



THE NIGHT ONCE MORE

A WILDCLOWN NOVEL
G. WELLS TAYLOR

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G. Wells Taylor

(eBook Sample)

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Acknowledgments:

Many thanks to Editor **Katherine Tomlinson** whose work on this novel marks her first walk on the “Wildclown” side.

CHAPTER 1

The colors, shades of green, jade, emerald and blue, deep blue. Drifting mist like smoke and then ...

I was ...

I was sitting in a patch of dark green weeds.

At least I think I was.

The weeds grew in a ditch on the side of a road.

Or so it seemed.

The road passed from left to right beneath a dense canopy of trees that dripped.

Raindrops pattered around me and tapped the tattered shoulders of my

coverall.

The pale material was colorless and rotten and wet.

Flesh showed through the many ragged holes.

The skin beneath was pale, almost white; was lined with blue-green veins, and looked dead.

Was it dead?

I think it was.

My hands were cold, so cold, they were almost frozen. So cold, I wished they were dead.

My body, too, was dead or almost dead. The chill flesh craved a covering of earth.

Numb and frozen, there was little else to feel but an ache deep down in the

bones and joints.

And there was something else.

Yes, it was there, the pressure of my backside against the ridged mound of clotted gravel and sand that had washed into the ditch.

The sensation was there along with a raw pang that tightened my throat when I swallowed.

There was a curious quiver in all my fingers, too—a subtle vibration that followed the contour of each wrinkled fingerprint.

I took a deep breath and fell back into the sopping greenery, thinking that it would be my last, hoping, grasping, for oblivion once again.

Black branches groped the dense gray clouds above me and the rain pelted against my open eyes.

So I shut them.

I was ...

I was curious about a sensation in my right ear.

I was sitting by the road again, sitting in the patch of weeds.

But there was something about that ear.

I raised icy fingers to it, and clawed blindly at the numb cartilage until my quivering hand closed on something soft and yielding.

I tugged and felt only a minor resistance. I jerked on a spongy body

and it pulled free.

So I held it up in front of me.

A bulging black wormy thing, the leech glistened along its thrashing length.

Blood drooled from the thing's cankerous mouth and stained my fingers.

There we go ...

I crushed the leech and threw it aside before reaching up to my ear again to check for another.

Nothing, but as I drilled my pinky finger into the ear, thrusting in and out to be sure, I heard a muffled *squeak*, and a sudden *pop*...

... then came a driving roar as my hearing on that side returned.

I dropped my hand to one knee, perched it across from the other.

A luminous fluid dripped from my finger. It was sticky, green like swamp water and veined with traces of dark red blood.

Green. Red. Go. Stop.

My vision doubled and I rolled back into the weeds.

CHAPTER 2

A man stood on the road.

He *swayed*, actually ...

... staggered in place.

The position allowed me a full view of his tattered clothing.

His coverall was completely worn through in places, and torn from collar to cuff.

Long frayed threads of white edged gaping holes on the front and back. Sodden with rain, the fibers hung down like many limp legs on a dead bug.

The man tried to take a step, but fell on his knees where he lingered to mumble something to himself.

Encouragement? Derision? His numb lips couldn't make sense of it.

Neither could I.

After a minute he struggled weakly for balance and strength, pushing against the ground with hands and feet until he suddenly surged upright again.

And in the action his hairy head passed *through* me, through the space where I was ...

Where I ...

Was ...

Floating over him.

Not "I," in the sense of "me and my body" either, just "me."

Just me, a point of view and nothing more.

To avoid that terrifying notion I turned my attention back to the man on the road.

From my unique vantage point I could see his nose had been broken and broken again. The gristled bridge was bent and battered, drifting left and right as it meandered over his broad, flat face.

The frazzled eyebrows over it had been worn down to bristles in places where they rode the hard ridge of bone, eroded like they'd repeatedly come into contact with something hard and abrasive.

So they had little to add to the expression on the face that pulsed between blank and grim. At intervals, a tremor flickered beneath the pale skin

and caused the lines around his mouth and eyes to tighten, wrenching his features into this somber grimace of anger, pain or sorrow.

With the straggly beard, he looked dangerous and crazed. He looked like a lobotomized mountain man.

One of his boots was missing; the left foot was bare.

The right was wrapped in a bloated black blob of waterlogged leather.

The man mumbled something again, and coughed.

Translucent green fluid was mixed with the blood that leaked from his ears and eyes, and painted wet brown lines from the corners of his mouth—like a frown.

He leaned over and spat.

A glistening glob smacked the damp asphalt. Emerald veins tracing the surface of the dark red lump seemed to catch his eye because he leaned forward unsteadily to study it ...

... until he was disgusted or he lost interest because he suddenly straightened, kicked his bare foot forward and started walking.

Slowly, still staggering, he followed the broken road; a long black lace trailing from his right boot.

I was drawn along after him, low overhead, attached by something that appeared to have no more substance than I.

The man continued to mumble as he walked.

His dark eyes glanced right and left, and from time to time he fell, his balance uncertain on his cold white legs.

He mumbled *then*, too. Cheek nuzzling the wet asphalt, he'd mutter incoherently, emotionlessly, now too tired for frustration or anger.

And when he fell, my forward motion stopped and I hung there overhead.

Waiting, watching silently over his prostrate form, I was unable to do more than study his tattered garments, and wonder if blood had made the faded brown stains around all those holes and tears.

There were puckered scars in the

cold, white flesh beneath the ruined material.

In time he rose and staggered onward, beard dripping.

Raindrops fell from the thick canopy of trees and made the asphalt slick and footing treacherous.

Whenever he stumbled, he arose more steadily though more shabbily, for his coverall was being reduced to rags.

Before long it was hard to call it clothing at all. A rotten seam ran from shoulder to shoulder, allowing the disintegrating garment to cascade down over his body like that, like a shredded cloak that clung in places to the scarred form beneath, or draped the pale limbs

in bands of threadbare gray.

He looked like something you'd find at the side of the road, like he belonged there.

I decided to call him Scruffy.

CHAPTER 3

Floating over Scruffy's head was unsettling, so I tried not to think about it. With nothing but the tree branches and clouds behind me—*above* me—and the stark landscape spreading out to either side, the temptation to panic was growing with each step Scruffy took.

But what was the rush?

I could have my breakdown later; lose it after I figured out how bad things *really* were.

Great gray humps of grassy, misty land spread out around the road and the trees that hugged its edge. I saw this in glimpses past the dense black bush that

grew to either side.

There was no reason for study, no sense dwelling on our predicament yet. There would be time for that when I got to the rubber room.

Rubber room ... now, where did that come from?

I didn't know where we were going, Scruffy and me. Maybe it *was* to a rubber room, the funny farm or a *booby hatch*? Another curve ball coming in from left field ... But whatever a *booby hatch* was, it sounded like more fun than a rubber room.

Hands down ...

Wherever the road was leading us, then, it would take us somewhere, wouldn't it? Wasn't that what roads

were for?

I'd have asked Scruffy but I didn't have a mouth, tongue or voice box to pose the question.

I was also pretty sure that he wouldn't be much help.

He was too busy talking to the road again.

I didn't have a lot of hope that he knew where *he* was going, swaying along the country road from one close inspection of the asphalt to the next. Crawling or tottering on his bruised bare foot, dragging his swollen boot with its shredded lace behind.

Day and night he carried on that way, if you could describe the subtle change

from cold and gray to cold and black in such a way. There were no stars to go by. He kept going through rain and rain, and wouldn't even stop for rain. Except when he fell down.

I had little else to mark the passage of time, and was soon lost in it, floating overhead as Scruffy soldiered on.

All while his activities continued to fray and wear his remaining coverings to nothing.

He'd be naked soon, if he didn't stop falling down. If something didn't change.

Poor Scruffy.

It had been a toss-up at first, what to call him, because the early moments had me favoring Staggers and Tippy. That was after I'd rejected the sentimental

notion that since he reminded me of a lost dog, and with all the circular scars on him “Spot” seemed a natural choice for a name.

But something about those scars had sent chills through whatever I am, and cold ideas had welled up that filled the growing shadows around us.

