

**DAMNED
WITH
THE
DEVIL**
A WILDCLOWN NOVEL

G. WELLS TAYLOR

DAMNED WITH THE DEVIL

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G. Wells Taylor

(eBook Sample)

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Acknowledgments:

Offered in recognition of the profound sacrifices made by the countless brave individuals who have fought and continue to fight against fascism, extremism, and injustice. To them I extend my deepest respect and appreciation.

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CHAPTER 1

She was the kind of beautiful that had you nodding your head in agreement the moment she walked into the room. You'd be smiling like an idiot, appreciating all that pretty packed into one woman—and you wouldn't be able to believe it.

Really, she was overwhelming; an embodiment of female perfection—built the way a genie would make a woman if one were rubbing his lamp.

She was the kind of beautiful that primed you, made you ready to sign on to any crazy scheme she was about to throw your way.

It started with her bright green eyes.

Those introduced her dazzling intellect and prepared you for what was coming. You were softened up for the kill before the first silky handshake.

That's why I was surprised when I turned her down.

Since I first met her in my office, my initial appreciation of her was all business. She led with the pretty face—pretty? Her striking features were perfectly arranged under a dark, broad-brimmed hat, and poised atop the raised collar of a black, ankle-length topcoat.

That's right. I got all that preceding nonsense before she had even shed her raingear.

She stood at the open door to my

office with a look of quiet bemusement, her head tilted slightly to the right.

Hester Schultz spoke with a perfect voice, too. It could handle the heights with a choir, the breathy depths of pillow talk, or climb the passionate stairs to Heaven.

I tried to focus.

She had read about me in some old newspaper where she'd learned of my involvement in cleaning up dirty factions in Authority. I hadn't done all that much. It was more of an accident that I had been involved at all.

That case had played out with a heavy dose of random luck, gunshot wounds, and stitches. I had employed my

usual investigative technique that involved getting bashed around by living and dead gangsters while I sipped cocktails and smoked cigarettes. In that specific case, I was pleasantly surprised to find myself still standing when the gun smoke cleared and some among the bodies were counted and identified as Authority officers who had found themselves on the wrong side of the law they'd sworn to enforce.

According to the *Greasetown Gazette*, I was some kind of hero.

Old news now, but that was why Hester Schultz had come knocking at my door.

I mean *Elmo's* door.

My partner ran the business now— had paid for it and the new digs with his sweat and savings while I'd wandered the wilderness for almost two years in an amnesiac haze. Too much time had passed for me to consider any challenge to the changes. Elmo was a big boy and had earned it on the up and up. He was a better businessman, and arguably a better detective.

On top of that, he had discovered a way out of our fog-swept sewer of a former neighborhood after our original, moldy old office had been torched by arsonists.

When I had finally wandered back to Greasetown, I arrived battered and scarred, but was unable to explain

where I had been, or *if* I'd been. My memory of that time still played like a nightmare, so I usually only reminisced when I was asleep.

Cue the nightcap. Cut to a clown lurching up in sweat-soaked sheets.

I had only managed to find the new office when I returned because my name was still on it. But I could not lay claim to much more.

Elmo had spent my absence growing the business in a way that I never could ... especially, in the way I had to work, which was dressed as a Gothic clown in coverall with faded spots, worse-for-wear trench coat and fedora.

Since I'd come back, my partner had been reluctant to trust me completely.

And why should he? He'd kept the business running while I haunted the edge of reality—when he'd come to consider me dead and gone.

Now that I had returned, I guess you could say that I was on probation. Elmo's hesitation was understandable since I had little recollection of my time away—and no explanation.

But he kept me on because he knew that I was the kind of detective who could get things done.

When it looked like I was back to stay, we moved to the larger space down the hall that sported two offices with a sizable connecting room for waiting clients, file storage, and additional desks for contract operatives.

My partner had big ideas and wanted room to grow.

Elmo took the office on the corner with two windows, and I got the next along the wall with one. I also had a separate entrance that opened right on the hallway opposite a shared bathroom and shower.

I was happy with the move and figured that our *new* location down the hall from the last office I'd come home to might provide some protection against anyone who had it in for us, but didn't know we'd moved *again*.

I remembered Authority Inspector Stall warning me that Morto had set up shop in town. Elmo and I had already had a run-in with the living dead wise

guys and while I had the feeling we were on agreeable terms when we parted ways, I knew they worked for the mob and no one was ever safe from *them*.

So, Hester Schultz needed to talk to me because I was a private detective that she had read about who ran an agency called Wildclown Investigations.

But seeing me there behind the desk, Hester Schultz couldn't hide her moment of absurd realization. The black and white greasepaint covering my face and the multicolored spots on my coverall must have leapt out at her as she removed her hat, and shook her dark, brown tresses out to their shoulder length.

There was a minute glimmer in her eye that could have taken the fun out of things.

Well, it would have completely, but Hester had done her homework. She must have seen a photograph of me somewhere, because she quickly wiped any lingering surprise aside along with a dangling lock, and approached my desk with hand outstretched.

“*You’re Wildclown?*” she started. The words came out with the slightest of *foreign* accents, and unbelievable uptick of pitch at the end. She’d made it a question.

I stood up and reached across the desk to wrap my fingers around her soft white hand, and agreed to her

observation with an animal grunt.

I was doing my best to avoid drawling. It was too early for tired tropes. I'd hold it at laconic to start.

“I'm Hester Schultz,” she said, smiling around a set of perfect teeth. They gleamed like the diamond raindrops that dotted her topcoat. Her business voice settled around a central, steady tone. She batted her shining eyes. The curtain of shimmering bangs over her brows bobbed. “I want to hire you.”

I nodded, gearing down from laconic. I dropped her hand and then reached for a cigarette from a pack on the desk. I placed it between my lips and held it there because lighting it would have been predictable.

So would offering Hester one, despite the fact that almost everyone in Greasetown smoked—and why not? By the look of things, the world had ended.

She set her damp hat on my desk, glanced back over her left shoulder and saw the waiting company chair. Her topcoat came off in a graceful twirl that shed its dew of raindrops before ending up draped over her arm.

Hester Schultz's elegant reveal left me reeling. She had a slight build that an ambitious woman could work wonders with given a good diet and a gym membership.

But, Hester was one of the lucky ones. There was a consummate, sculpted quality to her figure that defied reality,

like she'd been dreamed or created rather than born.

All she needed was a pedestal and she could head back to the museum.

Hester had poise. She wasn't tall—but that's not a complaint. You'd have to be a fool to consider her height anything but another facet of her formidable feminine allure.

Hester must have stood a few inches under five feet in her sheer, silk stockings, but did so while somehow conveying a willowy presence, as though her perfectly formed body operated outside the normal laws of nature.

It could have been her eyes, her smile—the shining hair. There was a

suggestion of this physical amplification in the cut of her clothing, and the angular grace of her movements.

Hester Schultz was a powerful presence.

CHAPTER 2

Hester looked me over, and then took two gentle steps back toward the guest chair while digging into her small handbag for a silver cigarette case and matching lighter.

“May I?” she offered, holding the flickering orange cigarette lighter flame out for me.

I shook my head.

“Can I ask you about your makeup?”

I shook my head again, but coughed clamping down on my surprise at her directness.

“You must get that a lot,” she said, tone softening.

I cleared my throat.

“Sorry, I’m not trying to be rude,” she continued. “But it’s kind of right out there!”

I sighed.

“You’re a man of few words,” she observed, before lighting her own cigarette and settling into the chair.

What could I say? It wasn’t like I had an easy explanation for the makeup, and I was trying to keep my jaw from hitting the floor, anyway. My first look at her in action had left me mute.

So instead of drooling, I plucked my unlit cigarette from my mouth and rolled it between my fingers as I sank into the chair across the desk from her.

“The man who showed me in—your

partner?” she said, gesturing to the outer room that adjoined the other office.

Hester’s eyes locked on the empty glass and half-full whisky bottle on my desk.

I stuck my cigarette back into my face as I rose to retrieve a dusty company glass from atop the filing cabinet behind me. I gestured with it, catching her eye and then staring at the bottle.

“Of course,” she said, as I dropped three ounces into her glass and the same in mine. She slid her damp topcoat over the arm of her chair and then took the drink I held out. Raising it slightly, she said, “Isn’t it customary to propose a toast?”

“Customs are optional here,” I said, reaching over the desk to clink her glass.

“*L’chaim*,” she sang, before downing half the drink and smiling gleefully. “So, you do talk. I was beginning to wonder if your mouth was painted on.”

I gave a weak smile, swept the matches up off the desk and lit my cigarette.

“That was okay,” I said through a cloud of smoke.

Hester smiled.

“But you stepped all over *my* punch line,” I grumbled unfairly. *Hers* was the better joke.

“Oh,” she said, throwing a gorgeous deadpan my way. “I’m sorry. Consider me an eager audience, then. Fire away.”

“No, I let it go too long.” I gave her a comic frown. “It would *bomb* now.”

That was a lie. I'd been struggling to find a suitable wisecrack, but it was her beauty again. It got to me, kept knocking me against the ropes.

And another part of me knew that once we started talking I'd learn something terrible, and all that beauty would start to crumble.

Or worse, it would begin to beckon like a desperate damsel.

No. That was for knights in shining armor.

“What can I do for you?” I asked sliding back in my chair and enjoying another shy kiss of whisky. I was trying to go easy on the hooch. I'd been back almost a year, and was showing signs of reliability.

My partner was getting there, too. He had handed me some respectable if uninspiring cases: divorce stuff and simple evidence collection; and he had me go along with him as muscle.

