

**MENAGERIE**  
G. Wells Taylor

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**For Helen Cushnie**

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## **Chapter 1**

I had already dropped most of a bottle of whiskey into an empty stomach, so decided to eat before it got the better of me. I was just starting to think I could run on high-octane fuel alone, which was the first sign that it was already getting the better of me. I didn't mind getting that drunk—nice to cut ties with the planet from time to time—but the hangovers were killers. After a day of searing pain and nausea, I'd roll out of sweated sheets and stare around with boiling red eyes expecting the end to come. A bullet, a lightning bolt, or tsunami—I spent those days snuggled up to my mortality with my temples hammering to get in. It would end. It was going to end. Everything ends. If I listened closely, I could hear Charon loading my bags on the boat down at the River Styx Marina.

*If* I woke up in a body—the body, really. There was only one I felt comfortable in. It's a long story, but I borrow a body to do my detective work. Tommy was nuts—that's my host. He only accepted the partnership if we dressed like an oversized gothic clown. Nothing silly. Black and white makeup, worn coverall with faded spots and a huge black overcoat. I wear a matching fedora too, to keep the rain off. It's always raining. I have quite a look. Nothing you'd want at a kid's birthday party, if there were kids.

I lost track of my own body. Must have left it in my other life. I have no idea how I got this way. In fact, if not for the hangover, I had to laugh every time I contemplated the end because there was a good chance I was dead already. But other times I woke up outside the body, as though I drifted out in dreams. Then I would come back to complete awareness, invisible, floating over Tommy—usually him snoring, sleeping off a drunk at awkward angles on the desk or out on the couch in the waiting room with Elmo looking uncomfortable in the easy chair across from him. I could usually repossess the body with ease, some sort of connection I had with his pleasure center. Then it would be back to

work, quite often with a pounding headache and watery bowels. Nothing a triple finger shot of whiskey wouldn't put right. Don't mind if I do.

Elmo, my partner, usually did the step and fetch—errands, that type of thing. Getting food and supplies was one of his duties and I hated to trample on his dead toes whether he could feel it or not; but my IQ was plummeting—I was getting caught up in the moment. Thoughts were starting to come at me like medicated tortoises. If I waited much longer, I'd be reduced to some simian ancestor impossible to toilet train and unable to handle the order. I was already having trouble deciding what I wanted to eat. I'd delayed the chore by a couple of drinks already, contenting myself making up names of yet to be invented foods: the pizwich, a soul of boop, a dish fog, or an S-bone Take. Maybe another whink of driskey would help.

I wasn't agoraphobic—the air would do me good—but the longer I drank, the more I felt like I had super powers. Who needs food when all the vitamins and nutrients I needed were contained in each little shot? Whiskey could do that to me if I drank it recklessly—if I failed to provide a solid base. The amber ambience permeated everything—all I needed was a cape and I could fly. But 'getting things' was Elmo's job, and since it had been a long time between cases, I was running out of ideas to keep him busy. At the moment, he was over in Gritburg on an errand. The reason escaped me: gricking up some pceries?

Let's go detective. You're driving up on the curb—food before a car wreck. It was happening more and more these days: Happy Hours on either side of lunch, and then cocktails until Happy Hour at three—and then Happy Half-Hours until supper, if you could still operate a sandwich by then. Drink after supper until you're relaxed and then relax with a drink until you're drunk. Then drink and giggle over a pack of cigarettes as the rain beat on the windows and the gray day dissolved into a meaningless night or the black night diluted into ashy dawn—it didn't matter which. If something didn't change soon I was headed into straits that I might not be able to drink my way out of. If there was work, that was one thing. The long hours, pistol-whippings and rising levels of violence kept my mind off the Change, and the long wet twilight it had made of life. But give a man time to think, to mull things over, and he'd have to dive into a bottle to keep from climbing up the wall and going out the window headfirst.

