—just some alcohol and a bandage. I pressed a towel full of ice cubes against my face.

Ms. Hawksbridge had grown nervous by this time. She was in a hotel room with a dead man and a clown. I could understand her concern. I had assured her that I was a detective—I showed her my license—and that she would be all right with Elmo.

She'd have to trust us.

I gave Elmo the auto-shotgun and a box of ammunition from the trunk. I left after telling Hawksbridge that I would be back soon; I told Elmo to take her to her brother if I wasn't.

I went to the Chrysler and pulled another coverall out of the trunk, then reapplied my makeup. The way my face had swollen up, it was an improvement for a change.

I loaded the .9 mm from the trunk and realized I was fast running out of backup weapons. That was fine, because I was fast running out of the urge to use them.

I stopped at a drug store to buy a pint of whiskey and a couple of sandwiches then I had headed out along the highway west.

Now I stood looking at the gates of Simpson's. Strips of yellow Authority caution tape were stapled over it in a prohibitive spider web. It bore the words: "Removal of tape a criminal offense!"

I tore it down with a sneer. I walked up to the miniature door set in the gates. It was locked, but I had brought a crowbar with me. I worked it into the groove by the lock and yanked it back and forth until I heard something snap. I pushed the door open.

There was darkness in the courtyard in front of the black stone mansion, and momentarily I wondered where the patients had gone after the Authority closure.

I shrugged, my moment of compassion over. There were a thousand such establishments dying for patients. They would be given good homes.

I instinctively checked the action of my gun, then slipped the automatic into my pink skipping rope belt. Yes, I have spares of those as well.

I reached into my pocket and grabbed my mini-flash. I flicked it on and followed its tiny light over the ceramic tiles. I noticed that a few windows were broken, evidence of vandals. It was likely that this edifice to the dead would go unmolested; it was so far out in the Landfill. Even thieves got butterflies so close to the failed internment facilities.

I found myself wishing I had been welcomed by the downy-cheeked Tobias, and given a ride in his little electric car. It was about a mile through the courtyard and leisure park, and my heart labored.

The whiskey I had drunk in the car had eased the pain of my exertions, but it had not supplied me with rest and actual healing, both things my—Tommy's—body craved.

"Soon," I said out loud. The word rolled up the empty courtyard like a drunk, bouncing off benches and lampposts. I glanced up at the high windows of the mansion.

As I had expected there was a light in a window. It was all warm and glowy like home.

I pulled my gun, and checked the clip. I made sure one was in the chamber before I slipped it away.

After this, I had one more phone call to make. One more, and if everything went right, life could get back to its usual horrors.

I was panting by the time I climbed a series of steps to the large front doors of the mansion. I shoved the crowbar into the space flush with the bolt, and then paused. I tried the handle—the doors were unlocked. I didn't like that very much, but decided to play it cool.

After setting the crowbar by the door, I lit a cigarette, cocked my hat—I had borrowed Elmo's, it was tight but it would do—and sauntered into the lobby.

I crossed the Persian carpet noiselessly. My flash's penny-light was just a tiny spark in the enormous room. The space overhead gathered mass with the darkness and weighed me down. I flinched involuntarily, before I made my way across the lobby and up the stair.

I looked up, saw only shadow, but knew that carved into the ceiling and columns around me were a thousand cherubs, their little marble eyes staring—night creatures now, like bats.

As I got to the top, I heard something that was like music, only sweeter. I didn't know the lyrics, but the melody continued until somewhere at the back of my mind, I responded with tears.

A baby was crying.

I followed the sound, and soon, in the utter darkness, saw a slit of light ahead creeping out under a door. Then, I heard another sound join the crying—perfect harmony.

A woman's voice hummed a long forgotten song—a lullaby.

I walked up to the door and drew my gun. A tear splashed on my hand.

I waited, hardened myself. I was surprised no guards had materialized but remembered that Adrian didn't want any more partners. No more palms to grease. I opened the door onto a large room—saw a bed, sitting area, and bar.

A woman with bright red hair turned to the door smiling. Her eyes were fixed upon a tiny naked thing in her hands.

She said, "Richard, I'm so glad you're back. You should have seen..." But her voice dropped as her gaze fixed upon me.

We stared for a moment or two. There was nothing else to do. I let myself drink her in. She was beautiful. She wore a heavy yellow terrycloth bathrobe. I looked at the baby, dropped my cigarette and stepped on it. Then looked up. I said the first thing that came into my mind.

"Your picture didn't do you justice."

She pulled the baby close and smiled like an angel.

Chapter 65

Van Reydner was draped across the bed. Smoke curled up from her cigarette. She had placed the baby in a large steel bassinet, which closed up at the top. It would look like a suitcase when fastened that way. I glanced at the baby momentarily—like looking at the Loch Ness Monster, so just a peek before sauntering over to a mahogany bar.

I felt real fear of the apparition. Its pink chubby arms had flailed the aroma of sour baby oil around the room like incense.

I mixed two drinks. Both were straight whiskey, room temperature.

I set my gun on top of the bar and studied Ms. Van Reydner.

She did have something in the flesh that a picture couldn't carry. Call it presence: her perfume was sticky with hormones.

Call it personality: her eyes seemed to pierce to the very soul when fixed upon me. They moved rapidly, pausing only for the moist and silent supplication, before flitting away like deer.

Call it acting: there was something about her mannerisms that seemed practiced—almost overly so. As genuine as they appeared, her gestures were tired. One too many nights in the spotlight.

The cynical actress in front of a gullible mob, more concerned with entertainment than art.

I had to remind myself to call it sex appeal. She had too much for the average man to resist if he didn't know she would use it on him. No wonder Adrian picked her to work with. That was also something that I had to remember. She was a murderer—at least an extremely guilty accessory.

“Is Richard dead?” she asked, puffing her cigarette with apparent indifference.

“I didn't do it, if that's any consolation.” I gave her the hard news over the rim of my glass.