But neither of us thought I was ready for the mainstream, yet.

I was the “go-to” guy on unusual cases, the oddball stuff that sometimes gimped in through the door after the apocalypse—and was either coming in crazy, or needed acid testing across the desk from a person with my special brand of charm.

And if someone asked for me ...

“I have read about you,” Hester said, sipping whisky and then pulling hard on her cigarette. The butt came away

stained with creamy pink lipstick.

“You’re tough and you’re eccentric, but you’re honest.”

I studied the smoke curling off my cigarette, going sphinx-like as I contemplated the gray dervish. The orange heater smoldered like a distant gypsy fire. Every heated glimmer held a secret.

Such a distraction was required when sitting across from Hester Schultz.

“I am putting together a group of professionals like yourself: former lawmen, hired guns, and others with military backgrounds,” she said, her eyes warming suddenly, in tandem with a flare from her cigarette.

“Are you starting a war?” I stared.

“No. I want to stop one,” she snapped, reaching out to crush her cigarette in the smoking stand by her chair. “You sure you won’t tell me about the makeup?”

“I work alone,” I said, ignoring the question.

Hester Schultz looked back over her shoulder toward the desks in the connecting room and the evidence of coworkers.

“And yet, you clearly *don’t*,” she said, teeth sparkling. “Your partner ...”

“Well, we don’t work *together*,” I said, flustered by her playful probing. “When I’m out—and working a case. I usually do that alone.”

“Not a ‘people person?’” Hester

kidded, undoing the top button on her trim, gray jacket to arrange the flowery blue satin shirt collar that cupped her delicate chin.

The jacket matched the thigh-hugging skirt that followed the line of her legs to her knees where seven inches of silk-wrapped calf flowed from the lower hem to the top of her ankle-height boots. Scarlet piping traced every seam on her suit and accentuated the form beneath.

I growled quietly.

“You’ll fit right in,” she said. “We need someone with your skills.”

I let my breath out slowly, reviewing the list: I could take a punch; I could throw one; I liked puzzles; and I got lucky once in a while.

“I’m not crazy,” I announced, gesturing at the greasepaint covering my face. “If that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Hester said, beaming. “I *will* have to introduce you to the team, and—”

“Who are the other *professionals*?” I asked.

“You’ll have to sign on first,” she said gravely, with a puckish flicker in her eyes. She tapped her fingertips along the polished outer edge of her smoking stand. “I have security concerns.”

“So it’s illegal?” My cigarette dropped flakes of ash in my lap.

“It’s a secret,” Hester said in a hushed voice. “But I pay half up front ...”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I assured her,

the sentence sounding childish and strangely erotic.

“I doubt you would,” she agreed, angling her head to the right and narrowing her focus to fit between the slats on the window blind.

Rain ticked against the pane. It had been drizzling non-stop for weeks.

“J. Ronald Bauer,” she said, turning her eyes back to me without moving her head. “Know him?”

“The name rings a bell,” I said, swallowing a gasp. Pale skin shone beneath dark stockings as she crossed her legs. “Of course, my tinnitus could be acting up.”

Hester’s teeth glittered across the space between us.

“How about we swap, then?” she blurted. “You tell me why you wear the makeup and I’ll tell you who’s on the team.”

“J. Ronald Bauer,” I said humorlessly, to get her back on track.

“*And* the Twelve Stars Group,” she relented with a sigh, taking another cigarette out of her silver case and launching it with a flash of flame. “Have you heard of them?”

“Yeah,” I grunted like I’d taken a punch to the gut. I remembered them. They carried a special symbol: a swastika bound in the oval part of an Egyptian Ankh. They bragged of an Eternal Reich and a *Fuhrer* to go with it. They whispered about a fabled fifth

horseman who would start the Biblical end of times. “Fun people.”

Years earlier, the Worshipers of the Twelve Stars Group had been seeking “Regenerics” technology—and were killing people to get it. The Regenerics inventor had had hopes of using it to bring the living dead back to life, but with little backing from the scientific community had turned to private interests for funding.

So the Twelve Stars Group had gone after it along with some of the other homicidal gangs that were operating within Greasetown Authority at the time. Some wanted the technology for their own uses, and others simply understood its value in a world where the dead rose

from their graves with their spirits intact, but bound to animated corpses.

Restarting their hearts would amount to eternal life.

“Authority shut the group down years ago,” I said without a trace of pride for my own part in that operation, and the successful rescue of a human infant that had resulted as a side effect of the Regenerics research.

There were no babies born naturally after the Change, so—I had helped the little fellow avoid dissection by turning him over to his rich uncle who could afford to hide him. I had luckily escaped any fatal backlash for my involvement in the Authority purge that followed.

“I heard they were long gone,” I

added dismissively.

The investigation had led all the way to Authority command where the Twelve Stars' claws were driven deep. So, a purge was executed by special law enforcement officers who exorcised most of the corrupt incumbents in a running battle—even dispatching the group's Eternal Fuhrer in the process. Headlines had screamed about Authority guns blazing as Twelve Stars loyalists were smoked out of their sanctuaries, arrested, or shot to pieces.

“The survivors didn't go far,” Hester said, knocking her cigarette ash into the smoking stand. “The Greasetown faction relocated to an abandoned town not sixty miles south of here. J. Ronald Bauer

runs it. Hell, he owns all the buildings.”

“So he’s a mayor of an abandoned town.” I dragged my cigarette to my painted lips.

The Twelve Stars Group pamphlets had spoken of a white supremacist’s paradise where the “right people” could dominate the new age that they hoped would follow the Change. They’d twisted their minds around oppression and Christianity—not that hard to do if you believed the wrong parts of the Bible.

“Now they call themselves the *Reformation*,” Hester said. “And Bauer’s in charge. He’s a big talker—a former salesman who got God. He convinced the core group to reject their

old beliefs and pledge to right the wrongs. They acknowledge that the Twelve Stars Group went too far.”

“Good for them,” I said, hiding my sneer behind a puff of smoke. If I wasn’t a gentleman, I’d have laughed at the suggestion of *moderate* Nazis.

“But it’s a fake out—they’re still pushing the Eternal Reich behind the scenes ...” she said, looking down then, her beauty dripping with tantalizing shame. “Factions within the leadership are. I know because I joined the group.”

“So you’re a Nazi,” I said, grinning lifelessly.

CHAPTER 3

“And you’re a *clown*?” Hester replied insistently, scooching forward in her chair. “You won’t even give me a hint about the makeup? Honestly, other clients must have asked the question. Is it an end of the world thing?”

“It’s a *personal* thing,” I said, firmly. “And *this* is business. Now why didn’t you take a swing at me for calling you a Nazi?”

“Because it doesn’t work that way *anymore*,” she countered, eyes shining with certainty. “People see *right-wing nationalism* as a legitimate political point of view now.”

“You mean *some* white people see it that way,” I asserted sadly, as the air rushed out of my fantastic Hester Schultz balloon. All of her “wonderful” was *blatting* in my face like a spitty Bronx cheer.

“Don’t think like that,” Hester said, shaking her head sharply and closing her fists in her lap. “I joined them on purpose.”

“I can’t imagine anyone *accidentally* acquiring a goose step,” I said.

“I’m a journalist,” she said.

“Right,” I groaned, feeling queasy, wishing she’d called herself a “reporter.”

I trusted *reporters*. They were like unarmed detectives who were after the

truth, but were smart enough to know they'd never get justice. And self-described *journalists*? Most of them I'd met and read were overzealous and capable of great sacrifice and harm.

Of course, that could have explained the conviction in Hester's voice.

So, she wasn't a Nazi, she hunted them.

"I worked up north at the *City of Light Standard*," she said, holding her hands out to indicate something of great weight. The *Standard* was a big newspaper. "That's where I met my husband."

I hid my disappointment behind a slow pull on my cigarette.

"I was close to burnout from the

Change. You know ... what do you report on Doomsday—that it's *Doomsday*?" Hester laughed, voice rising briefly to shrill. "But I am what I am. A journalist."

Her scarlet tongue flicked out to knock a shred of tobacco off her lower lip.

"I worked there *forever* before Joshua joined the *Standard* staff two years ago. My husband-to-be had been traveling in Old Europe to research a book and had just returned to the City of Light to write it. The *Standard* hired him part-time to write features, and right away, his passion for the job impressed me.

"After we hooked up he told me that I

needed a change, and we both came up with a book idea for *me*,” she said, looking inward. “I always got a kick out of the doomsday cults that had sprung up after the Change. The *Standard* staff saved up the craziest press releases to read over Friday night drinks.” She smiled broadly. “You have to embrace the absurd or go nuts, right?”

Hester’s eyes chased a fleeting memory, and I started to like her again.

“There are all kinds of doomsday cults, but most had a naive charm—or were at least passionate about their crackpot beliefs. Many even had something meaningful to say about hope.” Hester shrugged. “My book was never intended to be an exposé. I had

hoped to write it with a focus on the *humorous*—more inspiring than spiritual.”

“But Twelve Stars was no joke,” I rasped, leaning over to kill my cigarette in the desk ashtray and top up our drinks before settling back in my chair.

“I never saw any of it as a ‘joke.’” She rebuked me with a serious frown. “There are Satan worshippers, Scientologists, Quakers and Cthulhu adherents—really weird stuff, but even those speak of eternity, and other things that *all* people shared.”

“But the Twelve Stars Group isn’t interested in sharing *anything* with *anybody*,” I said, finishing her point.

“Exactly!” Hester’s eyes burned.