I'd been out of work for a couple weeks now with only a low-paying job photographing a cheating husband to make ends meet. I don't know if it was my distaste for the case or the whiskey I sampled while I waited outside his girlfriend's apartment, but I'd only managed a couple of pictures in sharp enough focus to tell my target was a man. The wife paid me anyway. I took that job after "The Murder and Death Section" of the *Greasetown Gazette* had gone quiet. That's where I usually trolled for work in the off-times. But there had been a lull in the constant gun battle that usually echoed outside my window. And none of the accidental deaths were suspicious enough to bother hiring a detective. So I drank to fill the time.

I tumbled out of my chair, crawled into my overcoat and climbed under my hat. There was a reflection in a glass-covered picture on the wall—the clown having problems with gravity was not as funny as you'd think. Especially when considering the ugly .44 automatic stuck in his pink skipping rope belt. He looked crazy enough to use it.

I swaggered out of the office, down the stairs and then walked a block south to a pizza shop. The air did me good. So did the sprinkling of foggy dew that glistened on my

painted cheeks. I wasn't smoking, so I paused in front of the shop and pulled a cigarette out of a pack before I realized there was a cold dead wet one in my mouth. I tossed the pair on the dark concrete and pulled the door open. The smell of spices greeted me seconds before a beautiful woman did. Maria appeared behind the counter with a big smile. She was used to my makeup and recently inebriated state—I'd been in often enough that the secret was out and she had stopped tossing me the typical: "You eat a lot of pizza" comment.

She was Greek, her Mediterranean skin bleached by the sunless skies. Maria always shook her lovely black curls and flashed her big brown eyes when she talked. Always there were gold bangles moving and rings jingling and gleaming. Always she floated around the shop like it was brand new—some kind of fancy eatery in Old Europe—brass-railed, smoke-mirrored and anything but an all night pizza shop with plastic furniture in Greasetown. Her lips were pink. I wanted to bite them. Her angular body went well with her lean features—every inch of her moved when she talked. I wanted to bite all of that too. She just wouldn't stop moving. I set my upper thighs against the counter, and balanced through a smile and introduction. I ordered a couple of slices with extra cheese, hot peppers and some kind of fish-sausage pieces.

I got tired of fishdogs and fishburgers sometimes—all that fishy goodness. It wasn't like I could avoid it, really. All meat sources had been replaced by fish-additives: krill or shrimp or plankton. It all tasted the same. Everything had a pinch of fish. So why not pizza? And it was too late to start worrying about my diet. I avoided a medical opinion because I knew how it felt about whiskey and cigarettes. It was getting so bad that a man couldn't drink scotch all day without feeling dirty. So pizza. I don't know where they got the flour for the crust—probably one of the corporate run hydroponic farms carved into the lower layers of reconditioned mines. They grew tomatoes, cucumbers and coffee down there and anything that would fit in the elevator. Few food crops grew without help in the constant rains in the world after the Change. And the fish-stuff, they ladled that out of enormous vats in factories on the coast. Nobody wanted to know much more than that.

"Another party, Mr. Wildclown?" Maria sang, a slight accent colored her song without distorting it. Her eyes danced and dazzled and gleamed. I'd spent three minutes watching her move: preparing the slices and then jamming them in the oven. She turned to me, handling the long wooden spatula like she was in a parked car after high school graduation. Don't mind if I do.

"Yes, a party." I didn't waste time thinking about Maria in *that* way. Well, I *thought* about her *that* way any time I saw her—but I didn't waste time doing anything about the way I thought that way. I'd met her husband, a big burly man—older than her—from an arranged marriage in the old country. He'd talk you blue in the face about business and the fact that a man can't get respect any more, but didn't like it when men got too familiar with his wife. His reactions to that were legendary. Many a nose was broken when he had to explain his feelings on the issue. I could see him on the far side of the oven, his hairy shoulders quivering as he beat the life out of a hundred pounds of dough. I knew he didn't mind the counter talk though, so I continued: "What the hell, Maria? It's Tuesday."

"Mr. Wildclown..." Maria turned from the oven and laughed, eyes flashing—mysterious brown centers in glittering white. "It is Thursday!" she giggled, and bagged my pizza slices.

“I was close,” I said, handing over a few bills and taking the hot slices from her slender white hands. “It has a ‘W’ in it.”

Maria slapped my hand and laughed. I chuckled, wishing I could do more than nod and turn and saunter back into the rain. It was really coming down out there again.