Sentiment did not suit the situation that I found myself in. There was only room for the absurd.

And fear.

Whatever Scruffy’s name really was, he could straighten me out later. We’d sit down over a cup of tea or a ... *tea*?

Another new word had spilled out, and this one I could almost taste. It was something you put in a cup, but what was

a cup?

Then I had the strong sense that I'd need hands to operate one, so ...

... so, once Scruffy got his bearings, we could answer less pressing questions than where the road we traveled on might lead us, and if there was an end to the cold, wet desolation that surrounded us on all sides.

His *bearings*, if there were such things. Whatever such things were.

Bearings were *directions*—I decided—coordinates in time and space.

Whatever those were ... Once *that* mystery was solved ...

When I considered *bearings* in that light, they seemed so much larger and important a thing than a man's name.

Even Scruffy's.

In the meantime he was free to call me what he liked ... if he even knew I was there. I'd be obliging since I was having some difficulty digging up a suitable word with my "name" on it.

Until that happened, I'd be, well "me" and "Scruffy" would have to do for him.

Me and Scruffy.

Scruffy and me.

It was clear that we were stuck together. We were linked somehow. One kind of a pair.

Whatever that was.

CHAPTER 4

I got into Scruffy's head somehow. One minute I was floating over him as he lay by the ditch mumbling to himself, and I was waiting and wondering if he was ever going to get up again ...

And the next, I opened my—*his*—Scruffy's eyes on a cold dark blur I quickly identified as the crumbled black asphalt pressing my nose.

It didn't take me long to realize something else. Between the cold and damp against my face, and the gravel that was cutting into my ribs, I realized that this had happened before.

Not the face-plant on the asphalt, that

seemed pretty unique, but I remembered sitting at the side of the road and pulling a leech out of my ear.

I had crushed the little bastard for his impudence.

Yet, somehow in all of my floating over Scruffy, all my breezing around his long, tangled hair I had forgotten that.

I'd forgotten that I'd been in his head.

How could I forget that?

It could have been the numbness and cold I'd felt then, and remembering that now helped me put two and two together. The cold, pain and discomfort I felt upon waking at the side of the road, and the lack thereof, the numbness which had been as urgent as a pencil in the eye—I felt it, just as I was feeling it now.

And while I had been floating over him, I'd felt little more than terror and curiosity. Oh, I put a brave face on it with all my witty observations and ironic asides, but my knees would have been knocking had I owned a pair.

Scruffy was hurting. The body—*his* body—that I was now in again ... *hurt*—badly. And it wasn't just the cold gravel and jagged asphalt beneath me—*us*.

There was a weight in my chest—*the* chest—that I first wrote off to the many wicked scars that were carved there.

But this was something else.

A sense of sadness, or was it anger? The weight throbbed beneath my ribs, thumped against the road, and somehow echoed in a heaviness behind my eyes.

Wasn't that the universal sign for sorrow?

But that did not explain my clenched jaws or the rigid fists that shook at my sides.

That reminded me of something else, looked a lot more like anger. I was ticked off about something, or sad—*and* sad.

So, I shut my eyes to try to sort it out, somehow understanding that to confuse those two emotions would cause me nothing but trouble.

I opened my eyes and stared at the dense asphalt that pressed my face.

A noise had brought me from a reverie in which I had been pondering

my situation, trying to remember how to get to my feet ...

... and wondering if it would be worth the trip.

There was a crackling sound in the bushes to my right that had piqued my curiosity, followed by a sudden low moan that had raised my hackles.

I lifted my head and turned it, felt my long whiskers drag in the rainwater as I faced the direction from which the sound had come.

More crackling there, close to the ground in the shadow of a high barrier of bushes or saplings that grew down into the ditch. I followed this line of brush with my eye until I found a broad space, a gap in the trees ahead.

There was another groan, and some instinctual machinery in me clicked. I pressed against the ground with both cold hands and levered myself unsteadily onto my knees.

From that new position I could make out the rusted rear bumper of a big sedan. The car had gone through the brush at the side of the road and plowed headfirst into a massive chunk of gray granite.

A dark stain had sprayed up over the rocky facing just where the hood of the car had crumpled back beneath the shattered windshield.

But the groaning and crackling noise came to me again, from someplace closer, so I rose on trembling legs to get

a better look.

A shiver went through me then, for from this perspective I could see a pale shape moving in the shadows of the lowest undergrowth.

And for a second I thought it was a naked man crawling through the foliage. On his stomach, I saw his head and shoulders, and his long arms pulling him toward me.

I surprised myself by taking a step forward and coming to a halt. Was I going to help?

The thought filled me with dismay.

Still the motion held my eye, the motion highlighted by pale skin stretched over arms and hands that pulled at the narrow trunks of bushes dragging the

head and shoulders of a man toward the road. The head and shoulders ...

... and little more.

My mouth dropped open, and my hair prickled.

The thing pulled itself out of the bushes and across the ditch. The *thing* because well, it kept dragging itself, canting its head from left to right, looking up at me from the soft shoulder with yellowed eyes.

It halted at the side of the road. The arms had stopped moving. The head continued to crane around on the skinny neck where pointy vertebrae showed through gaps in the ragged flesh.

It was the driver of the car.

His body had been severed just

beneath the line of his nipples. The head, shoulders and arms had come free with a gruesome lump of pulsing lung flesh attached; tissue that still dragged behind him and accounted for the soggy *thumps* that preceded the guttural groans that emanated from between his gnashing teeth.

I raised my hands. The fingers had a scarlet hue; the knuckles were white as I unclenched them. Was that it? Was I dead too? Dead like this little fellow, like Shorty the severed man. Had we both ended up in Hell?

Then I felt hot tears rolling over my face and I realized the weight that swelled in my chest and had me weeping

might not be sadness or anger after all.

It seemed more like terror.

I felt pressure and cold on my bare foot. Looking down, I saw that Shorty had dragged himself closer still.

His dead hand gripped my ankle.

Transition.

Suddenly I was floating over Scruffy again. His hands had dropped to his sides, and his head hung forward as he looked at the severed man at his feet.

Scruffy's head came up, and turned to me. The eyes rolled back and he fell forward on his face.

Shorty barely had time to scramble out of the way.

I watched this, shocked and reeling and felt close to losing consciousness

too, when a *vroom* sound brought me around.

A large white vehicle had come to a halt just ten yards behind Scruffy. The engine *vroomed* again.

CHAPTER 5

The white vehicle was a van. A van—yes, that's what it was.

Hello, van! Thank God you're here. Let's put some distance between us and that severed man—sorry Shorty, but I like my friends in one piece.

But it was a “van.” The word had just popped into my head, the way most of the words had been popping into my head since I'd first popped into existence a foot or two over *Scruffy's* head.

Some of the words came gift-wrapped with explanation and knowing, while others were taking some time to

comprehend.

But *van*, that came to me complete. Perhaps because one was sitting right there. A cube on wheels. Good for moving furniture and speedy soccer moms but good for little else.

I don't know how I could tell it was a van, I just knew. Just like I knew the creature that drove it, like my Scruffy, was a man.

But the comparison between my traveling buddy and this van man ended there—this *samaritan*.

There, another one of those words had risen up out of the fog, and I had a sense it was supposed to be paired with the word “good” though I would hold back on that until I knew more about the

fellow who got out of the van and walked to where Scruffy lay on his face.

The man looked like he would stand a good foot shorter than Scruffy and had half of the amount of hair. Thick, combed back and held in place by some glistening ointment, it left a lot of forehead bare where it swooped back and forward and back around a sharp widow's peak.

In truth, his hair was more stylish and sleek in presentation than I believe Scruffy's shoulder length frizzy locks could ever manage, and it suited the stranger's compact, well-knit frame.

He wore a form-fitting coverall of purple canvas, yellow work gloves and bright tan boots.

His clothing, like his hair, was clean, well-kept and like new, similar in presentation to the pale, clean-shaven face, dense eyebrows and hair.

He had a broad mouth and full sensuous lips that drooped to either side of a pointed chin.

The man looked calm and composed, but the set of his features suggested hotter emotions beneath.