“The Change came, the dead rose from their graves. The living were given unnaturally long life. Suddenly humanity had one gigantic mystery that none of us understood; but instead of pulling together, these idiots doubled-down on their white supremacy trash.”

“Fear,” I said. “They’re hooked on it.”

“You know the type,” she confirmed.

“Yeah,” I answered. “As you know from your research in the newspaper morgue.”

“It took a bit of digging.” She rolled her eyes. “Despite the influx of law-abiding inspectors during the Authority purge—the command ranks controlled the story as it came out, and downplayed

the worst to keep the public trust.”

“And maintain order,” I interjected. “It’s written on their car doors.”

“They buried related news articles, but there were enough people involved on all sides for names to leak,” Hester explained. “One source said off the record that you helped expose the Authority corruption that included the King’s Men, the Businessmen, and the Twelve Stars Group in an operation that ended with the deaths of prominent Greasetown businessmen.”

“People talk,” I said, wondering who her source was. “There was very little justice handed out back then. Some bad men died, and corrupt officials were replaced by less corrupt individuals

who had a mandate to tighten control over Authority *and* Greasetown.” I grumbled deep down in my chest. “Not much of a win.”

“I’ve found that’s what you get in the gray area,” she said. “It’s nuance and degrees.”

“The opposite of the blind faith and certainty that the Twelve Stars offers,” I said, snatching up my cigarettes and lighting a new one. “That doesn’t explain why you’d join them.”

“When I first heard of their *Reformation*, I thought it would be perfect for the book. The worst of the lot trying to atone for their behavior,” Hester said, a smile quivering over the thought. “Considering my book’s

potential for inspiring—reformed Nazis could be a great final punch for the narrative.”

“Redemption sells,” I said, with a slow nod. “But Nazis?”

“I watched J. Ronald Bauer’s old recordings,” Hester explained. “Before he joined the group he was a late-night TV pitchman. Did infomercials selling space-age coffee-making technologies, mini-microwaves and the like. He made a lot of money and the group liked money, but he didn’t have much to say until after the Authority purge when most of the Twelve Stars leadership went missing. Then he sort of talked his way into power. People were hurting and shopping for answers—and he was a

salesman. In interviews he said the Twelve Stars were now committed to becoming a force for good, but I knew I'd only believe *that* if I saw it myself."

"So, you joined," I said evenly.

"Joshua, too," Hester said, slowly.

"To watch my back. We went as a couple. It was pretty easy, really. We talked to a Reformation 'sponsor' and said we were experiencing a crisis of conscience after long careers as journalists in the confusing world of the Change." Hester studied the backs of her flawless hands. "They invited us to Bauer's little town and put us up in a house just off Main Street. We attended a couple rallies, joined in on their group therapy sessions, and got to know a few

of the locals.”

“Weren’t they suspicious?” I scowled over my drink.

“Maybe,” she said. “But Bauer welcomes anyone who is conflicted by guilt and the past.”

“He casts a big net,” I said.

“He likes a big audience.” Hester sighed. “I almost bought his story, too. Sympathy sells, right? So many people in the group are just confused conservatives who have been preyed upon by malcontents and fascist wannabes. Twelve Star ‘survivors’ wanted to believe Bauer when he said that Nazis can change.”

“How many are there?” I asked, blowing smoke.

“Too many. And the Reformation is allied with similar formerly-radical groups here in Westprime and in Old Europe who are keen on banding together.” She took a frantic pull on her cigarette. “The Authority ‘purge’ crossed the Atlantic to countries where similar right-wing and criminal groups were already under investigation, outlawed, or banned. People get tired of being hated, so there was talk of the groups unifying under one banner: *the Reformation*. And they’re still talking.”

“You don’t believe them,” I said.

“I wasn’t sure so I snooped around.” Hester stared. “And I overheard their friends from Old Europe who are not interested in reforming anything—but

see a different opportunity in *unification*.”

“What did they say?” I ground my teeth.

“Enough to bring me here,” Hester said, pretty smile locking tight.

“What does your husband think?” I couldn’t resist.

“Josh was unconvinced,” she said, voice faltering. “The last I talked to him.”

I took that to mean there’d been a fight. I wanted to ask if he still had her back, but the look on her face suggested a change of topics was in order.

“So your mercenaries will save us all?” I said, more snidely than intended.

“We might get a taste of justice. I

know where there is evidence to show the Reformation for what it really is.” Hester’s green eyes flared up with a zealous fire. “Bauer might be ready to kumbaya, but others are using his movement as a disguise. *We* can stop this monster in its tracks.”

“And kill us some Nazis!” I jeered, with cigarette clamped between my teeth.

“Expose their true evil,” she corrected.

“And in that declaration the nuance dies, and the gray subsides,” I said somberly, slumping in my chair. “You become the opposite of a Nazi, which is just as bad—and just as blind to injustice.”

Hester's Valkyrie-like expression faded and left her watching me over a disappointed but pretty frown.

“Flame against a wound will stop a fatal flow of blood,” she said. “The scar tissue that results is stronger than the flesh it replaces.”

“I know,” I said. “But scar tissue is numb, and it's there to remind you of the wound, and the mistakes that put it there.”

“You're pretty serious for a guy who wears clown makeup,” Hester said, slowly gathering her topcoat and sliding forward in her chair. “You won't help me?”

“You're not looking for help, Hester. You're hiring guns,” I said, my guts

twisting with shame. Her quest was more than that, and I knew it. “Call Authority or go write your book. It’ll be safer.”

“Authority has been compromised like all power is compromised,” she said, shaking her head, rising, and slipping into her coat. “And there will be no ‘safer’ while the Reformation exists. The Nazis set the world on fire and killed countless millions,” she declared, taking her hat from my desk and settling it over her beautiful brow. “And millions more died stopping them.”

I lowered my eyes, but raised them again to watch her. She had a gorgeous glare.

“I’m surprised at you,” she said. Hester was not used to people resisting her charms.

“So am I,” I answered, equally amazed. My face grew warm beneath the makeup.

“Then you repeat the mistakes that were made,” Hester warned, grim-faced. “Because the Nazis survived in the nuances. They are masters of the gray area.”

She turned and left the office.

CHAPTER 4

Two months passed and the memory of Hester Schultz had slipped into the quiet place between my daily possessions of Tommy Wildclown's body, and the strange hallucinations that I experienced at night and considered dreams.

All of that was still going on. Whatever I was: a disembodied spirit, ghost, or alien entity, I still borrowed Tommy's body to do my detective work. The compromise was that I could do it best over a few drinks, and I had to wear the mad clown's greasepaint.

He rejected me otherwise.

It's a long story, but to recap: whenever I relinquished my control over his body, Tommy was usually exhausted or drunk and ready for bed. While he snored, I floated over him near the ceiling without the corporeal senses of touch, smell, and taste, free to either think through my cases undistracted or slip into the hallucinogenic trance that I had come to believe was *my* version of sleep.

Faces, scenes, and sounds filled that trippy-hippy space, and while my lack of a body kept the images distant, and dispossessed, the mental state could not be considered restful.

Especially when the memory of past failures and losses flickered through it,

or when old physical and spiritual wounds were replayed—and puzzles like Hester Schultz rose up to haunt me.

The reappearance of a face like hers amidst the psychedelic brainstorm always caught my interest, and started me wondering how her mission had gone: whether it had died in the planning stages, or if it had been a real thing at all.

There had been nothing about it in the papers.

In time, I came to believe it was my injured pride that caused her memory to revisit my “dreams” and intrude upon my disembodied downtime. Hester’s memory jabbed at my conscience with a black iron cross.

Her acceptance of my decision *not* to help her without argument or insult had increased my admiration of her many fold, and left me more ashamed of my choice, even though I had already done my share against the neo-Nazi Twelve Stars Group when I had helped flush them out of Authority.

Of course, I hadn't thought it through then, that when you dealt with those evil bastards, you could never flush enough.

Days splashed and dribbled into longer, grayer days. The downpour faltered, showering us with false hope before another standing rain set in for weeks that was eventually replaced by more drizzling intervals of empty

optimism.

Throughout, I performed my daily morning ritual of ambushing Tommy while he slept below me on his bed, long limbs tangled in sheets that swaddled solid shoulders and chest. Sometimes I delayed to ponder the midriff paunch that suggested a comical and life-threatening potbelly lay ahead if I ever stopped forcing him to work.

I had rented the small, one-bedroom apartment when I first returned from my time away using money that Elmo had set aside as my part of a payment for the case I'd been working when I disappeared.

He had used most of the cash to keep the office open and run the agency while

I was missing, but some remained that I could borrow against if things ever got that tight.

So far, I'd managed to stay on top of my rent and other bills with a stipend I was paid against future cases.

My various bar tabs threatened to outpace me, but booze was required to sedate the clown while I worked. And I was only too happy to oblige him.

So, while the actual mechanics of possessing Tommy were pretty straightforward, the powers behind it were unknown to me.

It went like this.

From my disembodied position over him, I was at times able to see through his dark hair and the top of his skull to

watch the nervous energy in his brain that manifested to me as flickering spots of light moving over the convoluted surface.

It just so happened that this energy was most dynamic and easily scrutinized when Tommy was contemplating his various cravings and addictions—or actively engaging in them.

And it wasn't always a conscious act on my part.

There were times when I awoke in Tommy's body as the sticky sole survivor of his hardcore porn dreams, which led me to believe that there was some unconscious link connecting us to each other, or each of us to the body. I was still unsure of Tommy's actual past

and whether he had a legitimate claim to the flesh that we shared, though I had some suspicions that we might both be hijackers.