As I walked past a small clutch of plastic tables, I saw a man there. He had his back against the far wall. An untouched slice of pizza sat on the table in front of him beside a wet fedora. His body had a massive look beneath the charcoal gray overcoat, not big but pressurized—full of power waiting to get out, and the hands that slid off the table into his lap were corded with muscle and tendons. His heavy features gripped his skull; brow ridge like knuckles over large cheekbones. Long black hair hung over his dark eyebrows and hid a pair of gleaming eyes that glared at me. It wasn’t anger; it wasn’t hate. There was controlled purpose in the look. Nothing wanton there. They were hard, gave me a professional appraisal—had something else too. I knew all the local nasties, and he wasn’t one of them. He was imported.

I considered asking him what he thought he was looking at. Maybe it was the whiskey, maybe the errant testosterone Maria’s movements had revived in me but I wasn’t interested in his professional look or the subtext. I’d been out of work too long for aggressive chin thrusts and frank glares. Speak your mind or shut your yap. I certainly didn’t feel like the potential chaos and violence such a question could provoke but it was an answer to boredom. Of course, mixing it up with that one would be painful. There would be a price. Then the sound of Maria’s jingling bangles reached me, and she sang a few lines from an ancient song, and it passed. No war today. I wondered about the stranger’s interest for a second and then shrugged it off—why get into it? If he was curious why I dressed like a clown he could go see the movie. I was in no mood to explain. Happened all the time. If he was a bill collector, he could talk to me at the office—if he could trick me into opening the door. I overrode my impulse to respond. I didn’t even feel like cracking wise. He didn’t look like he was in the mood either.

I clawed one of the pizza slices out of the bag as I stepped into the night—the rain was pounding the street—made a distorted echo under the brim of my hat. I glanced back to catch Maria’s slim form distorted by the steamy window. She was moving ceaselessly around the pizza shop. The first slice was cold by the time I got to the crust halfway home. The bag containing the other was greasy and transparent before I was ready for the last piece. Water showered onto the sidewalk and the bag ripped to ribbons as I pulled the slice free. I got back to the office—paused outside long enough to spit bits of colored paper onto the stairs.

## Chapter 2

I unlocked the office door after several attempts, tossed my hat on the rack and crossed the waiting room: empty. Elmo wasn’t home yet. Off traipsing around the city with a pocket full of coins and lint. I was a bit behind on his pay again. Luckily he didn’t need much more than cigarettes and magazines. Oh, and the mineral oil mixture he drank to keep his body supple. A dead man couldn’t take the chance of drying out. He would lose flexibility and risk becoming a candidate for tobacco-induced immolation. I’d seen it

happen to others, and it was not a pretty sight. We kept a cooler of the viscid liquid behind the hat rack.

I swayed and shambled my way into the office. It was dark, but I could see the corner of my desk illuminated by light from the waiting room. I closed an eye to dull the double vision and held a hand out in front of me. I stumbled slightly on the carpet and into the arm of my chair before baby walking around the desk, one hand after the other. I slapped the air over the blotter until I found the coiled lamp, my fingers thudding dully on its metal helmet. That pizza and I got together just in time. We were a match made in heaven. My eyes burned when the lamp flared to life. Wincing, I reached out for the bottle of Canadian Club beside it and snagged the glass. Then I dropped into my chair, pouring a couple ounces and tipping them back. Over the unsteady rim of the glass I could see I was not alone.

A man stood there, his back flat against the far wall. A pistol was leveled rock-steady at my chest. He was long-limbed, narrowly built and tall, dressed in beige khakis, sodden leather shoes and a light blue jacket—also soaked through. His features were fine and bore a sculpted look. His skin shone greasily—like he'd just had his whole face waxed and his eyebrows shaped. The eyes that watched me were rimmed with the same pale short bristles that covered his head. They were blue with milky flecks, and they stared unwavering at me as I set my glass down.

"I walked into that one," I said, watching the stranger. His appearance was overworked. His skin was too clean, like he'd undergone some kind of transformation, or was wearing a disguise.