He looked sturdy and strong and he immediately set to proving this by squatting to thrust his hands under Scruffy's arms and hoisting the bigger man up enough to carry and half-drag to where he opened the van's sliding side door.

In this sudden intimate clasp, I too,

was drawn close to him as he grunted under the unconscious man's dead weight and in that proximity I could see that the samaritan's eyebrows had been carefully sculpted into a dark chevron that jutted up to left and right, divided by a wrinkled cleft of skin between his eyes.

His large ears had been groomed and shaved of all excess hair. They were purple from scrubbing and almost pointed at the tips.

I was allowed this close inspection as he heaved Scruffy into the van, dragging me after, where I was left to hover over my unconscious sidekick's sprawling form.

The driver turned back to the side of

the road to inspect the severed man who should have died in the car wreck.

Shorty had dragged himself closer and now lay panting or shuddering with the dirty dark lump of lung tissue hissing, throbbing and pulsing behind him like a whoopee cushion from Hell.

The driver of the van shook his head at the creature and clicked his tongue before he took a step or two away toward the mangled car.

He peered at the wreckage and seemed anxious to give it a closer inspection, but a glance down at the ditch, the thick undergrowth and uneven footing around the crash quelled that desire.

He shook his head slowly, and might

have clicked his tongue again. He moved back to the severed man on the road muttering something under his breath.

Shorty's dead eyes looked up, even appearing nervous despite their state as his mangled lips writhed over clicking teeth and wriggling tongue.

The dead man finally managed to force out his voice, a raspy sound like crumpling paper, but it was clear enough to be understood.

“Help!” he begged the man who leaned over him.

“Help?” the driver repeated in a calm and soothing voice. “It is unlikely that I can offer more than comfort to the torment your recklessness has wrought. But I can transport you somewhere safer

...” He crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “And yet, they say it is never too late ...”

He bent and lifted the severed man before dropping him none-too-gently onto Scruffy’s insensate form on the floor of the van.

The impact or motion startled Scruffy back toward consciousness, for he grunted something unintelligible and began thrashing his arms and legs, pushing at the severed man until Shorty rolled and crawled toward the rear of the vehicle.

The driver spat, and opened the passenger side door to retrieve a roll of duct tape from the glove compartment.

“You damned *dead* ...” he muttered

returning to Scruffy, pausing to pull at the remnants of his tattered coverall.

“You deserve each other. You certainly deserve your fates,” the driver continued, climbing over Scruffy’s near naked form and binding his wrists together with the tape.

“You drive without care and endanger the public ... such busy, busy, busy people. Speeding just as I’m sure you sped through all of your lives ... never caring for your part in the divine plan or the common good! Never caring ...” he scolded, shifting down to bind Scruffy’s ankles together. Pausing there a moment, he tore the remnants of Scruffy’s boot off and threw it into the ditch.

“Shame on you both,” the driver said,

standing back and shoving Scruffy's legs out of the way of the sliding door.

From my place over Scruffy, I watched the driver become a silhouette by the open door.

“*Help* I can give you,” he announced with one gloved hand on the door.

“Kindness and generosity is free, but my aid? You must pay for that by learning its value first.”

He slammed the door shut.

“Bring back the erring one ...” I heard him say past the thin sheet of metal, before he insisted: “It’s the *Christian* thing to do.”

I suddenly sensed motion, queer, because the driver was still outside the van. We were not moving; but I felt it,

and then I realized the force that pulled at me was pulling from below. I had a sudden sense of falling as darkness thickened around me.

Shift.

CHAPTER 6

Thickened.

The darkness ...

Just a minute. Wait.

Where's the road ... and where's the van?

Where's my Scruffy?

I saw that it was dark on every side of me. Was it night, then? Or was it death?

And where was Scruffy?

Come here, boy!

But where was I calling him to or from?

Where was I? *Who* was I?

Scruffy then, focus on him! What a

good boy. He was in trouble. I just knew it. I had a hunch.

I didn't like white vans. Never have. They have dead frogs inside them! And there was something wrong about the driver. About what he'd said.

Wait! What's that?

A smell or smells. Something strong and—yes, I smelled a couple of things—a hybrid. There was a delicate floral scent struggling to reach me through a hot and acrid stink that was dry—that was smoke! Cigarettes, that was it!

And the other smell was perfume. A certain perfume I recognized. But who wore it? She was a tall woman ... had reddish hair ...

And that perfume ... even though it

was light as a breeze, it pushed through the cigarette smoke ...

... encouraged me to open my eyes.

A woman of twenty years or so was sitting across from me. A pretty woman with long straight auburn hair that framed a pale and serious face. Serious but pretty with naturally narrow eyebrows that formed delicate sandy brown arches over bright hazel eyes.

They were serious eyes, too—but beautiful to either side of a long nose with fine nostrils.

She pursed her full pink lips and flipped the hair away from her face—pushed the locks back over her shoulders.

A slight tremor of nervousness caused her features to flex minutely as she lifted her cigarette and took a long drag. Excess smoke escaped her lips and nose, curled up and was funneled into the cheap plastic shade that focused the swag lamp's illumination onto the drab table's fake wood-grain finish.

"I thought you were going to quit," I said, my voice familiar and alien at the same time.

Her keen eyes regarded me evenly as she contorted her lips to blow the smoke to the side, frowning slightly as she knocked ash into an empty beer can.

"*If* we have a baby," she said, licking her lips before taking another drag. "If we try again, right?"

“Right ...” I said resignedly, amazed at the weight of disappointment I felt deep in my chest. She had promised me *both* more than once and only came through on the baby ... but that had been in our first semester at college. Bad timing had resulted in a regrettable procedure.

“Well, that’s right, isn’t it?” she asked, lifting her glass. The amber beer trailed foam as she drank. “That’s what we agreed ...”

“Yep, yep,” I said, “you’re right.”

I knew there’d be a fight if I didn’t agree, so I shifted uncomfortably to tamp down any defiance. The chairs were so cheap their foam padding always gave out five minutes into an evening. How

could I even think about babies if this was my idea of furniture?

I blurted, “You’re right. Pressure’s on me then ...”

“When we graduate,” she said, smiling, her even teeth glistening as she dropped her cigarette into the empty beer can where it hissed hollowly. “An incentive ...”

An incentive for *me* to pass. I was the only one who was going to get a job with my diploma. She was studying history, might be a teacher, if we could put the cash together for a couple more years of school.

“At least one of us needs to be working before we make a baby,” she said, smiling.

“As long as we can still go through the motions,” I said, smiling back. “So we’re all practiced up and ready, when it’s time.”

I swatted at a haze of smoke that hung over the table between us.

She was pulling a new cigarette out of her crumpled pack and noticed the gesture.

“Oh, damn,” she moaned, waving at the air as her voice tightened. “I’ll smoke outside, honey.”

“No!” I said, reaching across to hold her wrist. “We talked about that. It’s fine. I can’t make a beautiful woman leave the warmth and comfort of her home. I don’t have it in me.”

“I thought that only applied to

smoking in bed,” she chuckled, and a seductive gleam entered her eyes.

“In for a penny,” I answered, stroking her arm and raising the fine blonde hairs.

“I don’t know how you can stand it,” she said, as she lit the new cigarette. “Unless this baby talk is all about getting me to quit.” She tapped her cigarette against the ashtray, but her tone remained light.

“Look, Anne, if *I* can do it,” I said and shrugged. Her name had appeared on my lips. “Anybody can do it.”

“I know. I heard,” she agreed, with raised eyebrows. “You don’t want me to lose *all* my bad habits.” She shook her head, and that sexy glimmer returned to her eyes. “I’ve seen it happen, you know.

People get out of college, get married, and take the pledge ... Start cleaning up their acts.”

“No. No, I don’t want us to grow up ... if that’s what you mean. You’re right. People settle into their adult lives, and start getting bored—and *boring*.” I watched her take another drink, slid my hand along her smooth forearm until the fingers touched the inside of her elbow. “Besides, I’m still a sex maniac. That will never go away.”