“I suppose he had it coming.” Her voice held a noticeable pang of regret. She pulled at a loose thread on her sleeve.

“We all do.” I peeled my eyes off her with both hands. “Tell me. Did you ever do the killing? Did you ever pull the trigger?” There was a part of me that wanted to believe she wouldn't, but I knew a part of me would never believe a word she said.

“No. Never. That's the only reason I ever agreed to work with Richard.”

“The siren.” The whiskey from the drive had loosened a few screws. “Luring men to their deaths.”

“There are worse crimes.” She looked at me with a melting pity in her eyes. I wanted to kiss away her pain. “And most of them were bastards.”

“If you hadn't turned on me, I could have let you go. I really could have.” I shook my head and lit a cigarette. “There has been too much death today. Too much. I'm sick of bodies. There's flesh under my nails and it isn't mine.” I took a deep drag. My body throbbed. “At the Arizona, why did you plant the rubber nipple? If you just wanted to get the competition fighting among themselves, the room and the note should have been enough.”

“Richard wanted to make sure that everyone involved, who knew what they were looking for, understood that the baby existed. He said it was a teaser, to get commitment from any of the interested groups. He called you a catalyst.”

“If only you hadn't called me into it like that. I could have turned a blind eye.”

“Richard made me. He said he'd kill the baby if I didn't help.” Terror played across her features.

“You can do better than that...” I said, unimpressed by her act. “I've been flayed today. All the human parts are stripped away. As I came in, you were too happy for a woman who lived with a man who threatens or controls her. I've seen the type, and there's always a frightened timidity behind the eyes that can't be hidden. My vision's clear today. That's what makes it sad.”

“But you don’t know Richard. He could change in a second...”

“Come on, that’s enough...” I cut her off. “The only reason any of these events have taken place is because that baby exists. I find it impossible to believe that he would threaten to destroy the motivation for his actions.”

“Then let me go.” A shiny tear was forming in the corner of her eye. “Who would you give me to anyway? There is no justice. You know it, and I know it. No law.” She cast her eyes down and worried at the cord that closed her bathrobe.

“I guess you were kind of scared after the Billings murder. Adrian said you hadn’t checked in. Was that genuine fear or were you contemplating a double-cross?”

“I just left Greasetown for a while. I had to get the baby somewhere that I could take him out of that box. I wanted to take a couple of days to get used to things.” She smiled. “You don’t think I’d double-cross Richard.”

“I’m trying to imagine someone you wouldn’t double-cross.”

She pouted at that one.

“Look...” New excitement entered her voice. “You and me are the only ones left, right? We could go anywhere. We could be rich! As it stands, what will you do? Give me and the baby to Authority so that *they* can exploit the situation? *Take it!* Or someone else will! You’re smart enough to figure this whole thing out. And no one’s going to pay...”

“I agree. I’m probably the most cynical character you’re going to meet when it comes to Authority. I don’t trust it. But, I have this belief system that carries me through times of complete apathy. Of course, the same belief system causes the apathy, but that’s beside the point just now. I believe that regardless of how insane something may sound; there is still a good chance that someone is doing it. I’m not explaining myself well, am I? What I mean is, I believe in everything, and because I do, I believe that there really is some justice to be had. It may not come in truckloads, or by the bushel, but there is justice. And while there is, someone will deal it out.”

“Like you?” I wasn’t certain, but I detected a slight edge of contempt to her tone.

“Sure.” I poured myself another. “But there are others. And I’m sure that there are some in Authority. Do you have a phone?”

She seemed hesitant, and then waved a sultry arm to the far side of the bed.

“If that other drink is for me, why don’t you bring it?” She smiled, showing a lot of teeth, framed by a succulent oval of red lips. I set my glass down, picked my gun up in one hand and her drink in the other. I walked over to her.

She reached out to take the glass, making sure she stroked my fingers as she grasped it.

I grunted and walked over to the phone. I dialed the number of the *Greasetown Gazette*. I had memorized it for just such an occasion. I glanced at a little gold watch on the bedside table. It showed five minutes after midnight.

It was the fourteenth of May, spring, and Monday too. Another weekend gunned down.

The line buzzed. As it buzzed, I watched Van Reydner lick the side of her glass with a serpent tongue. She smiled again, her eyes flashed; then, she giggled. The phone line continued to buzz.

I detected some strange sensations that had very little to do with justice just then. Van Reydner tilted her head back, opened her mouth, and slowly poured whiskey over her tongue as it writhed in the potent shower.

Lucky whiskey, I thought.

One of her hands came up and loosened the bathrobe ever so much, just enough so she could pour whiskey on her palm and rub a nipple with it. A knee glided out of the terrycloth pulling a creamy thigh after.

All I'd have to do is walk over and take her.

"Hello, hello, come on, is someone there?" I suddenly realized I had been listening to a voice say hello for about a minute.

"Hello," I said while I tried to remember my reason for calling, in fact, I paused and wondered whom I had called.

"*Greasetown Gazette*, how may I direct your call?" The voice sounded agitated.

"Is Mary Redding there?"

"No sir, she's not in the office." A pause. "She's on assignment, but I can get her for you, if you give me a minute."

"Tell her Wildclown is at Simpson's Skin Tanning and Preservation for the Deceased. He has a story for her. It's extremely important, so if you can reach her—reach her."

I hung up the phone, my eyes still staring at Van Reydner. She had slid up onto the bed during my call slipping out of her robe in the process. The material formed soft and enticing manacles for her wrists.

Her thighs moved silently together and apart—the skin white as innocence—her bare toes reached out toward me.

I felt a shiver run down my spine as I noticed she had moved on to treating the whiskey to a ride on her pelvis.

A natural red head. At that moment, the baby started crying. Van Reydner was unmoved, and continued her gyrations. There was something wrong. She was trying too hard.

She was either trying to catch me quick, or she was stalling.

I turned toward the door, then back to her. One of her hands struggled free of the robe; she rubbed her thighs with it.