"Just keep your hands where I can see them," he ordered, his voice was matter-of-fact and hard. He shook his head. "You're a mess."

"Okay," I said, placing my hands on the desk. "As long as we can hurry the introductions, I need a cigarette." I was tempted to crack wise about a blindfold too but decided there was no money in tempting fate.

The pale blue eyes shifted toward the window, then his left ear turned slightly to the office door. He teased a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket and threw them across at me.

I recognized the brand, a little light for me, but they'd do. I flipped the pack open and took one out. He shook his head when I gestured toward him with the package. I lit up without him.

"You're Wildclown," he said, an unusual grin playing at his features. "And you're smashed. They weren't lying."

"I'm Wildclown." I drew in on the cigarette; let a long stream of smoke blow out over the desk. Adrenaline fired along my nerves and started warming the numb sprockets that worked my mind. Cold realization backed the whiskey off a shade. The desk lamp was on when I left, off when I got back. Huge mistake that might have just got me killed. In my condition, I doubt I'd have noticed a walrus on a unicycle reading Tolstoy. "And you are?"

"We know each other." The blue eyes flashed at the floor. "I've known about you—about this—for a long time, but I stayed away," the stranger said, his voice allowing a hint of familiarity. "I thought you went Change-happy. That's what Mary said. Maybe I should have contacted you long ago—maybe I could have helped. Maybe this is all karma coming back on me because I didn't reach out." Then he shook his head and smiled. "But I doubted you would want any help."

“And who is Mary?” I asked. He had said enough to keep me interested. The first adrenaline bath that washed through me was slowing and the whiskey was gathering in the hills, ready to make another charge. I clenched my jaws to stay focused.

“A mutual friend. She told me to come to you if things got bad. Mary Redding has been working her way up the chain, but the higher she’s gone, the closer she’s getting to the true source of Authority corruption. To the government corruption. Very dangerous for her *and* her friends.” His eyebrows leveled.

I remembered Mary. Her name kept popping up. She was a Medium Level Authority Inspector a couple years back who was instrumental in breaking up the Authority corruption in Greasetown. I helped her and for my trouble had received my share of knuckle sandwiches from disgruntled Enforcers and Inspectors ever since. Mary forged alliances with some of the good ones, and they started cleaning out the ranks. We worked together briefly: her under cover, me under the influence. We also made awkward but passionate love on my desk. The thought of it caused a stir below decks where Tommy lived during possessions. Don’t mind if I do.

“I need protection,” the stranger said. Some subtle shift in his posture told me he was experiencing a moment of safety. “But the operatives Mary assigned me are dead.”

“Okay,” I drawled, flicking my cigarette at the ashtray. “Why do you need protection?”

“The Prime elections are coming up,” he said, nodding. “You know about that?”

I nodded back at him. The Prime elections were an attempt by Authority to take complete control of government operations. The elected representatives were separate from local and federal levels of Authority. The remaining governments of the day were going to be coordinated under a national political entity called Westprime and would be run by a single individual, the Prime. There was only one candidate. The election was just a yes or no referendum. Do you want a more efficient post-Change government under the direct authority of the Prime? Or do you want things to continue to go the way they were going with uncoordinated elected governments that are throwbacks to a time that is long gone?

“I have evidence that the Prime is rigging the election. He’s working with others in the upper echelon of Authority, the military and law enforcement, to hedge his bets...” My guest smirked. “Terrorize people just before the vote, so the elected officials appear ineffective and out-of-date.”

I nodded. There was little known about the Prime, only that his name was Oscar Del and he had his roots in pre and post-Change corporate trade.

“If you’re aware of this, and I assume Mary is too, and her friends...” I spread my hands wide, saw his eyes flicker from one to the other. “Just get out your guns and stop him.”

“We’re trying to.” The stranger’s gun hand drooped slightly and a general look of weariness sank into his body. “And we will, if I can give evidence. I’m an operative in the City of Light Bureau. I came up through the Authority ranks. That’s where I met Mary. That’s where I met *you*.” He smirked again. His sharp teeth were close set. “And Mary has talked the City of Light District Attorney into convening the Grand Jury for hearings on vote rigging. And the D.A.’s on the level. They want to indict Oscar Del before the election. That’s where I’m supposed to give evidence.” He nodded to himself. “If *they* don’t get to me first.”