The whole thing was a mystery. I'd arrived at my first hypothesis that *I* was the interloper after I had appeared years ago, aware but without a complete memory, an orphaned *mind* floating over the mad clown's drunken head.

So, I had been in no condition at that time to make the call. And since then, I'd discovered too many gray areas to ignore.

Tommy couldn't see *me*, though cryptic things he said implied he was aware that some external phenomenon caused the amnesia he experienced when

I was in control. It was more than drunken blackouts.

Of course, those thoughts made him drink more, which facilitated the whole process.

I had also stumbled upon my ability to increase his nervous mental energy and initiate the possessions by broadcasting enticing images of my own imagining.

That was easiest in the morning, as the hung-over Tommy lolled in bed toying with sexual fantasies from his dreams.

When I identified the obvious physical clues to his arousal, I might start thinking about the woman, Maria, from a pizza shop near the old office.

Maria was just—gorgeous. As I mused over her voice, eyes, and body, the lights skittering across Tommy's brain would grow brighter and more agitated. It could be almost any woman or situation as far as Tommy was concerned, but we both liked Maria.

Then, I'd experience a sudden hurtling sensation and I'd fall toward the flickering lights. I'd experience a shift of perspective.

Transition.

And I'd open Tommy's eyes to see that I was inhabiting *his* body.

After a few overpowering minutes of glorious reintegration with tactile reality, I'd get up and start brewing the most delicious cup of coffee in the

world.

On the odd day, I'd feel a little overlap, like Tommy's presence was lingering nearby, feeling outrage or fear. I'd hear muttered words, whispered echoes—*surprise* perhaps—but my reawakened senses would barely catch the thread before the phenomena shrank into the shadowed parts of my mind where I imagined Tommy's spirit lurked when I assumed control.

He seemed even more content to do so once I had spiked the coffee with whisky and settled the deal over a fresh-lit cigarette.

Most times, he tolerated me taking charge, and rarely asserted himself—though he could throw in the odd

comment while I was talking, and had on occasion risen up to drive me out.

But such defiance was rare.

So I continued that limbic leapfrog for the months following my meeting with Hester Schultz, until I had started to grow bored again. As much as I appreciated Elmo's taking me on and putting me to work, there was a part of me that was quite comfortable with downtime.

Back when I was calling the shots, I'd take the odd day or two for a bender, sending my partner out for whisky and cigarettes after which we'd drink and rant about reality gone mad.

After all, Elmo was a resurrected

corpse in a world of constant rain. How could we not spend some time philosophizing about that?

While the benders would usually lead me to terrifying hangovers, the odd fistfight at a shop over cigarettes, and ultimately back to mind-numbing boredom, it had still felt like real work minus all the boring day-to-day stuff.

Of course that had also led me to taking some dangerous, weird, and unprofitable cases when we ran out of smokes and the bar tabs had come due, so I understood that Elmo's new system was an improvement.

It just taxed my sometimes-tenuous relationship with my host. Tommy liked benders and ranting, too, and he could

become restive after too much time in the library researching municipal building codes and zoning bylaws, or at a lawyer's office writing down the dull details of separation agreements and divorce.

And at other times, when I was out in the rain keeping watch on a cozy, orange window and considering the extramarital crimes being committed behind it.

Just like I was doing now.

CHAPTER 5

I could keep Tommy quiet and warm by nipping at a metal flask full of whisky, but I couldn't overdo it. This was Greasetown after dark. Crime was rife and life was cheap.

Cheaper, too, now that plugging a guy didn't mean a coffin, worms, and six feet under.

Murder was still murder, but nobody took it as seriously. Especially the guy holding the gun.

I stared across the street and imagined the fun my subject was having with his girlfriend. They'd be warm and dry but wet in all the right places.

They'd either be flushed and staring leading up to another go, or hot and frazzled, canoodling in slippery echoes of the deed.

Some guys had all the luck.

The rain drooled off the brim of my fedora, and ran down between my shoulder blades. I was drenched. The spotted coverall beneath my black overcoat was soaked through.

Gusts of wind had driven the downpour into my poor shelter beneath a fire escape.

An hour before, I'd taken up a position in an alleyway across from the apartment that the "son of a bitch" had rented for the "whore."

His wife's words.

She had brought her sad story to the office the day before. Her husband was cheating on her, she was sure, and she wanted to kick the son of a bitch to the curb.

However, in order to collect his retirement fund, she'd have to prove that his infidelity had led to the divorce. You gotta love prenups.

Of course, I could understand her husband's concern. He had built up close to a million dollars working his way up through amateur wrestling and on to the semi-pros. And he'd paid for the trip with teeth, clumps of hair, and broken bones. His face was a scarred battlefield where nothing beautiful would ever grow.

So, he had put that stipulation into their prenup, that he'd only forfeit half his million *and* the entirety of his generous retirement fund in divorce proceedings if *he* cheated on his wife.

He had no reason to believe he would.

They were childhood sweethearts after all, and she'd been icing his injuries since before the Change. And to the champ, "cheating" wasn't "loving" someone else, so to him, his wife would only collect the retirement proceeds in divorce if any dalliance actually meant something to him.

He must have got confused on that point.

I could see her side, too. With the

fifty plus years of marriage after the dead rose and the rain started, on top of the decades before the Change—that was a lot of sweaty jockstraps to run through the wash.

She must have had him put the stipulation in because of his premarital and pre-fortune behavior—back when he'd still had the mental capacity to hide a thing like infidelity, when his wife had just suspected such late-night, post-fight activities.

And he'd done pretty well to keep a low profile. Nothing ever hit the newspapers and nothing conclusive had ever made it back to his wife.

However, all those haymakers, flying mares, and pile-drivers had taken their

toll, and he'd slipped up somehow leaving a perfumed, kerchief-wrapped condom in his overpriced, low-riding sedan.

The silk hanky was purple and the condom was extra-large. Yeah, his wife had brought the evidence in for me to look at.

Some guys had all the luck.

The champ's wife said she just needed his picture with the whore now that she had the physical proof. A photo would let her rake her husband over the coals while she claimed his retirement fund.

I'd snapped a quick shot of the lovers after they drove up under the streetlight, before they'd hurried in. I was hoping

for another opportunity since the lighting was bad, and using a flash would have been counter-productive at that distance.

The champ was easily recognizable. He had defended his semi-professional heavyweight title at the Greasetown Arena only weeks before. Semi-pro bouts were extra-violent affairs that you couldn't get a professional scrapper to enter.

The smaller purses awarded to semi-pro survivors wouldn't pay big league limo or dry cleaning bills, and would be stretched to cover the medical expenses they'd be bound to incur.

The fights were patterned after popular pre-Change wrestling except that the violence wasn't fake. So lots of

costumes, and characters, but any barbed wire wound around a fist or broken glass taped to a hockey glove was the real thing.

Some of the posters detailing the event were still up around town. There was a “deads only” league that followed the semi-pro fighting circus, too, where bloody violence and the usual threats of grievous injury and death were replaced with gut-wrenching mutilations, and dismemberment.

“Hey, *s-s*-somebody back there?” a voice rasped to my right.

I glanced over to see a bedraggled figure limping toward me with raindrops spattering at his feet.

I sighed wearily. The dead panhandler had passed me earlier, just as twilight had been flickering on the edge of night.

He had spotted me standing by the wall between some trashcans and had hit me up for money. Instead, I'd sent him off with a couple of smokes. Offering the cigarettes had been enough of a risk. There were too many poor people, dead and alive, wandering Greasetown—especially in neighborhoods close to the harbor with backstreets that cut between ramshackle buildings like the one I was watching.

And handouts just bought you their constant attention. I didn't mind so much when it was a living person. After all,

such a beggar still had a mouth to feed—
but the dead?

As much as I empathized, I knew
there was nothing I could do for them.

I guess I was lucky that most would
settle for smokes.

The panhandler staggered cautiously
into the alley, head bobbing left and right
as he tried to focus his dead eyes.

“Oh, *you*-you that friendly clown
fella, huh?” He started, limping closer.

“I already donated,” I growled.

“So *wha*-what’d you donate?” the
dead man asked, his sodden, sagging
skin glistening in the streetlight.

“I gave you a couple smokes and told
you to beat it—so beat it!” I ordered,
looking past him to the apartment

window. The light had gone out. "I'm busy."

"*Wha*-what I do *w*-with them ciggies?" he stuttered, patting at his wet pockets.

"I don't know," I said, gesturing back the way he'd come. "So *beat it*."

His lifeless eyes looked past me and his jaw hung slack.

"You *d*-don't gotta be mean," he said, straightening his shabby jacket as he turned to stagger off. "At least you *guh*-got friends ..."

I shrugged reaching between the lapels of my overcoat where my camera hung on a strap.

The apartment lights across from me were still out. The champ's car was

parked. Would he stay the night, or was it time to say cheese?

I'd catch him coming out.

“Bedtime for Bonzo,” I whispered, as a large, powerful hand came from behind to clamp down on my right shoulder, and another scooped up between my legs.

I was lifted into the air.

CHAPTER 6

“Goddamn PERVERT!” a three-ring circus-sized voice erupted from below.

I found the description debatable since I wasn't the one lifting a man by his groin, but there was no time to argue the details.

My wet clothing caused me to slip in the uncomfortable grip, and I found myself looking down at the wrestler Goliath.

And the subject of my surveillance.

He must have stood seven feet tall, and was over three hundred pounds. Goliath had pale olive skin that was shaded by a uniform covering of short,

black body hair.