"Hey," I said. My libido, or Tommy, made a snapping vibration along my nerves like a cord had broken. A deep thud followed, as though a major organ had suddenly imploded. There was a faraway dying ache—then nothing.

"There's a baby in the room." I looked away. "That's enough, you're working too hard. Today would be a bad day for me!"

I heard a gun click. I dove. Someone had come in behind. I cursed myself for giving my back to the door. Looking up I recognized the tall thin form of Tobias.

I rolled and ducked behind the bed. I noticed then, that he wasn't pointing the gun at me at all. It was pointed at the bassinet.

"Throw out your gun. Or I'll kill the baby! Don't think I won't do it." His voice was broken—desperate.

I tried to form a quick plan. Nothing came. I could try to stall them.

"Now!" He fired a shot that hit the wall over the baby. A sudden chirp came from the bassinet.

"God Tobias, be careful!" Van Reydner shouted at him, pulling her robe on.

"Shut up. Damn you, Jan. He killed Richie!" Tobias cried. "You! Get out here, now!"

I shook my head—there was nothing else I could do—then threw my gun out on the floor, and stood up talking.

“Think about it, Tobias. You’re being loyal to a dead man who could have cared less about you. You’re just an employee.” That was one of those moments, when I immediately wanted to retract my words—a nanosecond of realization that I had gone too far.

The gun roared. I flinched and felt the bullet slap me in the right side. My legs turned to rubber and I dropped on my face.

“Now for that fucking baby, it was all that baby! I say we leave it *dead* for the bastards. They killed Richie! A life for a life.” I could just see from my position, Tobias had turned his gun back toward the baby. “Just because of that goddamned baby!”

I made a vain attempt to grab my gun. It was under me. Tobias fired, then his eyes flashed wide.

Van Reydner stood between him and the bassinet. A star of red, the same color as her hair had appeared between her breasts—a death mark. A tiny trickle of blood ran toward her navel. She looked down, genuinely surprised.

“Jan!” Tobias took a step forward, pain crossed his features then he leveled the gun at the bassinet.

“God, I’m...” Van Reydner dropped to one knee, still balanced against the bed. “I’m...”

I grabbed my gun and shot from the floor. I even had time to brace my arms and take a breath. I squeezed three into Tobias’ head and kicked his body down with a couple of bullets to the chest. What was left of him fell twitching in the doorway.

I stuffed a fist into the hole in my side, and grunting against the pain, struggled to my feet. My head swam, but I lurched over to Van Reydner.

As she fell her robe had fallen open. She was arranged beautifully over the bed.

Her hair had formed a fiery halo. The baby was crying. I looked at Van Reydner again. She could have looked like that for eternity, like an angel. She could have had anything she wanted, if only she hadn’t wanted it so soon. But she got greedy. Her last words I’m sure were going to be: “I’m dead.”

The universal capitulation of the human race: I’m dead, free from trouble. I’m dead, free from worry. I’m dead, no more pain.

But her troubles had just begun. Now she could spend her days watching her natural beauty wilt, desiccate, wither, then she could spend her eternity as a corpse, ugly, hag-like.

Human law, no, Van Reydner.

Justice with an ironic twist that only our warped creator could appreciate. The fact that she was a beautiful woman without scruples put her in this room. The fact that she was a woman made her take a bullet for a baby.

Again, I resisted the urge to vomit. The baby had stopped crying and was watching me. It tried to smile. I was glad mine was painted on, because I didn’t have one in me.

I suddenly lost my nerve. I couldn’t play with the baby’s life on a hunch. A hunch wasn’t a hundred per cent, and the little kid laughing at me deserved a hundred per cent. I faked a grin at it, and got close. I saw a soother in the blue blankets. *Blue* meant *boy*. I stuck the rubber nipple into the slushy part of his face, then hushed him and closed the bassinet.

I had to get him back to his mother. If my hunch proved right, law was on the way. But they might not be bringing justice. I knew the only justice I was going to hand out in this case was when I handed this baby back to its family.

I hurried painfully out of the room, stepping over Tobias' wriggling corpse in the doorway, before running down the stairs and out of the mansion.

I stumbled while crossing the courtyard—almost passed out, then climbed slowly to my feet and staggered to the car. I was soon on the highway back to Greasetown. I opened the basinet.

A breeze pulled at the baby's dark hair and it giggled.

Chapter 66

An Authority squad car was parked outside the building as we drove up. I got out of the Chrysler, and poked my head back in the window.

"Plenty of sauerkraut on the fishdogs, Elmo. And get a mickey of Canadian Club too, and some cigarettes." I had already ordered a tall bottle, and in a festive mood decided to replace the emergency bottle I kept in the back of my chair.

I also wanted Elmo out of the office for a while, so I could think. It was four-thirty in the morning—late—but I was expecting a visitor.

Elmo drove off.

An hour and a half before, we had dropped Julie Hawksbridge and her baby off at her brother's. There were tears and happiness. The baby was growing the Hawksbridge nose it seemed.

After a short explanation, I told Robert in no uncertain terms to take them and get them away from Greasetown. It was pleasing to see the bored malaise of wealth melt away from Hawksbridge's face to be replaced by a great white hunter look of determination—nothing new of course: I had already seen it on his sister. It was apparent to me that Uncle Hank wasn't the only Hawksbridge with blood.

A grateful kiss from the beautiful mother, and I almost collapsed. The bullet wound in my side had stopped bleeding long before, but I still felt weak.

Since returning to Greasetown, I had been having a love-hate relationship with floors. I was drawn to them. I knew it would hurt to get close, but love was like that.

Elmo had done another quick bandage job on me before we left the Berlinz—Tobias' gun had been a low caliber job, and the bullet had gone right through. I needed a couple of stitches; but for the time being, I would survive.

We then headed to Grey's office. By now the superintendent had taken to leaving the door unlocked. Once there, I telephoned Mrs. Cotton. After the usual angry banter with Edward the attack butler, I had her on the phone.