“And Mary can’t keep you safe?” I asked, gauging the man. He was looking like hot property—maybe too hot. Authority Operatives were the equivalent of pre-Change CIA Agents and federal gunplay was the most dangerous kind.

“I said I had operatives assigned to me. There were four.” His face went grim. “One of them was a traitor, killed the others. Almost got me.” He shook his head. “That’s why I’m not safe under Authority’s wing. The Prime can clip those feathers.”

“So Mary sent you here?” I considered pouring myself another drink, but realized I was just sobering up enough to remember some of the details.

“No...” Suddenly his gun went up. There was a noise in the hallway. I was going to tell him it was Elmo but the footsteps were going down the stairs. The door to the street closed with a bang. He tightened up again and continued. “She suggested you as a worst case scenario. No offence. And I came here right after my protection was eliminated.”

“You’re on the run,” I said needlessly.

“Running is the only place I’ll be safe.” Again a smirk—irony there. “I have to stay alive for two weeks. That’s when the Grand Jury convenes. Once it starts, we have a real chance to bring the Prime down before he sets up his throne.”

“In two weeks,” I grumbled, reaching out and pouring another drink. I offered the bottle to him, and he shook his head. “And there’s a big contract out on you.”

“Inside Authority and out.” This time his smirk turned into a smile as he studied my face. “Mary was right you know. It took a while at first, to figure out. The clown face, but your voice. Your mannerisms. It *is* you. She said you wouldn’t recognize me though.”

I studied his face. I remembered Mary trying to convince me I was someone she knew. I had no memory of another life. I shrugged and his smile widened.

“It makes sense.” He took a step away from the wall toward the desk. “Listen, there’s more. Something’s coming that’s going to make the Change look like a ride on a Merry-go-round. And I know the people involved. This whole thing, the Change, it’s just an introduction to the really bad stuff. They’ve got proof, evidence. And Oscar Del is orchestrating part of it. That’s why he wants to be Prime.” He wiped at a sheen of sweat on his brow. “But I can stop the Prime if I can get to the Grand Jury. Then we can come forward with the truth...the evidence. It might give us an edge, hell, it might even stop what’s coming down the pipe!”

“What’s coming down the pipe?” I stabbed out my cigarette feeling this man’s terror percolating in me.

It was hard to register what happened next, what happened first. It truly looked like his head exploded before the office window broke. But that would be impossible. It must have been a high caliber bullet, something an assassin would use—this was no gangland hit, no high-density lead bath that killed everything in the room. One minute he was poised to say something, and the next, half his face was gone, and a rusty mist of blood was falling on his shoulders, coloring his arms and hands as they fell lifeless at his sides. His gun dropped to the floor. His body slumped to its knees, the torso rigid held in place by useless body armor. The operative’s remaining eye blinked once and stared at nothing.

And I was on the floor ripping my gun free of my pink skipping rope belt. I rolled across the faded carpet and slammed my back against the wall beside the window.

There was another harsh clink and the Operative’s body took another hit. This one: on the right side of his chest just in front of the armpit. The impact was enough to push him over. His body hit the floor away from me and vomited blood.

I twisted around on my knees and cautiously slid up to the window frame. The buildings across from my offices were a rough mirror to my own. They were old brick heaps past renovating awaiting demolition, from two to four stories in height. Lots of windows, too many windows. I calculated the possible trajectory; it had to come directly—level or higher than my office.

I hissed and quickly peered out. My eye slid over the dull black windows across the street, nothing, reflections of streetlights, of my own window. The rain was still coming down, adding a gloss to the flat red bricks. None of the windows were open. I counted up two stories. Nothing, the building topped out at a crenellated wall. Steel or aluminum facing wrapped over it.

Lightning flashed, and I caught a shadow. Something man-sized and shaped standing on the roof. Dark overcoat, fedora slung low. From the stance, this shape was holding something up to his head, to his face, to his eye. Aiming.

Three more clinks, and my window exploded in a shower of glass.