“Thank God for that,” she said, gesturing at my beer that was growing warm on the table in front of me. “I think you’re replacing all your ticks and foibles with sex.” She nodded at my drink. “You barely finished your beer.”

“It got warm,” I said, locking my fingers on her arm and sliding from my chair to the one beside hers. I slipped one arm around her shoulder and the other across her hips. “Besides, you know I don’t like to be drunk around intelligent women.”

I kissed her cheek. “There are much greater pleasures.”

“That’s *subtle*,” she said, stubbing her cigarette out and lifting one of her legs over my knee as she turned in her chair toward me.

The kiss was as smoky as hell, but I’d never kick it out of bed.

She undid my belt and my heart started racing.

Shift.

CHAPTER 7

My heart! It *was* racing.

I was breathless.

Something was wrong.

Many hot points hammered in my chest.

There were many—burning there—but three stood out the worst; holes had been torn and left gaping. Three wounds searing my flesh and twisting it, tugging at the moving parts within—pulling at my guts like the barbed points on Neptune's spear.

Neptune—yes—it was his water that crushed in on me—crushed and muffled my spirit. Pressed on my throbbing eyes

while I drowned.

But no, there was more. *He* wasn't killing me. It was the boatman.

Around me it was dark, cold—frigid beyond feeling, and so the mortal wounds around my heart flared and burned and sizzled, but were delayed at killing me by the chill.

As the cold had eaten into my core—it had snuffed out my other senses, all but the pressing points of pain, flaming with a blistering heat that I struggled to pull away from.

And in the depths beneath me, beyond and inward near the total dark, a drum was beating—constant, like someone keeping time as slaves toiled over heavy oars. And a whip cracked across my

shoulders but gave no pain to match the fiery holes in my breast.

Still the drum beat like a heart, as I labored with the others on the bench. Warmth built in my arms, shoulders and back as I rowed. The warmth of blood and action—and of pain.

As we rowed.

I heard a keening sadness, and risked the brutal whip to glance past the faded gunwale to where a host of living dead haunted gray shores. The ghosts of the necropolis wailed and whined, begging for—I could not tell what, for as I pulled at the oar it thumped in its weathered rowlock and drowned out their supplication.

I rowed with the others, my spirit a

dwindling flame as the drum beat, but then the boat beneath me fell away and I was left alone again with the burning points of pain and the cold water pressing in on me.

Still, I could hear the distant drumbeat, the rhythmic stroke of the oars, and the cracking lash of the boatman's whip as the dead wailed.

These things were given shape and form by the water that pressed heavily against me, slowly crushing me, vibrating as it rolled and turned me around the fixed points of pain near my heart.

Now I surged with the black tide, and was heaved upward, rising with the swelling water. Cold as ever, but

growing brighter to gray. I felt the water lift me, and the dark begin to give way.

And I broke the surface at the crest of a rain-swept wave that glimmered with distant lightning before it flung me forward and skyward rolling again until my face struck the ice cold rocks and jarred me from my nightmare.

The waves were relentless and threw me as I tried to grab the slippery rocks—smashed me in a cold spray against the jagged granite.

I tasted blood, but relished it as the waves pulled at my joints, wrenched against my efforts to stay upright, as an undertow pulled and dragged at me still—yanking my feet off the slimy stone, and hurling me back over the tumble of

granite.

Again and again I was thrust against the shore, only to fall away.

Until I managed a hold on rough cedar roots that splayed at the water's edge and in the slurry of cold muck, I slithered free of the waves.

I pulled myself up and onto an overhang, a cantilevered carpet of woven cedar and pine needles threaded through with roots and anchored by black earth. I heaved myself clear and rolled onto my side beneath the evergreen forest where I looked back to see the iron gray sky melting into the tall black pines across the lake.

Lightning struck in the downpour, glittering on the rolling waves.

A pang of memory, and I saw a great white boat and a man in black. He fired a gun and the pain in my chest came alive again.

I shrank from the agony and sank into a numb, cold gray where faces appeared in glowing emerald shadows. Faces of nightmare proportions: no skin or flesh on a laughing skull; a wild man, his nose cut away to show his glistening sinuses; a smiling corpse with pale and waxy features.

Still more characters grew out of this spreading backdrop of green: some with guns, and others like monsters—misshapen—and some distorted like little demons.

And as these flickered out of sight,

they were replaced by jade and emerald forms—feminine—that swelled at the breasts and curving hips.

With sinking heart, I reached for them, barely felt the smooth, soft flesh that slipped beneath my fingers before the women fell away without a word into the darker green. Half-hearted smiles were there, shaped by concern or disdain.

As they left, the pain swelled up in my chest again, but this pain burned hotter than the three wounds that throbbed there.

This pain was ragged, and left me broken. It was anger and outrage and murder. It came from sacrifice and suicide and loss.

“No more!” I cried to the last of the fading green shadows. “Let it end!”

And a quiet numbness swelled within me, a silent darkness that wept out to soothe my fatal injuries, and smother the fire around my heart.

I opened my eyes and stood there swaying. I was standing in gravel. To either side of me were dark, dirty ruts torn deep in the soft shoulder. They led from the road in a gently curving double arc and continued where the land gave away, cutting into a sickly yellow-green slick that covered a pond.

The tire tracks were brown and soon dissolved into mud where the water deepened and the rear end of an old farm

truck jutted up out of the cattails.

The rusted bumper and corroded fenders pointed at an acute angle into the rain.

The truck's heavy engine had sunk where the pond got deep.

The driver's side door was open, and water had filled the cab.

I raised my hands and pressed my face. They came away streaked with scarlet and marked with white paint.

I must have hit my head when the brakes failed.

Or I might have. I couldn't remember driving the truck, but I knew it was stolen.

Pain grew behind my eyes. My body was cold and wet, aching and sore. My

trembling legs were tired. I needed a little sit down ... Just for a second.

I needed to rest, even for a minute. For a minute ... a chair ...

Shift.

CHAPTER 8

Scruffy was sitting in a kitchen chair just below me, uninterested, unworried about the panic attack I had just experienced when moving out of my strange dream and into the space just over his head. I hovered there like a shell-shocked cloud of doubt.

The anxiety passed quickly, since I had no physical symptoms to feed it, so as I calmed I inspected the situation and our surroundings.

First Scruffy.

He sat just beneath me, almost naked, draped with strips of graying cloth—the last remnants of his coverall.

The tape on his wrists and ankles had been cut away and thrown aside in a single sticky ball.

Scruffy's body was well-muscled, but lean, with a starved look that spoke of many days on the road. He sat in place with his hands resting comfortably on his upper thighs.

He hadn't been restrained in any way, so that was a positive sign.

So far, so good.

My attention was drawn to his bare feet that stood out against the black and white tiles on the floor. The toes were long and blue, almost purple and the skin atop his feet was white—like the blue-veined surface of his calves and legs, shoulders and back.

Small black hairs grew sporadically on him, sometimes following the sweep and swell of his muscles and limbs.

Considering his long exposure, he looked well enough, and I could see no new injuries on him.

Now the room.

I looked around the kitchen taking everything in from my extreme vantage point. Other than the checkerboard flooring tiles, it was a pale, colorless place—highlighted by vague, gray shadows and looking more barren than clean. The cupboards and counters, trim and ceiling were painted or veneered with white. Stove and fridge were colored the same.

A single powerful light bulb burned behind me, center to the ceiling. The room itself was almost square.

A kitchen ... but something nagged at the back of my mind as I ticked over the elements again, adding the white steel garbage can to the left of the counter, just beside a white enameled door that was closed and the bolt thrown.

All white ...

Then my dodgy memory started working in reverse, alerting me to all the things that should have been.

There were no ornaments, framed photos, no hanging pots or pans, or fridge magnets.

No small appliances, the counters were empty of toasters and blenders—

every flat space or horizontal shelf and recess was devoid of—*everything*. There was nothing that belonged in a kitchen and nowhere else. No utensils, cookbooks or kettles, salad bowls or cookie jars.

Either everything had been put neatly away, or the kitchen had never been used.