"Well, what have you found out?" She seemed slightly annoyed, as though life had been moving on for her, and she was beginning to find the past an unpleasant anchor.

"I know what happened to Alan, and why. It turns out that he may have been unscrupulous as hell, but he had a heart, in the end. If that means anything."

"I'm sitting down," she had said. "Tell me what happened."

It took me six cigarettes, three cups of coffee and a sandwich to explain the unpleasant life, times, business attachments and demise of Alan Cotton. I purposefully neglected the part about the baby.

The kid was going to have a tough enough time trying to make it to adulthood without people like Mrs. Cotton and Edward the butler knowing about him. I knew it wasn't fair to my client, but I had already broken all the other detective rules of etiquette.

Besides, she didn't have a stake in it now. Her husband was dead, I told her who killed him. I got a little creative with the story. Cotton had had a change of heart. He was killed at the Morocco while trying to get help for the Hawksbridge woman—not his baby. I told her Regenerics was a failure after all. While I talked, Elmo sat in the waiting room engrossed in the old magazines.

"Well, where do we go from here?" she had asked. Somewhere in the telling of the tale she had begun and finished crying. Her voice was hard and tired by the end. "Is there anyone we can tell?"

"No," I told her. "I'm almost certain you won't hear about anyone going to jail for murder."

She didn't like that. "The criminals—they won't pay? What will happen to them?"

"I guess, about everyone involved has paid." I could remember looking at my hands then, and thinking of all the horrible things they had been doing. "Everybody paid. They're beyond justice, or well... let's say that many of those involved will be learning to live with justice." I thought of Van Reydner then.

"Your fee, Mr. Wildclown. You have done an excellent job." Her voice had a sudden business tone to it.

"It's fine. A check for another week will do. It's Monday."

"What did we agree on?"

"Very little if I remember." I had to congratulate myself. My wit was coming back.

"I'm very grateful. I'd like to make it all worth your while. And, to be honest, I'd like to put it behind me."

I shook my head then. She couldn't see me do it, but I shook it anyway. Mrs. Cotton wanted to buy silence, a strange commodity to truck in. But these days, money worked better than bullets.

"Three grand." I had wanted to say five, or ten, but something inside me was repulsed by the whole idea. In fact, I wanted to wash my hands of the case as well. My magnanimity might also have come from the check in my pocket. Robert Hawksbridge had cut me one for twenty-five grand. I had to talk him down at that. The reward for Julie's return was fifty thousand, after all.

After I hung up on Mrs. Cotton, I had phoned the *Gazette*, and told them to give a message to Mary Redding that I would meet her at my office in half an hour.

I looked at the Authority squad car. A pair of inspectors looked back at me over their magazines. They were right across the street growing nervous as I stared. I smiled, realizing I had been completely lost in reverie on the sidewalk. My eyes had glazed over, but were pointed at them.

I turned and walked up the steps to my office. A sour reek was in the hall. The accountants were burning hamburger or branding cattle again.

I unlocked the door—Elmo was so efficient he needed a raise—walked through the waiting room and into my office. I dropped myself into my chair, and immediately winced against the pain. I set my gun on the desk blotter.

I lit a cigarette, and momentarily fought the urge to open the blinds. I won, darkness would do. I flicked on the desk lamp. I waited.

Chapter 67

I was drawn from my daze by the steel grinding sound of an Authority transport pulling up in front of the building. I smiled. I heard the characteristic repetitive horn as the rear ramp opened.

I thought of Willieboy's hideous end and shivered.

There followed the heavy tromp of boots on pavement. I waited.

A quick sweat broke out on my brow. What if I was wrong? That was a possibility, after all, and I believed everything to be possible. I shrugged, when I heard a single set of footsteps hit the stairs. If I were wrong, I would be dead soon—or Tommy would be. *Really dead* though, no way back.

Maybe just darkness and the silence of the singing soul. Maybe stars, and light, or Pearly Gates. Maybe fire and brimstone, maybe more Greasetown.

At that moment, I didn't care. What would be would be. Having fixed my mind on that rather dismal prospect, I began to get downright cocky. If the worst doesn't matter to you, how can you lose?

The door to the waiting room opened. I heard footsteps cross the carpet. The feet that made them weren't heavy and steel-shanked; I could tell that much.

I saw a shadow appear in the pebbled glass window. It looked familiar. The door opened.

Mary Redding pushed it aside, wearing the long black coat of Authority. I smiled, rather pleased with myself. I gestured to the company chair. Redding smiled. Then took it. Dark slacks hid her calves. Her feet were covered with crepe-soled shoes.

I had a feeling I wouldn't be seeing her toes curl up in orgasm for a while. She took off the trademark fedora of the inspector and dropped it beside her chair.

"How did you know?" Her voice was clear but a little defeated.

"A number of things. But one clinched it." I offered her a cigarette, but she declined. She pulled one of her special brand from her overcoat.

Redding smiled then. "Goddamn it! You surprised a lot of people."

"I'm glad. Of course, a lot of those people surprised me." I lit my cigarette and pulled hard on the hot smoke. It reminded me of the fire in the Galaxy Tower. It reminded me of death. I put it out. I offered her a drink that she declined.

Instead, she sat watching me.

"Did you get Van Reydner?" I asked.

"Yes. And what was left of that other guy. Van Reydner told us he, Tobias, and Adrian, were the masterminds of the whole operation. She said they came up with the method of collecting clients for Simpson's, and she said they were the ones who planned to sell the Regenerics Secret to the highest bidder. I guess she said a lot of things. I guess she'd pretty much sing like a bird right now, if we asked her to." Redding smiled and

blew some smoke. “She’s rather anxious to get into a preservation treatment of her own. Don’t worry; we’ll hurry that, just for her. Unfortunately, I won’t believe much of what she’s saying until she’s been out of Blacktime for a while,” she chuckled, and then went silent again. “How did you find out about me?”