I swung my gun up, and squeezed off a volley—knew it was too far for accuracy.

Another lightning flash. Nothing. The gunman was moving.

I crawled over to the doorway. Shifted my weight to my feet and braced my back against the frame away from the window.

I looked at the Operative's body then ran across the waiting room, plugged my head into my hat and threw myself down the stairs. In seconds I was hidden in the doorway that opened on the street. Rain splattered against the sidewalk and mist hung all over me.

I looked into the many hollow windows and recesses in the brick walls across the street. Any one of them could hide a hit man. He could have his sniper scope trained on my door.

But I had to do something. Someone who thought he could trust me just died in my office. And I had decided to take the case before the first bullet killed him.

### **Chapter 3**

I waited, wondering about my chances of catching a bullet halfway across the street. But decided to play it reckless. The assassin would have to be a hard-ass with a death wish to want more gunplay. Killing my client was the mission. It would be unprofessional to risk complications over a shot at a detective—unless I was on his list too. But he had no way of knowing if I had already called Authority. Of course, he didn't know if the operative had given me a lethal amount of information. Neither did I.

A bus turned the corner a block to the north and started bearing down the street. Its stained and dented body reminded me of an old toaster at a rummage sale. One of its headlights flickered. The backlit word "Crosstown" lurked under a yellowed sheet of plastic on the sign over the front window. I could just make out the driver through the grease-streaked windshield. Nothing more than a hunched and huddled form, dark, misshapen in low amber light—he would have looked more at home holding a pitchfork on a floating chunk of brimstone than in the driver's seat of a city bus. I took a deep breath as it drew near and bolted into the open. Heavy raindrops spattered off the asphalt and sent up a fine gray mist as I ran—obscured the street where my boots kicked it. I

sprinted up to the great groaning Greasetown Transit bus, and almost played it too recklessly—its rusted fender passed me so close I could kiss it.

I knew this neighborhood though, and bolted through the cloud of exhaust toward an alley across the street that split the row of buildings about fifty feet to the south. The alley divided the piles of decaying brick architecture for access to an open courtyard for parking that served apartments and businesses in the buildings that backed onto it. There was every chance that the assassin would just walk out the front door, but if the stakes were as high as my client said, I was dealing with a professional who would want to get in and get out without being seen. If he were good, there'd be no evidence linking him to whoever hired him—even though no one would ever get that close.

I ran to the corner of the building where the alley opened, and threw my back against the brick. I was dizzy. My vision swam until I drove an incisor into my tongue to steady it. My stomach was a burning dog that wanted to roll in the puddles. My lungs were old men working a bellows; my heart throbbed like a sick slug. I had to get to the gym. I couldn't do it all on whiskey and cigarettes. My supper jackknifed into a painful cramp. I bit down on three hard chunks of air, heaved my gun up and ran into the alley. It was twenty feet wide lit with sporadic flickering bulbs. Torrents of rain hurtled down, whipped the dirty pavement into a black froth. Heavy red brick glistened to both sides—loomed, disappeared in the blanket of rain overhead. Doorways opened at ten-yard intervals and windows, most of them boarded up, loomed over me suggesting secret death. The pavement was slick with rain and garbage. My boots slithered in the crap.

I was halfway down the alley, squinting into the gray—my vision obscured by rain, mist and darkness. Then I could just make out a shape—a mass in the mist. Something was waiting there hidden by a fog of rain. An engine grumbled powerfully—its muscular threat set my hair on end.

A pair of headlights torched the haze. A squat black car rocketed at me—its lights stabbing the darkness like a nightmare. There was no time to aim. The car was moving too fast. I squeezed off a few rounds. My bullets rang hollowly on the steel fenders—snapped against the windshield. I bolted toward a doorway cut back into the brick and jumped. The headlights blinded me. I felt a wave of pressurized air push at me when the car changed course—bellowed its turbocharged rage—its chromium teeth snapping at me, ripping the bricks.

There was a monstrous roar; a scream of steel and a shower of sparks that sprayed into the recess with me. Blinded me a second before black shadows descended.