I'd seen him in posters wearing tiger-skin wrestling trunks.

He was bald from the crown of his head to his eyebrows and ears. The rest of him resembled a semi-civilized Sasquatch. He didn't sport a moustache or beard, instead short fur grew from his lower eyelids down either side of his nose, clustered on his neck and shoulders and covered the rest of his oversized body.

Tonight he wore heavy black boots, dark trousers and a white, wife-beater. I supposed the thick pelt on his arms and buffalo hump of a neck kept him warm in the dank night air.

Goliath shifted his grip and spun me

until I hung there eye to eye with him.

“Sable seen something out here!” the big man bellowed, before he started shaking me by the collar until my camera swung out of its hiding place behind my lapels.

“Hah!” Goliath glared at it and growled like a bear. With a simple flex of his massive arms, he flung me into the street at a passing taxicab.

I shattered its windshield with my shoulder and rolled off the far fender to land on my head.

The vehicle lurched to a halt.

Lights sparked before my eyes. I blinked up into the rain, gasping for breath, waiting for my head to clear.

The taxi driver got out but froze in

place when he saw Goliath charging out of the alley.

The cabbie leapt back into the car and tore away with tires hissing on the wet asphalt, the rear bumper nearly clipping my shoulder.

Goliath squatted and dragged me upright where I swayed in the half-light.

“So what’s your game, bub?” He grabbed my camera between the cucumber-sized thumb and forefinger of his left hand. “You *paparazzi* or some creep taking dirty pictures, huh?”

He dropped the camera, snagged my collar, and slapped me across the face with his large right hand.

“I’m a private eye,” I said. There were stars. My vision tilted dizzily.

“Oh, all right—a snooper,” he agreed, bony brow shining in the rain as he studied the makeup that had transferred to his scarred palm. He scowled at my face. “You’re a goddamn *clown!*”

“And you should pick on someone your own size,” I drawled, tensing my head, neck, and shoulders for the punch that he was wrapping up in his right hand.

It was going to be a showstopper.

Goliath’s career in the ring played against him then, as if his muscle memory had suddenly taken over, because his eyes burned demonically, and a villainous smile stretched across his battered face.

I'd seen the same expression on his posters.

Goliath was unconsciously performing and mugging for the cameras in his own mind. His audience loved his violence with a dash of relish.

So, I took the opportunity to add some flair of my own, lashing at his left instep with my right boot.

Goliath howled, staggering forward around the pain—face contorting with rage. His lips curled away from sharp false teeth.

And I drilled him on the nose with a hard right. I gave it everything thing I had. It was enough to knock him back, tip his balance to send him falling—with me close behind, delivering first a

vicious left to his open mouth, and then kicking upward to catch him under the chin as he dropped on his ass.

He fell heavily, and if he were a normal human being, he would have stayed down; but he was Goliath, more wrestler than man, more muscle than mind.

He roared and tumbled onto his left side, feigning a kick at my legs to push me back as he gained his feet.

“Oh, that’s a good combo for the clown,” he spat, drooling saliva and blood. His teeth were streaked with red and hungry for vengeance. “Now it’s Goliath’s turn!”

Somewhere far off, I heard a siren start, but I didn’t get my hopes up.

Greasetown rang with a constant background radiation of emergency vehicles, gunshots, and screams.

Goliath charged. He outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds, and had a foot in height and reach.

I'd never win trading punches or letting him throw me at taxicabs.

So I dropped my head and shoulders, and surged at the giant's gut like a battering ram. Unfortunately, that move had to be covered in the first chapter of the wrestler's playbook.

Goliath planted his feet when he saw me coming, clasped his fists together to form a club, and brought them down on the back of my neck and shoulders.

I kissed the pavement so hard my

teeth clacked and lights burst inside my head. Hot electric pain jazzed down my spine and along my arms as I tried to get my hands under me.

Then my shoulders and back clenched with the kind of intuitive physical prescience a body can experience during a beating. It was all instincts and reactions. Maybe I'd heard his feet moving or seen the shadows shift on the wet asphalt.

Whatever it was, my body was half-prepared for the kick that Goliath launched at my face. My nose broke as his big boot smashed my lips against my teeth.

The impact threw my head back, sending still more painful shockwaves

through my body. I rolled away from the giant, letting the energy of the blow have its way.

And I scrambled to my knees as Goliath fired another boot at my head. I deflected it with my right arm, and caught at his belt, dragging myself to my feet as he lurched back.

My legs tangled in his, and we both went down.

I butted his face with my forehead, but he was in his element now, and he only laughed at the fresh springs of blood that spurted from his nose and mouth.

He grabbed my neck with both hands and started squeezing.

My ears immediately rendered the

gargantuan strangling pressure into a sudden, stifling throb. I went for Goliath's neck, but could barely scratch his chin with my fingertips, so I gripped his thick right wrist with my left hand, and reached into my coat with the other.

I drew my .44 automatic from where I kept it thrust through my pink skipping rope belt, and jammed the barrel into Goliath's left eye socket.

"Tap out," I choked past throttling fingers, glaring into Goliath's free eye.

"*Uncle*," the wrestler capitulated, murderous hands suddenly going lax.

His big arms fell back on the pavement, and I halfway collapsed on him, straddling his barrel chest.

"No fair using a gat," Goliath

complained, staring up at me.

“That’s why I didn’t shoot you right away,” I grated, left hand massaging life back into my throat.

“Really?” he said, a bloody smile stretching his mangled lips. “That ain’t half bad of you, clown.”

We both suddenly became aware of a shimmering red flicker on the street around us that grew in intensity with the siren.

A second later, an Authority squad car slid to a halt and two inspectors climbed out with their weapons drawn. I gingerly set my gun on the pavement and crawled off Goliath to lie in a rain puddle beside it.

CHAPTER 7

My right fist was soaking in a bowl of ice water set out on the desk between the ashtray and my gun.

I was back in my office having a drink with Elmo. He was sitting across from me in the guest chair alternately drawing on a strong, slim cigarette and taking short sips of whisky.

His thin form was draped in gray wool trousers and vest, white dress shirt, green satin tie and polished brown wingtips. He'd dyed his lanky hair to a golden brown so its wavy contours shone like burnished bronze against his dark skin. He had left his suit jacket in

his office, but he was ready for action.

It had to be four in the morning.

Elmo didn't sleep. Few dead men did more than rest their bones since actually lying down and closing your eyes could be a terrifying proposition to a walking corpse.

I'd turned my camera over to him upon my return, and he'd teased the film out of it while I washed up in the bathroom and decided which body part hurt the worst.

There were lots of bruises, but nothing felt permanent or disabling.

I had a tubular wad of toilet paper sticking out of each mashed nostril. The nose itself was swollen and red beneath my greasepaint, but I had been hit enough

over the years to know that it wasn't worth setting, if it really was broken.

I had wiped away most of the blood while taking care to leave the rest of my makeup in place. The resulting mess would be a jarring look for the uninitiated, but Elmo had seen it all.

And he had come to understand that the facial disguise was necessary to my getting any work done. He knew firsthand that our career plans went into the toilet anytime I uncovered my face.

I'd tried to clean the gunk off in my first days of possessing Tommy, but every time the mirror reflected raw, pink features, an agitated presence had suddenly boiled up and I found myself ejected from the body and floating over

my host.

So I made the best of it, and had even added my own touches to the makeup. I guess I'd forced a compromise on Tommy in turn, since I'd shifted his look away from classic Barnum and Bailey lines and color to a darker, black and white representation of moody Gothic angst.

My clown makeup could change as the time allowed and my attitude suggested. I tried to keep it just shy of sinister, while maintaining enough sardonic ennui in the black lines around the mouth and eyes to keep me from being a target of violence.

The detective job took me to some rough neighborhoods where clowns

were more likely to trigger rage over unhappy childhoods than conjure charming memories of circuses, balloon animals, and birthday parties.

Elmo knew that his partner required the disguise to function as a detective and he was too much of a gentleman to ask why.

He had left the camera in his office before crossing the connecting room to join me in mine. Elmo would send the film out for developing in the morning. I was pretty sure I had a good snap of Goliath on his way into the girlfriend, Sable's, place—with his arm around her fluffy mink shoulder—and I had managed an angry portrait of the

wrestler taken through the rear window of the Authority cruiser as he was on his way to lockup for assaulting a guy who was just doing his job.

If that one turned out, it might be worth a few bucks to the *Greasetown Gazette's* sports and entertainment pages.

“Any trouble w-with Authority?” Elmo asked between a drag on his cigarette and a sip of whisky.

I shook my head, and frowned lifting my swollen fist out of the ice water.

When Goliath's girlfriend had spotted me in the alley across the street from her apartment, the wrestler had gone out to investigate, thinking it was one of

Sable's old boyfriends who had been phoning her and showing up at her work.

He must have got a shock when he found a clown in fedora and trench coat.

Then Sable had called Authority when she heard the sounds of fighting and was afraid a past lover was trying to kill the present one.

The inspectors who arrived soon after had heard of me. I was a running joke down at Greasetown Authority Headquarters.

Or I used to be. It was just the way that Hester Schultz had said it. My actions in the past had brought many corrupt Authority Inspectors down and forced a shakeup in the local ranks that sent ripples through the organization as

far away as the City of Light. Some thought I was a hero, but most didn't, because even corrupt inspectors had friends, and some of those friends had been on the take, and receiving their cut, too.

That's the way it turned out. There had been a purge of the higher ups, and firings among the worst offenders of all ranks, but they couldn't fire everyone.