“I thought you were a reporter, and nothing more. I only began to get suspicious about some of the things you said, after I visited the *Gazette*. I noticed people acting a little strange around you. Then, you lied about Morris—the librarian.

“He just about jumped out of his skin when you took me into the morgue. You must have forgotten who he was so you made up that story about him being a volunteer. And Morris reacted like you had a lot more authority than you should have had. That was the hard part of your role as a reporter, you know. You get to work on murder assignments; yet you have to cover your ass by saying that you haven’t worked there long. You mentioned Malcolm Aird to me, and for the longest time I couldn’t remember who he was. Then I got a mental picture of this short guy with gray hair and a black moustache. He was the editor of a newspaper. I can’t remember where I met him, but I do know he was easygoing enough to share a few drinks with a clown.

“One of his biggest complaints was that since everyone was immortal, it was hard as hell to get any cub reporters to do the little stories. Everyone had too much experience.

“When you told me you had only been there three months, and were already working crime—it just didn’t sit right with me. You also mentioned you had job security, which didn’t wash.” I tried another go at a cigarette. It worked this time. “Still, that could have been explained. You could have been the editor’s girlfriend, or you could have come from a prestigious magazine. No, I wasn’t positive.” I squeaked my chair. “But the things that sold me were the things that happened here.”

“I didn’t walk properly for a week...” She smirked, and then surprised me by blushing.

“Beside that, which I’m not knocking,” I said. “The fact that you were at the scene of the Adrian murder so quickly. The fact that you would come home with me in the first place. The fact that you happened to be the only reporter to discover both the murders at the Morocco. And when we were here talking murder, you kept mentioning justice as though it was really important to you.”

I gulped a breath. “Reporters can be interested in justice, but any that truly believe it can be found wouldn’t work for the *Greasetown Gazette*. You talked about it as though you believed it existed out there. And you asked me about it enough to give me the feeling that you were checking me out for reasons other than simply to determine whether or not I would be a good lay.”

Mary Redding blushed again, and crossed her legs.

“There is also this,” I said pointing to my face. “The clown makeup doesn’t do a lot for me. Any woman that is turned on by it is suspicious in my books.”

Redding chuckled and butted her cigarette in the ash stand to her left. “What clinched it for you?”

“I don’t know if you remember. I suppose after a while it comes to be second nature, but I heard you say something that I heard someone in Authority and someone I suspected of being in Authority say.”

“I can’t imagine.” Redding shook her head.

“What’s a clusterfuck?” I grinned and knocked ash from my cigarette. “I heard you say it and I’ve been called a clusterfuck by Cane, and by Willieboy. I never asked what it meant, I just kept noticing it.”

Redding burst out laughing. She doubled over, then looked up at me and burst out again. I tried to take it all in stride. Redding had a lovely laugh. She raised a finger and struggled over the last of her chuckles.

“In basic, in Authority—basic training—we get the once over on graduation day by the Inspector General. He has a cluster of oak leaves on his collar. We call grads *clusterfucks*, because their collars are clean. They have clusters of fuck-all.” She started to giggle. “I don’t suppose it’s a nice thing to say to anyone.”

“Well, it put me onto you.” I fell silent a moment to sober her. “Where did your people come in at the Galaxy Tower?”

That hit the spot. The serious line between her eyes tightened up enough to set a silver dollar in.

“We lost a lot of good people.” She fell silent. “God, that’s such a cliché, but we did. I guess I say it because good people are rare.” She struck another match and lit a cigarette.

“We came in through the roof—got there late. You see I didn’t spend all of my time at the *Gazette*. For reasons I’ll explain later I had Mary Redding’s extension hooked to my office at HQ. Whoever took the message either tried to obstruct me on purpose or it was a real oversight, it didn’t get it to me for thirty-five minutes. Almost too late.

“When we did get there we saw all the Authority vehicles, so I was a little uncertain of what to do. I knew the King’s Men would be there, and the Twelve Stars. Both those groups employ hard-assed Enforcers who fight like demons. They have terrible punishments for disloyalty I’m told. I didn’t have enough people with me to take both groups on at once. But, there was no turning back.

“We had a little trouble in the lobby with an Enforcer stationed there. But we took him out and then found a woman tied up behind her desk. She told us that everyone had gone up to the penthouse. I wasn’t sure how to deploy my people. I just didn’t want to lose too many. So, we went up in a service elevator to try a forced entry through the roof.

“We have sensing equipment, echo-radar, to be certain no one is killed when we blast, so our munitions expert popped a hole in the ceiling twenty yards from echo sources to minimize bystander casualties. Down we went.” She took a long drag on her cigarette, and her eyes seemed to cloud up momentarily.

“Of course, Cane’s people were coming up through the floor at about the same time. Of the forty Enforcers I went in with, only eighteen made it out.

“That fucking helicopter was unexpected! God damned maniacs took out the whole top floor, and wasted some of their own people too. A couple of us kept our heads after the concussion. We were pretty well protected by our armor but the concussion can knock you out. I was down but my people saw a group of Enforcers come in, meet up with Willieboy, then watched them taking you out.” Her eyes stared inward. “A few shots were fired, but no kills. We had you followed to the King’s castle. It took us a while to get our shit together after the blasts. We had to identify forces and our casualties—call in reinforcements and medics.”

“Was Cane still there?” I sat forward now, hands set flat on the desk blotter.

“Hard to tell, the firestorm burned up a lot of the bodies. I can’t be sure. There wouldn’t be much left. Anyway, we got reinforcements and started the fight at the King’s gates.”

I gave her a hard look.

“We just broke onto the King’s courtyard when that transport came roaring out of the ground. We opened fire on it. Christ, we almost got you too. We won the fight, if that’s anything, and have rounded up about a quarter of the King’s Men. But the rest are spread out and dug in deep.

“When we got inside his castle, we couldn’t find your body, or anybody living, for that matter. I assumed that you had left in the transport. I don’t know what the hell happened inside, but you sure did a number on the King. I assume *you* did it.”