Then my memory began to rewind, now showing me dimly the van stopping in the garage and Scruffy being dragged into the house. I'd seen none of the usual things in the garage either: no oil or grease stains on the floor; no shovels, rakes or hoes; no skateboards, bicycles or garbage pails.

I flashed back to being pulled along

after Scruffy—I saw no workbench or pin-up calendar either as my traveling buddy was taken out of the garage through a side door and up a narrow set of stairs ...

... before arriving in the kitchen through the white enameled door by the garbage can.

I could see my host's tan boots on the woven doormat.

To Scruffy's left, a narrow archway opened on a hall that would run the length of the house. It came from somewhere out of sight behind the wall and went past the kitchen toward the garage.

I could just make out the end of a couch to the right of the archway, ivory

wall-to-wall carpet, and another door on the far wall, the front entrance, beside a window obscured by white vertical blinds.

Pale carpet spilled out of the living room and ran down the hall.

I looked back to the kitchen counter and cupboards on Scruffy's right and a smaller window over it. The colorless vinyl slats of a venetian blind formed a clean rectangle that was easily missed against the white wall.

So someone did live here. Either that or the sparse decor signified that the house was not abandoned—but saw little use.

Sounds came from outside the

kitchen.

Footsteps rattled hollowly at some distance, followed by a door closing and then feet thumped on carpet, approaching.

The driver of the van, my samaritan, walked into the kitchen with the handle of a large plastic pail hooked over one arm. He put this at Scruffy's feet and removed a bottle of bleach, a scrub brush and sponge. He placed those on the floor before going to the sink to fill the pail.

The samaritan hummed quietly as the water flowed, a charming and fragile tune—light and childish and easy to memorize—something hymnal, perhaps a nursery rhyme.

He closed the tap and hoisted the three-quarters-full pail. Steam shapes played over its surface as he set this by Scruffy.

I saw that he had replaced his yellow work gloves with a long pair of rubber gauntlets that reached his elbows. A white plastic daisy decorated each bright blue wrist.

He continued humming as he poured several yellow gouts of bleach into the steaming water.

Then, he stirred this with the scrub brush before dunking the large sponge in and wringing it out in a cloud of steam.

Smiling absently, he lifted Scruffy's right arm and started scrubbing the wrist, hand and fingers. The nails were long

and ragged with rings of dirt under each.

“You’re filthy,” the samaritan grumbled, dipping and squeezing the sponge again.

He paused to contemplate Scruffy’s blank stare, searching the dark pupils for signs of consciousness. But Scruffy remained impassive. The occasional blinking of his eyes was the only indication that he was not carved from stone.

Our host shrugged, lifted the arm again with sponge ready, and gasped, turning Scruffy’s forearm in his gloved hands.

The white skin had flushed at the scalding water, and looked swollen.

The samaritan dropped the sponge

and pulled the arm closer, the fingers of his free hand moving toward Scruffy's pale wrist.

“Impossible ...” he said, turning and canting his head as he shifted the arm, as his fingers searched for a pulse.

“But you didn't speak ... My God!” he groaned, as his fingertips pressed the artery below Scruffy's thumb.

“Oh no!” the samaritan rasped, dropping on his knees and pushing Scruffy's legs wide. He set his ear against the silent man's chest.

“A heartbeat ... you're warming ... but—you were so—so cold and—and quiet!” The samaritan rocked back from knee to knee, reaching out for a chair that he dragged close to sit upon.

“You’re still freezing!” He lurched to his feet and almost kicked the water bucket over. He lifted the pail and set it in the sink where he stood for a minute with his face lowered and his hands braced against the counter.

He shook his head slowly.

“Why hasn’t he—he didn’t speak ...” he whispered, turning to Scruffy and shouting, “What’s wrong with you?”

Scruffy shivered involuntarily.

The samaritan groaned, and with an anxious expression, raced from the kitchen to return in seconds with a patched old quilt that he draped over Scruffy’s broad shoulders so it could hang down his back like a cape.

“My name is Eli,” he said, rubbing

Scruffy's chest through the blanket. "I'm sorry, but when I saw your dead friend—and the car wreck so near—I believed that you were also killed in the crash."

He kneaded Scruffy's shoulders.

"You were unresponsive—and so cold ..." He laughed nervously.

"Can you hear me?" he raised his voice, then wiggled his fingers in front of Scruffy's face, before moving in to study the vacant eyes again.

"Is it a brain injury, is that it?" Eli reached for Scruffy's injured arm. "You didn't even flinch at the heat!"

He held the limb up and angled it in the light from the overhead.

"I hope you aren't burned. I have nothing here that would do for anything

serious, and Willard's a long drive for ointment ..." he said, before smiling. Perhaps, even one-sided, the conversation was a treat for him.

"Willard's the closest town to me," he said, shaking his head. "It's over a hundred miles to any place bigger ... the other small towns have fallen. That's why I have to search so far afield."

As he turned the burned forearm in the light again, his look of disbelief shifted to curiosity, and then to something sly and reckless.

Staring into Scruffy's eyes, he pressed his thumb against the injury and squeezed.

The silent man sat unmoving—oblivious.

When no reaction came, Eli changed his grip and twisted the swollen skin between thumb and forefinger.

Still nothing. Scruffy's blank gaze was fixed on the distance.

Disappointment registered on the samaritan's face as his eyes rolled down and he stared at the floor. Then his expression softened, became pious or self-effacing—humble. Or was he afraid of something?

“It would be wrong. I can't do that—I promised!” he muttered, finally; his attention returning to Scruffy. “Of course, his reflexes should be tested, and he can stop me at any time.”

Eli set Scruffy's hand down, and lifted his own right.

He slapped the silent man across the face, his rubber glove amplifying the sound.

The impact rocked Scruffy to the side, but he did not fall over or respond in any way other than to robotically adjust his position, canting his hips and straightening his upper thighs until he had resumed his seat.

There was a scarlet mark showing through the whiskers on his white cheek.

“Still no reaction,” Eli whispered, sliding his chair close and pulling Scruffy’s head forward into his lap.

“No obvious sign of head trauma,” he said, peering at the scalp through the scraggly locks. “Your brain must have been damaged in the crash that killed

your friend. I can think of nothing else to explain your—detachment.”

Eli probed the matted hair. “Plenty of old scars, here and *there*, but nothing recent.”

He pushed Scruffy back into a sitting position.

There was no change in the silent man’s expression.

Eli drew his hand back and hit him across the face again—this time even harder.

Scruffy teetered on the chair, but rocked back into his seated position. His face was blank; his breathing continued regular and even.

“I’ve read about some brain injuries—you can walk, move and have

muscular control of your body, but you're unable to feel or communicate.” The samaritan squeezed his own chin between his fingers. “There's so little bacteria since the Change, you might survive such an injury without infection—but the spirit is left a prisoner in a damaged brain.”

He parted Scruffy's blanket and lifted a strip of cloth that was all that remained of his collar.

“Your clothing is rotten from exposure ...” Eli studied the frayed fabric. “You've been out there a long time.” His hands shifted to Scruffy's naked chest and abdomen, fingers touching the many scars there.

“Old injuries *survived* ...” He

squeezed Scruffy's pectoral muscles. "Your muscle tone is still good ... but how?" He peered into the silent man's eyes. "You're thin but you haven't starved."

Then he leaned back in his chair with one elbow perched on the opposite forearm. He pinched the wrinkled skin between his eyebrows—the rubber gloves making him clumsy.

"I will ask your friend. He will tell me who you are." He continued to pull at his forehead and eyebrows.

"No need to involve Authority," he said, lowering his hands and straightening in his chair.

Then a gleam entered his eyes and he smiled broadly.

“No need when God’s authority has already spoken!” Eli cried exultantly, flipping his face skyward and staring through the space I occupied. “For how could you come to me in this state without His implicit acceptance of my work? Even, *His approval*. And so my research is given His Holy Blessing ... I become a tool for the Lord’s own hand and purpose ...”

He lowered his eyes and spoke directly to Scruffy, “I feel we have important work to do together ... You, a man imprisoned in his own body ... and I—perhaps the only person in the world who can help you.”

He brushed at Scruffy’s swollen cheek and pushed the long locks away

from his face.