Which meant there were still plenty of inspectors and enforcers on the force that had an axe to grind with me, and there was the thin blue line to protect.

But for the most part, I was a joke that had lost its punch line, who had to occasionally put up with the "punch" being an actual *punch*.

Luckily, there were enough honest law enforcement officers remaining in the command ranks to have welcomed my assistance with the Authority purge, whether my involvement had been accidental or not.

Thanks to them, I didn't have to wear a bulletproof vest. Instead of dodging lead, I put up with ribbing, the odd veiled threat, and some blatant intimidation and violence.

That meant the inspectors who had arrived in the alley to break up my fight with Goliath were unlikely to have much sympathy for me.

“They never change,” I told Elmo over my flexing fingers, and the dead

man cursed under his breath.

I tried to take the harassment in stride since it was nothing compared to the treatment that Authority handed out to the dead. In fact, a “deceased” branch of the law enforcement agency had been set up to handle criminal investigations amongst the dead because of it.

Most of the living inspectors and enforcers could not be trusted to deal with Elmo’s kind impartially because the early ranks—including many who were still on the force—had come from groups of regulators hired by government just after the Change to deal with the rising dead and their demands for equality.

And the regulators had been none too

gentle about “regulating” things.

One of the quirks of waking up dead was that there were no guarantees your personality would return intact on the other side of Blacktime. Brain damage and the physical destruction of the organ could leave you normal, moronic, or zombie-like. It was a crapshoot that left the living dead struggling for their rights in the best of cases.

“Could be worse,” I said, taking a drink and remembering the moments after the fight.

“Another night in the life of a private dick,” Authority Inspector Lifeson had said after he’d locked Goliath in the cruiser. The big inspector had loomed

even larger in his black, rain-drenched slicker. His partner was a broad-shouldered woman of Asian descent that I'd seen around town: Inspector Cho.

“Maybe you should consider leaving the circus.”

“Maybe I will,” I answered him, drooling blood through a wad of gauze.

I had been perched on the back bumper of an ambulance that had come to the scene five minutes after the inspectors.

“Imagine this,” Cho laughed as she lit a cigarette on approach. “The champ finds Wildclown with a camera out in the alley. He does a double take on the painted mug and figures him for a sex pervert.”

“Imagine that,” I answered then, wincing while the ambulance attendant had dabbed cotton and iodine into some deep bootlace impressions on my chin. The black man’s face had shone purple in the flickering Authority cruiser lights.

The other attendant, another black man, had stayed in the ambulance smoking, sitting sideways behind the wheel with his long legs stretched out through the open door.

“I just told him you were a bird watcher with an interest in night owls,” Lifeson had sniped, handing my gun and ammo magazine back to me, as Cho added helpfully, “*I* told him you were a pervert who liked to have sex with wrestlers.”

I didn't press charges and the inspectors were tickled to hear I wouldn't.

They took Goliath downtown anyway. He'd had a few bottles of vodka with Sable, and they didn't want him driving angry or beating anybody else bloody.

The champion wrestler was the only reason that "inspectors" and not enforcers had answered the call so quickly. They could show him off to their peers and underlings back at headquarters, and keep him from following me back to my office.

I remembered limping out to snap a picture of Goliath flipping me the bird in

back of the Authority cruiser before someone touched me softly on the bruised, right shoulder.

The ambulance driver had left his partner to stow the medical gear while he had stepped out into the rain to approach me.

He had a gleeful, childlike gleam in his eye that occurred whenever people saw impossible things.

“So, you’re that *Wildclown* guy,” he started, with a silly, disbelieving smile. “The detective.”

“Yeah?” I answered turning, tilting my head so the streetlight spilled under my hat brim to show the wrecked face beneath.

“I remember you from the *list*,” the

driver had continued, black features gleaming in the drizzle and damp.

“*Hester’s* list,” he whispered as I spat bloody scraps of tobacco.

“I’m the *medic*.” The man’s handsome features had turned to stone as he pointed at the caduceus embroidered on his shoulder. “You were smarter than me.”

“What?” was all that I managed before the ambulance headlights had flashed, the horn honked, and the engine roared.

“I didn’t think you were real!” the black EMT had laughed before slapping my arm and climbing into the ambulance. Then the siren had kicked in and the dome lights flickered as they sped north

through the fog and drizzle.

“It *ti*-ticks me off—*off!*” Elmo stammered. “Bad enough with the Change, and the *d*-disrespect.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to recall the company name that I’d seen embroidered around the ambulance driver’s shoulder-mounted caduceus.

CHAPTER 8

The next three weeks passed slowly with me coming into the office to do paperwork, answer the phones, and do boring detective things that included musing over old cases.

Puzzling out the mysteries of life helped keep the mind sharp, too.

The Change was a phenomenon above my pay grade, but other things like that ambulance driver's mention of "Hester's list" tended to keep me brooding.

I'd looked up the address of Greasetown First Responders the week after the Goliath fight one afternoon

while I was counting the minutes until cocktail hour.

We still drank at work, and I could come in with a snootful if I wanted to, but Elmo frowned on excessive drinking before noon during the business day. Since he'd built this spiffy new office up from the rat trap I'd started us out in, who was I to complain?

I still kept a bottle of whisky in the lower right-hand drawer of my desk, but that was for real emergencies. It's funny, how often those can crop up.

They called themselves Greasetown First Responders. The ambulance company's Yellow Pages ad said they offered pickup and delivery services for

the living and the dead. They also claimed to be *Authority Approved* and *Post-Mortem Treatment Certified*.

I guessed that last part referred to some specialization for treating injury and damages to the dead. That would include the preservation of lifeless tissue that no longer healed but still needed mending. So, they'd be experts at filling holes, sewing hides, and screw-nailing broken bones back together.

I knew that most funeral homes sold the different makeup, pastes, and putties that the living dead used to cover up the evidence of their own demises, and I imagined that services like the First Responders would, too.

Greasetown First Responders was

one of almost twenty-five such ambulance companies that were contracted by Authority, hospitals, and morgues to coordinate with other emergency services responding to crimes, accidents, and calamities.

The ambulance driver who accosted me had appeared to be about pre-Change thirty in age, give or take the fifty-eight years that had passed since the world had changed.

He'd been at the back of my mind since the Goliath fight, and moved to the forefront as a general malaise had sunk into business and life in general. Fall was coming on and a cold, damp north wind now accompanied the incessant rain.

It rarely snowed in Greasetown, so winter arrived like the flu in dismal, unwelcome stages. The chill temperatures turned the rain into sleet and the streets to sludge. It left you shivering, damp, and runny.

Snowmen were all but extinct, and white Christmases were rare, so there was little left to prompt nostalgic cheer.

That was one of the reasons I tried to keep a bottle or flask of whisky handy at such times. Being drunk was the closest you could get to having that holiday glow.

The shifting weather also kept me in at my apartment, or at the office, the same way it kept most of our clients at home.

I'd make my way to work and usually find Elmo there before me—if he'd ever left. My partner didn't have an apartment, and because of his dead status preferred to keep the lights burning at night. He worked all the time. On the rare occasion, he'd have other private dicks on site to whom he'd contracted low-paying and tedious surveillance tasks, or who were sharing a case or consulting with us.

Back when I was in charge, slow times usually prompted drinks, cigarettes, and tirades.

With Elmo at the helm, a lull in activity provoked creative thinking. Why eat into savings when pooling resources on crummy cases could produce

employment for a few hours, days, or weeks?

... to pay for drinks, cigarettes and ...

At other times when I'd come to work, he'd be there with a client who was unraveling a story of woe, or chatting up some local grifter who had just popped in to avoid the wet and cold on the way to somewhere else.

But with the slowdown in work, I was reminded that I was the only one Elmo counted on to mind the store with him on a *daily* basis. The other operatives and associates were either temporary contract workers, or too good to work part time.

More likely, they didn't have the right history.

That reminded me of Elmo's loyalty because he still expected me to arrive at the office every day close to opening and to stay late if required. What did I know, maybe it wasn't loyalty? Maybe I was the only living idiot he knew that didn't have a life outside the office.

But Elmo had always valued having a living partner because detective work often got us involved with Authority, and they were too dangerous for him to deal with directly.

Not that I got a lot of extra respect with my clown's face and faded coverall. I remembered more than once having some irate Authority Inspector polish the toes of his big black boots in my bellybutton.

A smart detective tries to take an expression of frustration like that with a grain of salt, but a wise one never forgets the incident, or hesitates to give it back if he sees an opening.

One morning I heard the mailman enter the outer office with a big hello for Elmo who sauntered across the connecting room to claim a package.

I had spent the first half hour of the day perfecting my makeup. A lot of black had built up around my eyes and lips since I'd been hung over and in a hurry after a breakfast of coffee and tobacco.

The results were messy.

There'd been a glimmer of something disapproving or startled in Elmo's look

when I arrived earlier that made me give myself the once-over. Since then, I'd been trying to enclose the dark accents, refining things by drawing a sharper line of white makeup around my lips, eyes, and nose.

I also did my best to wipe the excess goo out of my hairline. I'd given up on the long stuff to keep it out of my mouth and greasepaint. Unfortunately, the trim haircut put more focus on my makeup.

I shrugged at the hand mirror and threw it into my top desk drawer as Elmo limped into the room.

“Package *ma*-marked ‘Wildclown,’” he said, holding it up so I could see my name scrawled over our address in red marker.

“Should we soak it in water?” I joked. “We did cross those mob guys ...”