I didn’t answer.

“Whatever, you’ve got to remember we were right in the middle of a firefight when you left, so it took a few minutes to muster troops to chase you. When we did get someone after the transport, we found it empty.”

“Then I called you from Simpson’s,” I grumbled. “You got there and found a couple of murderers, but no Wildclown and no Regenerics Secret.”

“What was the Regenerics Secret?” Redding asked then, uncrossing her legs, and standing up from the chair. “So far Van Reydner hasn’t been specific. I think she’s holding onto that card for leverage. I can’t blame her. I have my own theories, but I’m not sure.”

“Before I answer that, tell me why you let me get involved.”

“Difficult tale. You must know about the divisions in Authority. The special interest groups.”

“Which one do you belong to?” I was almost afraid of the answer.

“The one that believes in justice. There are a few of us who were in the first Authority units formed after the Change—we were hired right out of the civilly run policing agencies. But we were in the minority. Those of us who couldn’t hide our true feelings disappeared. Others among of us hid our loyalties and bided our time.

“We didn’t join any group, chose boring or dangerous assignments, and were pretty much outcasts in the force. Over the last couple of years things have been getting worse. The special groups were beginning to form alliances that would at best, tear Authority apart, or at worse, turn it into a monster the likes of which the human race has never seen before.

Those of us who stayed clean—I’d say pure, but nobody’s pure—knew that something was going on that would start the final battle. The only good thing about all those groups forming on the inside was we could form our own.

“Honestly, I’m surprised there were only two of the bad ones involved. The Twelve Stars and the King’s Men are the largest, but there are at least ten more. I suppose a lot of them didn’t have the belly for it, or had already been squeezed by the bigger guys, and stayed out of it.” She smiled then, and a look of exasperation crossed her face. “I found out about you from a recording we made in Willieboy’s car—Oates, that’s his real name. We were following him after the Billings murder—he was identified at the Morocco—and our people taped him talking to the King. He mentioned a bush beater named *Wildclown*.” She smiled weakly. “We didn’t have much on you in records. Officially you don’t exist past two years ago. There aren’t a lot of detectives walking around in clown

makeup so you stand out. I didn't know who you were until I saw you. Even then it took a while before I was sure."

"Sure about what?" I felt my entire soul focus on the question.

"Who you were." She looked embarrassed, a flush crossing her cheeks. "And I didn't know what to think. It wasn't an act. You really didn't recognize *me*."

"Why should I recognize you?" I didn't move a muscle. I felt the first clamoring of Tommy's spirit.

"We trained together. Authority Enforcement division. They had a center in northern Florida back in the first decade." Her eyes locked on mine. "I heard you quit the force after the dead riots."

Now I could feel electric surges burning up from my subconscious. Tommy yammered with terror.

"I knew you got into detective work. But I didn't know where—I thought Vicetown." She gestured at my costume. "And I didn't know about this."

I felt a deep cold blackness open up beneath me.

"You're Sergeant Owen Grey, Authority Enforcement Division." Her eyes probed mine. "Or you were..."

Suddenly a loud and terrifying noise echoed through my mind—it was overwhelming in its darkness and power. I felt my hold on Tommy slip. My vision doubled and I blacked out.

Chapter 68

A cold hand on my cheek brought me back. I opened my eyes wide and saw myself reflected in Mary's gaze.

"Are you okay?" Concern crowded her features. Her hands investigated my body. "You're really banged up. *God you're bleeding!*"

"I'm okay." I pushed myself upright checking my memory as I did so. Owen Grey was dead. Tommy continued to gibber inside. I had to be careful, or he'd evict me. "Vacation looms."

Mary left her hand on my shoulder as she studied my face. "What happened to you?"

"I don't know." I looked away from her. "Owen Grey is dead." I kept my hands locked on the arms of the chair. "He was whacked by the King while looking for Julie Hawksbridge." Tommy's spirit lunged upward from the depths. I felt its febrile nature begin to color my thoughts.

"But *you* were looking for Julie Hawksbridge!" Disbelief crossed Mary's features.

"I was probably drunk somewhere when she went missing." It felt like I was drowning. "Don't kid yourself."

"But why hide?" She was about to implore. "Why the makeup?"

"It's a public relations thing." I felt around for my cigarettes, abandoned the idea. I was afraid to do anything. "You were saying?"

"Because it sure isn't like the Owen I knew." She shook her head and lit a cigarette, stepping back.

"He's dead—sorry to say." I wanted her to stop. Darkness was gathering around me.

Mary watched me a minute more then continued: “Oh Mr. Business is back. All right, all right. Where was I? I knew something was up because Cane wanted you.” She paused, and then said, “You know, Owen... Whatever happened? You can tell me.”

I rolled my eyes away from her as I grappled inside with the clown.

Mary shrugged. “If you ever want to.” She looked at her hands. “Willieboy and Cane had their phone lines hooked to records. They both use the name Borden when working unofficially. It’s a dead end post, but they managed to find a use for it. Hell—I’ve even used it.” Redding smiled.

“Where is Julie Hawksbridge? I saw a videotape of her at the King’s castle. Pervert had cameras set up over her tub.” When I didn’t say anything, Mary continued: “When the gag order was placed on the Morocco murders, I knew that the big players were about to start a turf war. But I had to know who was involved. My group isn’t very big, so we have to step softly around them—and our survival depends on knowing what the big guys are doing.

“So on a hunch I told the publishers of the *Gazette* we were investigating the murders and fire at the Morocco building. I knew that the *Gazette* was the only unofficial source for information, so I had the real Mary Redding’s line hooked up directly to my office, just in case. Eventually, you called. My problem was in making sure you were unconnected.”