“But first, you need a shave—and a bath.”

I listened to crazy Eli from where I floated over Scruffy’s head, and watched as the samaritan left the room and returned minutes later carrying a small bottle, syringe and hand towel in a stainless steel kidney tray.

He knelt in front of Scruffy and charged the needle, then used a cotton swab to gently clean the inside of the silent man’s right elbow.

“I had other uses for this sedative ...” He smiled self-consciously, jogging the needle up and down to emphasize the point.

“But you can’t flinch while I shave you—even if you can.” He licked his lips. “I can’t have you bleeding.”

As I watched from my elevated position I was alarmed to feel heat on my right. It was some kind of metaphysical coordinate and connection that prompted a phantom reaction in me that “felt” as though heat was coming from “over there,” growing hotter as I watched the plunger force the drug into Scruffy’s arm.

I continued to heat up, and my being soon began to throb like a drum or heartbeat—a repetitive sensation that had suddenly come on hard and regular, as though the atoms that surrounded and comprised me had coalesced into a

living thing.

I felt my pulse pound as my vision dimmed—gravity returned and I fell.

Shift.

CHAPTER 9

I fell through darkness, downward past the dim and shadow. Discordant sensation loomed as everything dropped away with the light: the sense of motion, all perception of time and then memory.

Only to be replaced by another set, another paradigm. Familiarity grew as I faded and reformed.

And I somehow ended up in a chair or on a bench—it was something padded—yes. A bench on one side of a small booth, or a nook in a tiny kitchen. Cramped and impossible to sit in for any length of time.

I had always hated the thing.

It came with the second apartment we had rented together. I had made it through the academy, completed my years as a rookie and had married Anne to celebrate my fifth year on the job.

I was older, too, but not by much—almost thirty—enough, I guess. It was time to make some serious decisions, but Anne had been hemming and hawing. She had completed her Masters in History and was starting her first year teaching at the local university campus.

I'd halfway thought the new apartment would prime her for what was to come—set the stage for the next step. It was natural, after you get married you ...

We were talking over coffee as we

did whenever my shifts allowed it. That was the only downside of the job and not having my sergeant's stripes: I was still prey to the whims of scheduling, covering anything extra that came up.

But I'd never complain. I still had my eye on the sergeant stripes after all. And complainers seldom prospered anywhere. Especially on the police force.

I was playing with my cheap gold wedding band that was too tight, but we were still living too close to the financial red line for me to complain about it. If she knew, Anne would try to find the money to get it re-sized, and if we couldn't afford it—like we couldn't—I knew she'd feel worse than the

discomfort the tight ring was giving me.

Besides, I was getting used to it. The degree of strangulation fluctuated with the weather. The ring grew alternately smaller and larger as the changing climate allowed.

And it was changing.

What the hell? I'd do something about the ring if my finger ever started turning black.

Anne was smoking her cigarette and looking upset, so I wanted to talk to her, get the discussion going, over and out of the way. I hoped it would lead to better places than the last conversation where she had ended up leaving the kitchen nook in tears.

I was wearing my patrolman's uniform having just finished dressing for my shift before noticing the fresh coffee and my wife's dire expression.

My peaked cap sat on the table in front of me looking all shiny.

“What's the matter, honey?” I asked, a part of me impishly wanting to add the word “now.” She'd been having more trouble with her moods since graduating, and her new job had just added stress to her anxiety.

She shrugged, looking at me with one eye through a cloud of cigarette smoke. She took another drag and swept ash off the newspaper she had spread out in front of her.

Anne gestured with the cigarette.

“Sorry ... I know I was going to quit.”

“No worries. I didn’t say a thing, babe,” I cooed, reaching across the table for a hand she pulled away. I shrugged with my eyebrows and went for my coffee instead.

No worries. No sense fighting.

“Of course, I should worry about *that!*” she said, tone rising. “That was *the deal* right? I was going to quit.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I said, shaking my head. “The day’s just starting ...” I angled my neck to peer out the window beside us. Rain clouds. It had been raining for a week or more. “And uh ... It looks like rain again, so we’ll have to rely on sunny dispositions.”

She frowned across the table at me,

shaking her head at mention of “sunny dispositions.”

“I know, the punch line’s a little weak, but it’s early and I’d rather not start the day in a bad mood,” I said, smiling apologetically. “Can we talk about this tonight? I’ll have better material ...”

“Talk about what?” she said suspiciously, taking another drag.

“Whatever’s under your skin,” I said, realizing her present mood would not allow any peaceful discussions. *Time to cut and run.*

“So, you don’t think it’s important,” she said with a shake of her head, crushing her cigarette in the ashtray and picking the package up to play with

instead of lighting another.

“I just thought ...” I looked at the clock over the stove. “I don’t have much time before shift, so ...”

“So, we can put it off,” she snapped, to complete my sentence, whipping out a cigarette and lighting it. “Just like *I* put the baby off!”

“The baby?” I frowned, snatching up my coffee cup and sipping—hiding behind its rim. “I see. That’s what you were referring to when you said ‘the deal’.” I knew full well that was what she had been referring to, but had refused to take the bait.

“Of course!” she hissed, crossing her arms as she puffed her cigarette.

“Honey, can we talk about that later?”

I asked again, reaching out and catching her hand, but she pulled it away forcefully. “Look, if it’s still eating at you, we can talk to the doctor again. People hold off well into their thirties and you’re not even there yet. It’s never too late to start a family.”

Actually, it was getting too late.

“But I haven’t quit smoking,” she said, defiantly, self-destructively. “The doctor said that it would be better if I did. That it could help us conceive. But my nerves ...” She shook her head. “I just think about before. We shouldn’t have ...”

“I am not worried, Anne,” I said, taking another sip of coffee. I would have liked to heat it up from the

decanter, but realized that would only prolong the fight. “And even if we can’t do it—conceive, I mean—without help ... There are perfectly safe methods available ...”

“*Unnatural* methods!” she blurted. “For an *unnatural* mother—for an unhealthy woman! That’s what I am. That’s why I haven’t given you a baby,” she sobbed, crossing her arms over her breasts. “Why I haven’t kept my part of the deal! It’s payback for what we did!”

“Okay,” I said, leaning back against the cushion with palms up and arms wide. “Okay. Tell me what’s got you so upset.”

“Well, *you* want a baby, and—and the world’s going to hell,” she whimpered,

slumping in her seat. “Who could bring a baby into *this* world?”

“It’s the only world we’ve got,” I said, trying to keep things light, but she wouldn’t bite.

“Don’t make fun of me!” She angrily puffed her cigarette.

“Please honey,” I said, setting my empty coffee cup aside. “Tell me what’s eating you. I want to know.”

“Oh, it’s everything ...” she groaned, sliding forward, cradling her head on her left arm. Her right hand with the cigarette was stuck out toward the center of the table, difficult for me to grab without getting burned.

The smoke drifted upward as she spoke, “It’s the rain. It’s been almost a

month now. Rain with hardly any break! I need the sun.” She rose to stand beside the kitchen nook sweeping her hand at the window and the gray sky. “And it’s there again! More rain!”

“Anne,” I said, calmly. “I agree. The rain, I’m sick of it too. But it’s spring, that’s what we get.”

“It’s almost summer,” she corrected. “And what about this?” She rapped her knuckles on the newspaper that was spread out on the table. “All the unusual murders, war, rape and climate change, and now this! Does spring have anything to do with *this*?”

“With what?” I leaned forward, craning my neck to see, but Anne wouldn’t even turn the paper for me to

read.

“It’s all there. It’s in the headlines! *I’ve* been watching. Strange things all over the world. Oddities, but now family dogs—not far from here,” she said, her voice breaking. “Killed them all.”

“What family dogs?” I got up, reached for the paper and swung my head to read. “Where?”

“How many is it *this* week? And what *aren’t* they telling us ...” she said, drawing violently on her cigarette. “... about the animals?”

“What do you mean?” I mumbled, kneeling on the bench seat, scanning the gray text for the news. “You mean those horses? That was a freak accident.”