A thin eyebrow shot up on Elmo’s forehead as he gauged my tone before he grinned, and dismissed the jest with a shake of his head.

We had ticked off several mobsters over the years, and had been pointedly warned by Authority that they’d come looking sooner or later.

I took it seriously enough, but also understood the futility of avoiding bad guys in Greasetown. The place was filthy with goons and gangsters.

It had grown worse in the last decade, to the point that many of the so-called “good citizens” had packed up and moved north to the City of Light

where the big money had congregated with all of its associated protections and trappings of civilization.

That left Greasetown with a population of living and dead people of poor to moderate means who had nowhere else to go: gangsters, criminals, crooked lawyers, and cops, too, and pretty much any combination of the above.

Things were so bad that if someone had it in for us, they wouldn't use a letter bomb. They'd just walk in the door and start shooting. It would be done up close and personal to make a point.

However, because of the darker gradations of justice and crime in Greasetown, the financial entanglements

and power partnerships were often hard to sort out, so revenge or punishment killings might give you some satisfaction but they could also buy you a war.

“Thanks, Fatso,” I said with a smile, and my partner returned the warm expression before walking back to his own office.

Actually, Elmo wasn't fat at all. In fact, he was needle-thin from decades of death and dehydration. I was referring to his days before the Change when he was a detective named Thesalon Des'arlmo in the now-flooded New Orleans. He'd been overweight back then or “fat” as he had told the story, correcting me and Tommy in the early days of our partnerships.

Post-mortem issues with desiccating flesh and mortification of muscle had left Elmo draped in stretched skin that he carefully folded under the trim lines of his stylish suits and that clustered like ebon crepe at his tight collar.

Today he was wearing a dazzling blue and white, double-breasted houndstooth number, black patent leathers, and white satin shirt with a wide red tie to accent.

Death had given him a wandering speech impediment, too, and turned his actual name into a labial labyrinth that his dead tongue could not navigate reliably. So he'd already been going by *Fat Elmo* back when I had first taken possession of Tommy Wildclown.

I jotted a mental note to check that the water coolers in the waiting area were topped up. There was one cooler for the living and a special one containing mineral oil and other preservatives that was reserved for the dead.

Elmo suffered from the same thing any walking dead man or woman did. He often forgot he was deceased and failed to take proper care of his corpse.

This included hydrating and moisturizing himself inside and out, as well as stretching and exercising his lifeless limbs.

The dead tended to slow down and lock up otherwise. And they had to remember that while they were immune to disease and death by time or injury,

they also did not heal.

That explained the ragged state of Greasetown's abundant homeless population of the dearly departed.

CHAPTER 9

I turned the package over in my hands. It was a sturdy envelope about ten inches by fourteen with reinforced corners and it weighed under two pounds. By its flexible feel, I could tell it contained paper documents.

I ran a thumbnail under the tape that closed it and dumped its contents onto my desk.

There was a dirty file folder with a sheaf of paper clipped inside and a cheap, rectangular journal that had a plain black cover and blue-lined pages about six inches by nine in size.

As I lifted it, a business card fell out.

“Greasetown First Responders” was printed over “Andre Bridges” and “Emergency Medical Technician” in plain black letters.

There was a number under the name, so I dragged the phone toward me and dialed.

“Greasetown First Responders,” a musical female voice answered after a couple rings. “How can I help you?”

“Andre Bridges, please,” I said, chewing over a pretty big suspicion of who Andre Bridges was.

“I’m sorry,” the voice cut out, before quavering with real emotion: “Andre died recently—and due to the circumstances, he won’t be back.”

“What circumstances, and when did it

happen?” I said.

“Last week,” the woman replied. “It was in the news. I’m not at liberty to say more.”

“Thanks,” I said, and hung up.

I opened the journal and saw my name “Wildclown” written in the top margin of the page. A hastily drawn arrow swooped from that to the writing under it that read:

“This summer on July 19, I was contacted by an old army buddy who said he had a job for me. A woman was putting a team of operatives together for a special mission and was paying top dollar. She already had two weapons specialists, but was looking for a medic with military training which made him

think of me ...”

I put the journal down and crossed my office to the connecting room where recent and back issues of the *Greasetown Gazette* newspaper were piled along with news and entertainment magazines.

Gone were the days of firing up a laptop and searching the Internet for information. The Change had brought a technological devolution along with all its other inconveniences.

Shortly after the dead started walking, digital data became unstable, just as the specialized electronic hardware necessary to access and store it did. Cell phones, most handheld

devices, and computers were scavenged for precious metals, and the remains were sent to landfills.

Planes crashed, most satellites became nothing but space junk, and modern medical procedures had to be reverse-engineered to pre-digital norms.

Scientists were still working on the problem, so in the intervening decades the global population had been forced to seek out old technologies.

Rotary and touch-tone telephones worked on analog lines, though they weren't very portable or popular. Telecommunications was pushed back to the pre-Change fifties or sixties with radio becoming king to the television that you could still watch in color, if you

could stand the bad reception.

Digital information was lost or irretrievable so rolodexes and phonebooks appeared on desks again. Accounting firms bought adding machines for the many bean counters that were hired to sort through all the hard copy now being printed. The same thing happened in banks.

The Change worked wonders for employment. Millions of tedious jobs became instantly available and essential—jobs like sifting through old newspapers for clues.

The office had a subscription to the *Greasetown Gazette* for the obvious reasons: daily news, updates of old stories and developments related to our

cases, and for the Murder and Death Section from which we often gleaned business.

When the dead rose, murder victims often had a story to tell, and those who could afford vengeance or justice usually wanted it. Other people who had suffered accidental deaths were no slouches either, and some had hired us in the past to gather evidence to support their life insurance claims.

The long lost and dead rarely had money when they came looking for help, so they made for bad clients. Newspaper notices of unclaimed bodies damaged beyond meaningful reanimation or identification were just sad.

Elmo kept back issues of the *Gazette*

and the other literature in the waiting room for clients to pass the time, for us to use like a research library, and most of all for him when he got bored in the middle of the night.

My partner came out of his office holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a letter in the other.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“I want to check last week’s *Gazette*,” I said.

Elmo set his cup and the letter down on one of the small desks he kept against the far wall for contract dicks to use, then he started forward making a rasping sound at the back of his throat.

I grabbed up the first folded paper from the pile atop a side table by the

couch. It was a day old.

“I *puh*-put the ‘week’ old and older on the other side,” Elmo said, moving past me. “I don’t like them *pi*-piling up.”

He slowly settled on one knee and riffled through a stack of papers on the side table opposite the one I was checking.

“*These* ...” Elmo said after a minute, cutting the top ten papers off the pile.

“Special Advertiser Editions *in-in* here, too,” he explained, shuffling over and setting them atop some magazines that were arranged on the coffee table before the couch.

“Thanks,” I said, leaning over to pull up the first one.

“What we *l*-looking for?” Elmo

picked up the next.

“Anything that has to do with Greasetown First Responders, an ambulance company and accidents, crime, or death,” I said.

Elmo set himself carefully on the couch and eagerly opened the first paper.

We ended up having to go back to the previous Monday.

It was an ambulance hijacking on page three of the Murder and Death Section. The previous Saturday, Greasetown First Responders answered a two a.m. call about a heart attack in the part of town called Gritburg that balanced between New Garden, the city center, and Downings District.

When the ambulance failed to check in or respond to radio calls thirty minutes later, an Authority cruiser was sent in to nose around.

The enforcers found a derelict building at the address to which the ambulance had been called, and no telephone service. Squatters on site reported seeing nothing.

Two hours later the Greasetown Fire Department responded to a call in Downings District and found the *First Responders*' ambulance ablaze with the attendant EMTs inside.

Neither had survived the fire and the state of their bodies was such that they were sent to an Authority facility for immediate interment after identification.

There would be no post-mortem legal representation.

Medical equipment and drugs stolen from the ambulance hinted at a hijacking and murder. The investigation was ongoing.

Company ID photos pasted halfway down the news story showed head-and-shoulder shots of two men.

I stared at the photos with Elmo reading over my left shoulder. It was the same pair who had treated my wounds in the alley where I'd fought Goliath.

A picture of the man who had mentioned Hester's list, Andre Bridges, was identified on the left.

I spent the better part of the afternoon

alternately thumbing through Andre's notebook and going over the file folder contents that he'd sent to me through the mail.

Hester Schultz had tried to recruit me shortly after that July 19 date that Bridges marked as his initial contact with her. I had fought Goliath two months after that.

The postmark on the package was from the Friday before the ambulance hijacking and fire, so it looked like I'd been on Bridges' mind, too. But those events so close together made me suspect that something had changed suddenly for him, since he'd let two weeks pass after first seeing me before he tried to make contact. And he had

died hours after sending the parcel.

I could only assume that Bridges had decided to use regular postage because packages sent that way were harder to track than through the courier services that took pains to follow your delivery every step of the way.

Dropping a package into a mailbox was the safest way to send sensitive information if you didn't want the authorities to know you were involved with it, or where they might find you.

At least, that's the way I thought of it. Mind you, decades of being punched in the face over secrets and conspiracies had left me slightly paranoid.

Since couriers were faster, I assumed that Bridges might have only suspected

he was under some kind of threat, but doubted it enough to allow the slower mail delivery to take its time getting the information to me.

The hell with couriers. If he'd genuinely felt threatened he could have called Authority. Unless the threat referred directly to his involvement in Hester's mission. She'd said it was a secret, which could have been her hiding its criminal undertones. *That* would have made contacting Authority dangerous.