And then my overcoat turned to iron. A giant grabbed my arms. He ripped them back. I was pulled off my feet—slammed hard against the bricks. Lights went off in my head—fireworks blazed—and my vision jumped, then blurred to gray. I took a deep breath, felt the world dropping out from under me. I heard a powerful car changing gears. Heard wide tires churn the rain to steam.

### *Transition.*

Something was wrong. This was different. My vision flickered between black and nothing. Normally when I was kicked out of Tommy by stress or struggle, I'd find myself floating impotently over him—unable to do more than watch and listen. I had to be dreaming. My vision resolved, still no sensations—maybe terror—but it seemed that high in the sky, cut loose of the earth, I was floating. It wasn't flying, no nothing as fun as that. And the second thing that struck me was the clarity of my vision. I could see water

droplets in the air. Almost, I wasn't positive, but there was even the chance I was picking up the tiny electric discharges from the approaching storm. That was a heavy black rolling blanket of cloud that built and piled from horizon to horizon and hung over my shoulders like the weight of the world. But the longer I looked around me, tried to gauge what was happening behind, I kept getting vibrant, almost violent tugs on my perception, like there was a hook in my chin and I was a kite. My gaze kept being yanked down, to the vast green forest that ran on and on to the sea. A galaxy of leaves, of every spectrum of green undulated and shook in the gusting wind—shimmered as they flipped and furled on slender branches. And as they spun and moved, I could see the heavy, hoary tree trunks drop out of that green canopy—charge away toward the ground at precipitous speeds. And as the trunks neared the earth they widened and spread out until they formed a million snaky roots like fingers that plunged into the wet black soil. The muck was churned into heaps and ridges where these tendrils twisted deep into the earth—where they dug for purchase, holding on against the wind that pulled at the leaves upon their upper reaches. These weren't normal winds. This was no approaching cloudburst. These were the winds of limbo pulling at the trees, shaking their boughs in a growing hell storm.

And the gargantuan trunks swayed like massive soldiers protecting the land beneath, and the shadowy winding paths—and the many little feet that tread them. And the storm picked up in ferocity and purpose and with its winds bent the trees from side to side, pushing them away to get a glimpse of what was so well protected. I could barely see any better: just glimpses of little twinkling fleshy forms; giggling of ever color running the paths; flickering, laughing and playing amid the shadowy trunks and roots. And there were other things silent, just misty forms among the ancient trunks, old bearded guardians watching. Then clouds pressed over me and silence fell, darkened the quieting forest as the last of the little shapes ran for shelter. And the light fell from the leaves, and darkness stained all. A sudden crack of lightning and thunder boomed, heavy as a casket lid; buffeted me then numbed my perceptions with the wet droning hiss of a downpour. The quiet patter of drops on broad green leaves soon filled the silence. A quiet calm embraced my mind until a hollow laugh ringing like a knife-edge broke the spell.

## Chapter 4

The darkness flickered around me. Lightning. I was in the shadow. Beneath me where I floated, I saw a shape, a form, a man: Tommy. Just outside the doorway, the rain clattered in the alley. Thunder boomed ominously.

The car must have caught the trailing edge of my overcoat. Luckily, the rain-rotted fabric was ripped to pieces before I was. Blood was trickling down the back of the clown's head, coloring the gray collar of his coverall. He was breathing though. I could see his chest moving through the torn material. He was resting with his back against the wall, his legs splayed in a thick carpet of cigarette butts, condoms and syringes.

I was floating in the space at the top of the doorway. The shadows were varied and dark, hid spiders, and secrets. Fifty years after the Change, a Greasetown alleyway, especially a recessed doorway like this had seen too much to take any interest in these

developments. This pile of bricks had seen worse. A detective narrowly missing being torn to pieces did not impress it. No. This doorway had seen it all.

Tommy groaned beneath me and I attempted repossession but ran into a wall of fury and pain. I'd have to wait. He wasn't in the mood. The clown muttered something obscene and then coughed. His hand climbed up his chest and gripped his head—the fingers tapped gingerly through the bloody hair. He muttered something else, and slowly got to his feet. I could see the energetic motes that described Tommy's mental state. It appeared to me at times like a miniature highway on his skull, busy with tiny headlights. But this was anger, and I couldn't get past that either. I'd bide my time. He had to have his little cry.