“Not the fucking horses!” she said,

tearing up. “At least that was—was possible. A farmer kicked to death in his barn by his horses ... dragged out into the rain ...” Her voice dropped. “And torn to pieces with their teeth ... after ...” Tears ran down her cheeks as she realized how that wasn’t really very possible. “At least that kind of thing might have happened *before* ...”

I squeezed Anne’s shoulder, but found it as rigid and unyielding as stone.

“I’m talking about the *Schitzoodles* or poodles or ... they were little fucking lap dogs right in town!” she said. “A week ago, the pair of them no more than fifteen pounds each, tore out their owners’ throats and ate the flesh—a couple—while they slept. For thirteen years

they'd lived together. Lap dogs! And bang! They killed them.”

“Maybe the dogs got bored,” I said, smiling weakly, regretting my decision to let a little humor break the spell as the inappropriate punch line followed:

“That’s a long lap dance.”

“How can you joke?” she said, throwing the stub of her cigarette into the sink where it hissed. “I’m glad you’re able to find the bright side of an old couple being murdered in their sleep ...”

“Sorry—I’m sorry ...” It was my life as a cop talking. You couldn’t take anything too close to the heart. “I just think we have to roll with the punches. Bad things happen. It’s nothing new ...”

“Roll with the punches *then*, don’t

joke about a thing like this,” she muttered, slapping the paper. “Those dogs were waiting to ambush the couple’s full-grown kids who visited on the weekend. A son—a big man in his thirties got home and he suffered some serious injuries before he managed to beat the dogs to death with a steam iron.”

I sat there quietly, watching her, wishing I could read something other than anger and desperation in her eyes.

“Do you think *that’s* funny?” she asked, incredulously.

“Well, no. But even dark humor is better than obsessing about everything negatively the way you’re doing,” I answered, wondering if the son had

folded the dogs after delivering the coup de grâce. “Anne, honey, there are lots of weird things going on out there. But there always have been weird things going on.” I glanced at the rain-streaked window. “I’m a cop. I’m out there on the street. It just seems worse, Christ, first the millennium bug thing, and then 9/11 and terrorism—the financial crash ...”

The truth was that on the job we *were* seeing more and more of these animal attacks, and doing everything we could to keep the press from turning them into hysteria. The attacks started not long after the meteorologists had started struggling to explain the shift in world weather patterns. Climate change was one thing ... but it was a gradual process.

These rains? It was raining everywhere.

Of course, I couldn't get into all of that with Anne. It would inflame her fears. She'd find a conspiracy in it.

“But they're signs of something bigger happening,” she said, the fingers of both hands drumming on the newspaper.

“Signs?” I knew which way that would take the discussion. She'd been watching the TV evangelicals more that I was comfortable. “Well, everyone's trying to figure it out. So, we all have to remain calm until the scientists solve the mystery.”

“What if they can't figure it out?” she asked, eyes gleaming desperately as she started playing with her cigarette pack

again. “If they can’t solve it?”

“You know the way this stuff works,” I said, slipping an arm around her shoulders and guiding her back into her seat. I slumped on the bench beside her. “It looks bad all piled together, but in the end, they’ll find a cause. Something in the food maybe, who knows, there’s a reason that those pets got aggressive. And the rain is probably just climate change!”

She sat quietly watching my hands where I had set them on the table in front of me.

“Maybe you should be a detective,” she said, pulling out another cigarette, and running her fingers up and down its length. “You’re smarter than any of the

cops you've ever brought around here.”

“I want to try *sergeant* first,” I said, leaning over to press my lips to her neck. “Besides, I know myself too well. My character is not suited to promotions because I'm allergic to ass kissing. So anywhere higher on the chain gets more dangerous for me.”

I squeezed her arm before letting it go so she could light her cigarette.

“*Sergeant's* probably the safest place—for now. I can hold the line between the uniforms and the idiots in charge. That way the brass is never threatened by me if I do bend the rules, or drag my feet ... They'll know I'm doing a job that they don't want ...”

“But maybe you're too close to the

street,” she said. Her hands had been rubbing over the newspaper long enough for the ink to start coming off. “You can pick and choose what you hear if you’re a detective.”

“That isn’t the way it works,” I said, shrugging. “Besides, detectives have to be better than lawyers in order to do their jobs.” I shook my head. “Cops too ... there’s a lot you have to know.”

“You already do that,” she said.

“Yes, but at the end of my shift, I clock out and come home to you,” I said. “Fine, I’m getting some odd shifts right now, but I can leave the job at the office. Detectives can’t.”

The fact was, I needed sergeant before I tried anything else, but would

be content to wait. I was worried about Anne's moods, and had hoped things would settle when we had a baby.

"But won't ..." she started. "Won't the 'brass' as you call them. Will they think you lack ambition?"

"No," I said. "Honey, the most important thing right now is for you to feel better, and for us to settle into married life. Then we can look at the future together, and get our plans underway."

"*Plans!*" She blew out a breath of smoke. "When I can't even keep my side of a deal. Well, it's good to know that we're both content with failure!" Her hands became like claws as she teared up. "Me as a mother and you as ..."

“Jesus Christ! Honey. I don’t know what to do with you,” I said, slowly shaking my head, pulling her hand close and kissing the rigid tendons across the back. “You are in a hell of a mood today.”

A horn honked outside.

“That’s Dort!” I said. It was my partner picking me up.

I grabbed my hat and slipped it over my crew cut before sliding away from the booth and toward the door. “I’ll talk to you about this later; even failures need to punch a clock now and then.”

Halfway out the door, I adjusted my hat. It itched where the hard-leather band pressed the short hair flat to my skull.

Itching like I’d just had it cut.

Like there were ants crawling over
my head.

Shift.

CHAPTER 10

Ants.

It was a funny feeling—the crawling ants—downright distracting. Made more so because I realized I was out of body again. Despite that, the sensation had been vivid enough that I was still experiencing an echo of it, remembering what it felt like to have a new brush cut.

It was itchy and had to be something like what Scruffy would be feeling now.

My traveling buddy was in his chair again when I snapped out of my dream or delusion, appearing over his head, looking down remembering having short hair and wondering why.

Knowing only what it felt like.

Scruffy had been shaved and bathed, and dressed in light gray cotton pajamas that looked to be two sizes too small. The shirt and pants were snug on the torso, while the sleeves and legs stopped just below the elbows and knees.

His chair was pulled out and turned so its back was to the kitchen table. There was a white wastebasket at his side with a plastic bag in it containing a dense, dark mass of long, wet strands.

Eli, our host, had cut Scruffy's hair, and he must have used an electric razor because the silent man was almost bald. All that remained was a bluish shadow of bristle following his hairline and

resembling a skull cap.

It must have been a dull electric razor, too, because the shadowy scalp was marked with scarlet welts and nicks.

Some kind of razor blade had been used on his face and neck that were smooth shaven under a crosshatch of cuts and abrasions.

There was no sign of Eli, and the kitchen was its usual sterile self. Just white everywhere punctuated with bits of chrome.

I had no idea how much time had passed since we had first arrived at the samaritan's house, and few could blame me since my time had been divided between curious dreams or unclaimed

memories and Scruffy's time in his chair.

Had I seen him in his bed? I had the feeling I had been around when Scruffy was sleeping, but I couldn't conjure up any specific mental picture of it. Just a vague feeling; well, he had to sleep sometime ...

It was growing difficult for me to hold onto any specific version of reality, since I had no physical requirements like sleep and food to punctuate my time with mundane memories; and using Scruffy's experience was impossible.

That had a numbing effect upon me. Without physical cues, it was easy to forget the things that I was experiencing out-of-body with Scruffy but "into body" in the hallucinations I was having.

So, I assumed that this was the first time that Scruffy had been cleaned up because I didn't have anything else to go on.

Especially now that I'd been away again.

I remembered perfume, and having coffee with a woman. There was talk of rain; at least I think there was. That would be easy to mix up with the present setting since the sound of rain against the windows had been a constant at Eli's house.

I would have to try to focus on the details.

Even as I thought it, I felt a great pang of boredom and I experienced a dim memory of a creepy exchange between

Scruffy and our host. *Creepy*.