So, the package was insurance in the event his suspicions were wrong?

On first and second pass, the information Andre Bridges had sent me sure sounded secret. And it bore more

than a little whiff of criminality.

The bound journal held his notes on the mission for which Hester Schultz had tried to recruit me. Andre had jotted down his observations sometime after their mission had failed and he was aware of the violent ends or disappearances of surviving team members.

That news must have come to him at a slow drip. He lived in Greasetown where questionable deaths occurred by the hour. Dying here barely rated a shrug.

But most of Hester's team was dead by the time Bridges purchased his journal and started jotting notes. Or had he done it even more urgently? There

weren't many bullet points in a list that was addressed only to me.

The notes' brevity suggested that they'd been put together in a hurry, relatively soon after he discovered that I was not a figment of Hester Schultz's imagination.

CHAPTER 10

The file folder on my desk blotter contained a brief synopsis of the mission and short resumes for team members listing the skills that they were bringing to the table.

Since my name was not among them, I surmised that this was the final list. Hester must have let my name and appearance slip to Andre during a conversation, or when she'd been preparing him and other team members for my eccentricities in the event I changed my mind and signed on.

Hester must have sold me as a straight shooter for Bridges to trust me

with his notes.

The following was typed on the first sheet in the folder.

THE MISSION: Enter the “Objective” compound and recover “Subject X” from the main headquarters lockup by stealth if possible, using extreme prejudice where necessary. “Objective” guards are fanatics who worship the movement and its members. They cannot be bargained with, subverted, or expected to offer or receive quarter.

They will fight to the death so oblige them.

These individuals can be identified by their distinctive armament and armor

that is formidable and based on the Authority Enforcer model.

Additional objective: capture or destroy the “Obelisk and contents.”

Resumes were typed on pages to which two-by-three-inch photo portraits had been stapled, and were paper clipped to the mission objective sheet. This was the team.

Leader Hester Schultz: Journalist. Received military and weapons proficiency training at Petrov Defense Fundamentals. Age and appearance thirty pre-Change.

Hester’s photo spoke for itself. Even in black and white, I could see the color

of her eyes. She looked real enough to kiss. There was an authentic core to her beauty that pulled at my conscience, and demanded loyalty. She still didn't look like a criminal, which gave me a breathless pang of guilt.

Medic Andre Bridges: Former Army medical technician, current Emergency Medical Technician at Greasetown First Responders. Army weapons training. Age and appearance thirty-eight pre-Change. Additional Skills: Post-mortem care for the dead.

Andre's expression in his ID photo was devil-may-care. A former army medic, he must have found Greasetown First Responders a dull but welcome

life. That smile in the photo showed that seeing his old comrade again had awakened the fighting spirit in him.

Captain Ivan Petrov's photo showed a man with a face like an old battle tank.

Decades fighting as a sergeant in the Russian army and later in the Eastprime Military Command post-Change had left deep gouges in him. He had served primarily in Old Europe. His age and appearance was give or take forty-five pre-Change. He held multiple heavy weapons proficiencies. The military contractor had worked as a regulator before turning to private security when he formed Defense Fundamentals.

The notation “Heavy Vehicle Driver, and Mechanical support training” had been appended to his skillset in blue pen by a feminine hand.

Then came Lieutenant Francisco Leone, a former sergeant in the Spanish Army who served in the Eastprime Military Command post-Change. Like Petrov, he also fought for decades in Old Europe. His age and appearance were forty pre-Change. His skills read as sniper, military weapons proficiency and hand-to-hand combat training as well as combat engineer. Those specialists dealt with booby traps, landmines, and demolition. He also worked private security for Defense Fundamentals.

So he'd have a connection to Ivan Petrov, and they both might have trained Hester Schultz.

The next up, Octavia Wong, was a looker. Sure, her nose had a slight drift to the left and right that had to have come from being broken multiple times, but her sturdy Asian cheekbones framed her dark, intense eyes and full mouth in a way that negated the wandering nasal drift.

A former sergeant in the Chinese People's Liberation Army and later a lieutenant with Eastprime Military Command post-Change had kept her fighting in the Northeast Habitable Zone. Age and appearance were pre-Change

thirty-five. Her listed skills included lock and security specialist, IT security technician, gymnast, weapons specialist including proficiency with sword and crossbow, martial arts, and safe cracking. She'd done a short stint in a re-education center for supplying intel on a bank job.

Then came Allie Minor, a former British Marine Sergeant with the Westprime Military Command post-Change. The attractive black woman hailed from London and was a pre-Change thirty-eight with tight-cropped, kinky black hair. She was a weapons specialist, marine pilot, demolition expert and martial artist with a black

belt in Karate.

I sputtered involuntarily over the next and final member of the team.

Donny Rouge: Private Investigator. He looked forty-one pre-Change. His skills were listed as knowledge of post-Change law, police/Authority procedure, firearms proficiency, and investigative techniques.

I snarled and leaned back in the chair to grunt my disapproval. Donny Rouge? Was that the best Hester could do? *He* was her second choice? It was galling to think that she'd gone to Donny as a replacement for *me*.

Donny Rouge was a scammer and big

talker—all bluster and no substance. We crossed paths occasionally around town and down at Authority Headquarters or Greasetown City Hall.

He was more divorce lawyer with a gun than a private detective, and his cheap suits, colorful overcoats, and hats almost made my own getup look like something you'd wear to church.

Rouge had money, but no one knew what he spent it on. It couldn't be his wardrobe.

His claim to fame was being the brother-in-law of Chief Inspector Holbein at Greasetown Authority Headquarters.

Chief Inspector Holbein couldn't stand to have his sister married to a no-

account private investigator who worked on the fringe of respectability, so he had slipped Rouge a tip now and then that pretty much hand-fed him his detective business.

Rouge had won notoriety and a gold medal—something about “valor” to pin on his pigeon chest—when he had helped bring down one of the biggest Greaseasy dealers around.

Greaseasy was a drug that kept the forever kids energized and babbling, but had side effects that were bad enough to still warrant policing even this long after the Change, when the teens that’d stopped aging had added five decades to their personal angst—so should have known better.

The bust had put Donny Rouge on the map. He'd received a tip about something going down at a Greasetown harbor warehouse, and all he did was drive over, note the suspicious behavior, and call it in to Authority.

Since then his connections at Authority HQ had kept him a step ahead of the other private dicks working in town.

Donny liked to keep his name in the paper, so he spread his business cards around the theatre crowd, local politicos, and the media.

I didn't have a personal relationship with him, but I knew his shallow backstory well enough to call him up if I was stuck on a case and wanted to try a

long cast close to shore.

He rarely did anything more than drop names.

Of course, despite his marital status, Donny Rouge also liked the ladies. I could imagine the sound of his wolf whistle when Hester Schultz had walked into his office.

I pulled the phone across the desk and fished the Yellow Pages from atop a steel filing cabinet against the wall on my right.

I had Donny Rouge's number in seconds and was soon listening to the bell ringing at the far end of a connection that sizzled and popped.

"Hello?" a man answered with a

voice that was too harsh to be mistaken for Donny Rouge's silky, self-aware tones.

"Can I speak to Donny?" I asked, wondering about the time, and guessing it to be around four o'clock. You'd never tell by the stacked gray bars of light that leaked in through the blinds.

"If you can find him," came the answer.

"What do you mean?" I shifted forward in my chair and reached out for a cigarette to play with.

"Who's calling please?"

"It's Wildclown," I said, lighting my smoke. "I'm a private detective."

"*Wildclown?*" The guy on the other end brayed like a donkey.

“Who am I talking to,” I said, ignoring the farm animal noise.

“Donny’s landlord,” the gruff voice said. “*You* know where he’s up to?”

“No, that’s why I’m calling,” I said after a long draw on my cigarette.

“Well if you see him, you tell him I’m into his last month’s rent now and he’s gotta pay for the damages,” the landlord continued. “He’s going to have to sign a lease if he’s gonna treat me this way.”

“Damages?” I drawled.

“Yeah, Authority was in a couple—three weeks back,” he reported.

“Enforcers knocked the door off its hinges and tossed the joint!”

Authority Enforcers were officers tasked with everything from handing out

traffic tickets to riot control. The stylized protective masks and heavy armor that they wore was meant to give the public a feeling of uniformity, security, and comfort but had only delivered on its threatening aspects.

“Who was in charge of the search? Did you get a name?” I pushed.

“I ain’t a secretary,” the landlord carped.

“I take it you haven’t seen Donny in a while,” I said.

“Gotta be a month and more now,” the man’s gravelly voice trailed off as he grasped the reality of answering a phone in a renter’s office. “I’m only in here looking for him, or maybe a note or something.”

Or to see if there's spare change in the couch cushions.

“Sure,” I said, tapping my cigarette against the ashtray. “Listen, there's ten bucks in it for you to drop a dime if you see Donny.”

He repeated that he wasn't a secretary, but asked for my number anyway.

I hung up and stared out the window through a cloud of cigarette smoke.

That was *two* missing.

It was time for another pass at Andre's journal.

End of this eBook Sample

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a degree in English from Nipissing University. Taylor worked as a freelance writer for small market newspapers and later wrote, designed and edited for

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He joined the digital publishing revolution early with an eBook version of his first novel *When Graveyards Yawn* that has been available online since 2000. Taylor published and edited the *Wildclown Chronicle* e-zine from 2001-2003 that showcased his novels, book trailer animations and illustrations, short story writing and book reviews alongside titles from other up-and-coming horror, fantasy and science fiction writers.

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include more dark fiction and additions to the

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