I held a hand up. “The night we met, Cane called me out to the scene of Adrian’s murder. When I got there, he acted like he hadn’t made the call. Then, I ran into Mary Redding, the very reporter who had covered the murders at the Morocco. Both of which I happened to have been involved with at the time.” I shook my head. “Cane didn’t call me that night. *You* did. Excellent impression.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to meet you... get your trust. I had read copies of Cane’s files on the Billings murder. A call from him wouldn’t get you too suspicious. It was a good opportunity.” Her eyes dropped. “And when I saw you...”

“So you’re not Mary Redding.” A part of me felt deflated. The cynical part nodded its head.

“No. There is such a person, but I used my pull to get in to take her place. She’s working sports under a pseudonym. I told her she’d get the exclusive if she played along.” Her eyes flashed genuine remorse. “I’m sorry, but there is an awful lot at stake. I didn’t want to deceive you. You have to understand the enormity of the task ahead, and the importance of our mission. Authority is full of rats, but we’ll burn them out given time. There are gun battles raging even now. The fight for control has begun. Who knows what we’ll wake up to tomorrow.” She sighed. “Probably more of the same.”

“So you were using me, too.” I shook my head. “I think I’ll cry.”

“At first, everyone was. I didn’t know whose property you were. So I had to get to know you—and when you didn’t recognize me, or pretended you didn’t. I didn’t know if I could trust you. You have to understand the importance of my task.” Her face was washed with extreme feeling. “But after that night, I don’t know. I didn’t want you to be expendable. Not after that—under the makeup you were still Owen Grey.” She set a hip on my desk. “What about you, Mr. Honesty? You haven’t exactly been straightforward with me. Look who’s wearing the disguise.” There was just a touch of defensiveness in her tone. “If you aren’t Owen Grey, who are you?”

“By all appearances, I’m Tommy Wildclown. And Tommy’s not sure who he is.” I tried my best to smile, but was moved by the feeling in her voice. “I’ll be quite honest with you. The only certainty is that I’m a detective. I try to catch bad guys.”

“If I could get that makeup off you, I’d find out a few things.” Her face suddenly became muscular as it struggled over underlying passion. She leaned forward suggestively. “If it’s amnesia, I could help you remember...” The desire drained from her eyes. She smiled weakly. “But I suppose not. I can tell an angry man when I see one.”

“Some other time,” I said, standing—struggling with feelings of my own. There were long dark corridors opening up that should have contained clues to who I was. But there was nothing. I walked toward the door. “I don’t like to be used, and I don’t care what the cause. I never take a liar to bed more than once.”

She looked hurt. “It was on the desk if you remember.”

“Okay, the desk. You may have found a loophole.” I dropped my hands, defeated. “Look, I’m sick of everyone just now and I think my understanding bone got broken last night. Let’s talk about desks after the war.”

Redding stood up. “I suppose you’re right. I just thought it might be nice. Since I’m going off to battle.”

“I’ll bet that’s one of the oldest lines going.” I tried to grin, but my face found the expression too heavy and dropped it.

“I’ll be in touch.” Redding turned to go, paused momentarily to pick up her hat. She turned. “Oh, don’t think I’m satisfied about the Regenerics Secret or Hawksbridge. I’ll be back to trade notes about that! But I want to prove to you that I’m interested in other things—like *justice*.”

She gazed at me wistfully, and left.

Chapter 69

I shuffled around my desk like an old man, weary and willing to die. I fell into my seat and listened as the transport outside reloaded then drove away. A part of me wanted her to get in touch. But now, now, I was full of hate. I squeaked my chair. I remembered doing that before. It had bothered Billings.

I had to keep moving. I rolled out of the chair and walked to the window. I poked a hole in the blinds.

The streetlight was bleak. The street under it was gray, the sky over it was gray, even the pigeons that fluttered on a rooftop beside it were gray. And now I was Grey. I had the urge to see no more gray.

Who was getting haunted here? But there were no answers forthcoming, no release. All I could do was console myself with the money I had been paid. Perhaps a vacation.

I could give Elmo his back pay and the two of us could go to Vicetown, ride a roller coaster. Hell, we could go south of the border. I had heard rumors that the sun still shone there sometimes.

The door opened behind me. I turned expecting Elmo.

The corpse was the right height, but that was all that was recognizable about it. Tattered pieces of scorched fabric hung about its shoulders and neck, the wire frame of its

glasses had melted to the bridge of its nose—the lenses were cracked. It was black all over and gave off an overpowering burnt hamburger stench—hot and oily.

And a sickly sweet smell hung on and kept coming. The corpse's right foot still had flesh on it. Its skin was pearly white. The toes were chubby and looked clean like they had just stepped out of the shower.

There was a gun in the corpse's hand pointed at my heart. The brass toothpick was welded to the thing's dental work.

"Bastard!" it hissed, cheeks ripping with the strain.

"Inspector Cane, you don't look well." I had nothing to lose but gray. "You're probably upset."

"Where's the *baby*?" The eyes in its face were swollen blisters. Cane must have been almost blind.

"Where it belongs."

"It is the son. I must have it." His hand jerked the gun. "The fifth horseman."

"Horseman? This kid hasn't even had his first pony ride." I turned away from him, disgusted. "It is the son of a young woman, who by all rights shouldn't have had him in the first place. The baby is a miracle. But it doesn't deserve the damnation of reverence. Let it be, Cane."

"I'll shoot you in the back, then I'll do the same thing to you that you did to me."

"No, you won't," I sighed.

A gun roared, roared again. I turned slowly.

Cane's head was gone. His corpse dropped. It made a feeble attempt to rise, and then lay still. It was in such bad condition, I was surprised that it had made it this far. Elmo walked in holding the auto-shotgun. It was pointed at the corpse.

"You all right, Boss?" He kicked the gun away from the body.

"Yes, Elmo, and thanks." I looked at what was left of Cane and then at the mess that covered my desk. "I'm not much in the mood for those fishdogs though."

I had seen Elmo drive up while I was looking out through the blinds.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't we go down to the bank, cash some checks and have some fun?" I walked over to Elmo, set a hand on his shoulder. "I owe you what friend, a couple of hundred?"