In it my traveling buddy was standing naked as naked gets acting like a robot in response to all of Eli's commands: "Get in the tub ... Good boy. Now hold your foot up while I scrub it. There, you give me your hands ..."

That kind of creepy.

So Eli must have just finished shearing and dressing Scruffy. My sidekick was sitting quietly beneath me when I heard an echoing *boom* of shoes on stairs that came from down the hallway. There were *thumps* and other muffled noises that almost sounded like voices.

A door slammed, and a bolt locked

into place.

A minute later Eli returned, smiling as he positioned a chair to sit in front of Scruffy and pull on his long blue rubber gloves. He had brought a little first-aid kit with him that looked a lot like a tin lunchbox.

He opened it on his lap and took out a bottle of iodine and a few cotton swabs. He set the kit on the floor by his chair and soaked a couple of swabs with antiseptic before rising to stand beside Scruffy.

“This will sting,” he said, struggling to purse his lips as they quivered in and out of a smile.

If it did sting, Scruffy didn't feel it. He was as sensitive as a gravestone.

Eli hissed peevishly at this before twisting his lips and throwing pretense aside. He scoured the many cuts on the silent man's head like they were barnacles on a boat, pausing only to reapply iodine to the dripping swabs.

Fresh scabs were worn away. Blood ebbed from the deepest wounds.

But nothing came from Scruffy. His eyes were dark, and his expression was vacant.

Eli grew frustrated and perplexed by the man's detachment since it was clear that he could hear, even responding to simple commands: "Sit up straight now, and lean your head forward."

But he didn't feel any pain.

The samaritan frowned when he

noticed droplets of blood forming on Scruffy's damaged scalp, and he immediately wiped them away with cotton swabs.

“Can't have that ...” Eli muttered, clicking his tongue and setting the soiled cotton aside.

He leaned in again to study the man, reaching out and jerking on Scruffy's left eyebrow where the remaining hairs were longest.

“I should have shaved these too. You're a mess,” Eli said, watching for changes in the man's expression. “Better late than never ...”

He pinched a few strands of Scruffy's right eyebrow and pulled the hairs out with a quick snap of his wrist.

Scruffy was pulled forward slightly by the action but straightened in his seat without responding.

Floating over him, I was fascinated by strange motes of light that had suddenly appeared and flitted over the surface of the silent man's scalp.

When Eli repeated the violent action on the other tattered eyebrow, Scruffy gave the same non-response, but I watched a new cascade of electric points glimmering over his head.

“The dead man I found you with says he doesn't know you. Claims you simply wandered by,” Eli said, straightening Scruffy's pajama collar.

He sighed, “For the present, your name is lost to me ...”

I had the same problem. I'd been calling my sidekick Scruffy, but that was just a joke, a leg-pull to keep the seriousness of the situation from getting too deep.

I mean, not knowing who the fellow was and dwelling on it was just going to drag the conversation down toward other pertinent questions about identity—and the important mystery of my own name.

For the time being, I was Scruffy's traveling buddy. A dark little cloud that followed him around.

Scruffy had the edge there because at least he had attributes that might help create a nickname. But me, what: Foggy? Afterthought? The man who was and

wasn't there?

And Scruffy had a body that could be fingerprinted, blood drawn, and DNA tested.

Me? I had nothing. In fact, other than my pithy observations and limited interactions with Scruffy, I had very little evidence that I existed at all.

“I could drive along the road, look for clues where you came from ...” Eli said finally, patting down the soft cotton shoulders of Scruffy's pajamas. “The dead fellow isn't lying. He came around quickly when he realized how little he had to lose ...”

He took Scruffy's hands.

“Warm. Your pulse is stronger.” Eli set them back on the silent man's knees.

“You’re feeling better. The food and warmth is working quickly.”

He sighed, “But you’re not *improving*, are you? You’re still locked in there ...” An unexpected smile appeared on his face. “It’s been so long since I’ve talked to another living soul. I almost wish you *could* speak.” He laughed and shook his head.

“Is that why I delay?”

A thunderclap shook the gray ceiling, and Eli’s eyes flashed upward.

“I haven’t forgotten! I’m—I’m also anxious to begin ...” he stammered, crossing his arms over his chest as he plucked at the sweaty skin between his eyes. “But I promised ... My work upon the others is no sin, but on a *living* man

... *A friend*—perhaps ...” Eli panted, “True, he’s a living man with a dead man’s feelings—what am I saying? Even a dead man flinches ...”

He searched Scruffy’s face.

“And it will be dangerous with a living man ...” he warned, taking up his iodine and cotton balls again to dab at Scruffy’s uneven eyebrows. The skin turned red where the hairs had been plucked, but if there was pain, he didn’t show it. “Living blood swells the flesh, and will pour out if I’m not careful. It’s dangerous with the *others* near. They’ll want to participate.”

The silent man was silent.

“God sent you here for a reason,” the samaritan told him. “A gift for me ... a

reward?” He raised his eyes again.

“Unless ...” Tears trailed over his face.

“Is that it, my Lord?”

Eli screwed the cap on his iodine bottle and put it in the first-aid kit.

Scruffy was quiet.

“*I* have a reason and so *you* have a purpose also,” Eli said, a fleeting glance flickered upward as he gathered the used cotton balls into his fist. “You’ve been born again for *me*.”

I listened, wondering how crazy this man was going to get. Scruffy just sat there.

“The scars upon you. They tell me ...” One of his hands fluttered in the air in front of Scruffy’s face before flying up and down his chest. “... that you *should*

be dead ...”

I couldn't argue with him, since I'd seen the scars.

“... or that you *have* been,” the samaritan continued, touching the purple canvas over his own heart. “Your scars tell me you have been in contact with great power that almost or *did* destroy you as it did your apparel and possessions, yet even then that power knit your wounds and gave you life again. You have been blessed, my friend, cleaned of sin and memory, and prepared for a sacrament of change.”

Eli rose, walked to the sink and reached up to open the blinds. It was dark gray outside the rain-streaked window. Thunder rumbled distantly.

“The rains wash the world in preparation for the end of times,” he said. “But only one thing can wash away death ... You have bathed in ... been anointed by ...”

Eli shivered saying: “They who have come out of the great tribulation have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” He nodded slowly. “In the same way your body has been cleaned of fatal injuries, and given new life.”

Eli turned with shoulders and arms rigid as he walked back to resume his seat in front of Scruffy.

“The time for Judgment Day has come and gone,” he said, “and I labor for the Lord to send His flock home to eternal

Love, and belated Judgment.”

He smiled, lifting a hand to gently stroke Scruffy's cheek.

“And so you have been sent to me pure of spirit, cleansed of your sins.”

He suddenly snatched another tuft of hair from Scruffy's eyebrow.

Scruffy took it without a sound.

“You have been prepared to leave this world and live forever in eternity ... Yeah, with your injuries, your spirit must crave release ...” He reached out again, but froze with his hand over Scruffy's crotch. The thin cotton pajama bottoms did more to exaggerate than hide the silent man's erection.

“What's this?” Eli blinked comically, lowering his hand to the bulging material

but pulling away before he touched it.

“You *are* a puzzle, a cipher, my friend—a *marvel*,” he breathed, studying the distorted cotton. “An erection.” He leaned back, shaking his head slowly.

“Do you provoke God?” he asked thoughtfully, rubbing his hand across his chin. “Are there still sins to drive out? Is that why you are silent? Is that your secret?”

Then, Eli jerked his right ear toward the floor and said, “Did you hear that? They think I can’t but I can hear it. They’re out again. I let them, but not if they’re making noise.”

He glared at the tiles, lips curling away from his teeth as he shouted, “How can I concentrate?”

Eli glanced at Scruffy's crotch and back to the floor, before his eyes shifted up to my sidekick's unwavering gaze.

The samaritan surged forward and punched the thick muscle high on his captive's right thigh close to the groin.

Scruffy gasped achingly and doubled over.

Motes of light flared and flickered over his newly shaven scalp.

I was caught center to a curious explosion of sensations, slung between pain and pleasure.

The sexual excitement caused another shifting of the blood ...

Shift.

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

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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 additions to the Wildclown Mysteries and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.