"Twenty-four hundred," he said, stony-faced.

"*Twenty-four* hundred, then. First we'll go to Dr. Forrester's place. I'll get some stitches, maybe a few painkillers. Yes, we'll cash our checks and take a trip to Vicetown. Maybe go south of the border. I need a rest. I don't know about you." Elmo started smiling and nodding his head. "I have to get out of here."

Elmo gestured to the corpse. "What about the mess?"

We dropped Cane's feebly twitching remains in the dumpster in front of the building. I kept walking with Elmo until we got to the Chrysler.

We drove to Forrester's. I collapsed again, and awoke a couple of hours later, stitched and numb. It was still dark.

Oddly enough I was still inside Tommy. I waited for his presence, but it was strangely absent.

Forrester fed me breakfast. We thanked him and left. Elmo drove us to the bank. I left the majority of my money there, wrote a check for my partner, and withdrew enough to take us to Vicetown and farther if we wanted.

As we headed down the coast, morning was coming on. I was tired and could have used some rest, but for some reason was reluctant to give up possession of Tommy. The little baby's Buddha face kept returning to my mind as the ocean sped past.

I wasn't certain, but somewhere out under the angry black clouds at the edge of it all; I thought I caught a flash of sun.

The story continues in
THE FORSAKEN

The Apocalypse Trilogy: Book Two

G. Wells Taylor

Assassin

An Angel was going to die. The idea caused the man on the road to smile—a rare smile cruelly cut into hard, pitiless features. The Angel would die quickly. It was a pity that it had to be so fast. But surprise was necessary. It was essential. He knew he was lucky to have that much of an edge and speed was the only way to maintain it. Their supernatural abilities allowed no margin for error. But the idea of killing one slowly appealed to him—to kill an Angel and take his time doing it. He smiled again thinking about what it would be like to get a knife and take one apart. See what all the fuss was about.

Miles to the west, his car was parked permanently on the soft shoulder. The Pontiac's twenty-year-old engine had cracked in two. He had taken one look under the hood and grabbed his packs to start the long walk to the City. There was nothing he could do about it. He was not that kind of mechanic.

But an Angel was going to die. That was something. Two hours had passed, and the idea had kept him focused on the march. *Fuck the car.* It was common for people to drive them into the ground only to purchase another rebuilt junker when it was necessary. He'd done it more times than he could remember. Automotive parts designed to last in the old counting could not keep up to people who did not age in a time of endless rain and decay.

Money wasn't a problem. He carried enough in pocket to buy a new vehicle right off the lot. By why bother? They all fell apart eventually. It didn't matter how much money you spent. Time got them in the end, like it got everything.

But he wouldn't buy another vehicle just yet. There were too many variables to justify the expense. He had only trusted his abandoned car because it drew little attention. But this was now and the future was then. He was close enough to the City of Light to walk, so he'd walk. And once there, who knew? Cars were more common than strangers buying them. Until he completed his contract anonymity was his greatest ally.

Don't let them see you coming. That was the first rule of the business he was in. The second was to have a backup plan and backup plans cost money. Beneath his Kevlar vest was a nylon money belt containing \$40,000 in cash and about the same in gems for special purchases. Printed money wouldn't always buy you what you wanted in the circles he traveled. And it seemed that people with apparently ageless bodies identified with the permanence of diamonds and gems—he did.

The belt held enough for bribes, transport and emergencies. He had plenty more, but with the chaos that yawned around what was left of humanity, the traveler knew that a place you left might not be there when you returned. The remains of civilization were on the verge of riot and dissolution. Occasionally fear would manifest and burn one of the dying cities or towns that remained. The man on the road didn't care about the social costs; he just understood that his many money stashes could be consumed by the madness; so carrying a small fortune had become a habit. And he was the safest bank he knew.

He snarled up at the rumbling overcast as he marched along the road—then stumbled. The broken pavement beneath his boots had heaved in places torn by cycles of frost, and undercut by incessant rain. Scowling, he dropped back into his steady, rhythmic pace. The black canvas bags were heavy hanging across his muscular shoulders, but they did not impede him. The mild annoyance of the gun barrels and ammunition thudding against his kidneys did more to reassure than irritate.

The City was not far off. He'd get there by sundown. The last hill he crested had given him a bleak view of its monolithic skyline and the Eastern Sea beyond. The distance did not concern him, since he welcomed any sort of physical challenge. In his Spartan philosophy he could never be hard or strong enough. Besides, if he grew bored with the walk, he could flag down a passing motorist and either hitch a ride or buy the vehicle outright with a bullet—there were still travelers despite the rigors of the road. In fact, the latter mode of transportation would allow him to enter the slow tempest of the City without making a ripple. And he wouldn't have to make conversation.

But the walk would do for now. It allowed him to step outside his life for a time and do something simple—it was the closest he ever got to carefree, and he could never be carefree. There was no rush. Again the distant thunder made him look up at the clouds. He shrugged knowing he'd packed an overcoat in the smaller of the two bags.

Rattle! His boots scuffed against the pavement, almost muffled the sound. And then: *Click!*

The traveler threw his bags and dropped to a knee. A .9 mm automatic jumped lightly in his sinewy hand; its muzzle scanned the dark brush at the side of the road. Dim light from the overcast showed ugly gray weeds—the brittle shafts quivering, rattling sporadically as the gun ran over their varied surfaces searching a target.

Then the traveler hissed with disgust, turned the pistol up and slipped it away. A woman's hand twitched and convulsed its way out of the dead brush. The skin was torn off it from the severed wrist all the way up the broken thumb—worms or beetles crawled in the swollen red meat on its palm. The knuckles clicked hollowly as it moved.

The man walked to his bags, hefted them, and resumed his trek without another glance at the hideous thing that scuttled farther onto the road behind him. The traveler let his mind move onto more prosaic concerns. He could reach the City inside two hours—if he didn't buy a car first.

And an Angel would die soon after.

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