Tommy looked around, rubbing blood off his hands where the remains of his shredded overcoat tangled at his knees. "Who in?" he said, his voice was weak. He looked out into the night. "Where?" He shook his head and muttered another obscenity. Must have hurt. He found my fedora and gun in the refuse at his feet. He picked them up, slipped the gun away and jammed the hat on before staggering out into the rain, one hand protectively hovering over his head.

I was drawn along after him—my insubstantial form moving through the rain with frightening speed. I had to stay focused on Tommy—or risk getting overwhelmed by all that space around me. The rain didn't help. It went through me, confused my edges. I struggled to keep the anxiety at bay. I had the distinct impression that the downpour was trying to wash me away.

Tommy picked up speed. I could see the panic subsiding in his mind. He was resilient, sheltered by his madness. He didn't remember much of what happened when I was in possession, and must have considered himself almost or wholly insane. But he didn't waste time trying to understand it. Thinking about it just created more questions than answers. So he usually just dusted himself off, clutched a boatload of anger to his chest and reached out for a drink and a cigarette. He was headed back to the office. I was pulled along after him linked by whatever strange energy connected us.

The Chrysler was parked in front of the building. Elmo was home. That was good. I was going to need his help. I was always going to need his help. Even though my partner was a dead man, he was the one consistent part of my existence that anchored me. Kept me from spiraling out of control with my insane host's whimsy.

Tommy stumbled up the front stairs and then shouldered the door out of the way. He staggered up the main stairway to my second floor office. I was pulled along; watching like it was a dream.

He opened the front door, and walked carelessly across the waiting room. I knew he was thinking about whiskey and cigarettes. Tommy wanted to make his pain go away. I was going to help him in a minute, inherit the whole thing when I got a chance to take control.

I saw Elmo's parcels dropped in the doorway to my office. And I could just see the operative's dead legs lying on the bloodstained carpet. Tommy casually glanced at the operative and the parcels, and then his eyes darted to the whiskey bottle on my desk. He knew he'd need a drink to deal with the things he was seeing.

The clown took two steps in and was careening around the Operative's legs when Elmo's voice said: "Boss? You all right?"

From my vantage point, I could see where Elmo had taken up a defensive position in the corner by the window. His .38 was out, but he tipped it up when Tommy glanced at him. The clown's eyes snapped back to the open bottle. He snatched it up and took three long pulls. I could see his mental activity relaxing. Each swallow drew him down from the heights. Then he looked over at Elmo. "You have any smokes?" My dead partner looked at him eyes wide, mouth dropped open.

Tommy gazed at the shattered window, and then he remembered the dead man on the floor. He regarded the body for a second before looking back at Elmo. "What the hell did you do?" Fresh blood trickled past his eyebrows and mingled with the face paint.

"N-nothing, Boss," Elmo said, slipping the .38 into his shoulder holster. My partner's dead lips and tongue stuttered when he was nervous. "I thought it w-was you."

Tommy walked around the desk and knelt by the body. "Is he dead?"

"He's real d-dead." Elmo shook his head. I could see the incredulous look on his features. He was pretty sure Tommy was involved. "Someone sh-shot his head, and he took another b-bullet in the chest, maybe more." He pointed at the window. "A-and the bullets c-came in there." He pointed to the wall opposite. "And a f-f-few is stuck in the lath." I could see the bullet holes under a faded reproduction of ballerinas getting ready for the big show. It was a pastel. It came with the office.

"Well," Tommy stood up, staggered to the desk. He snatched up the office bottle and took a big slug. "What the hell happened?" He looked down at the desk. The glass there. Nothing more.

"You w-weren't here?" Elmo's instincts were wide-awake.

"No," Tommy said, shaking his head uncertainly, "I was...in the alley." He just remembered waking up in the alleyway with a cracked skull. Not the first time for that. He liked to drink and was well acquainted with blackouts. "In the alley," he repeated, then snatched at his mangled overcoat and lifted tattered wings of material out to either side. Elmo shook his head.

I decided it was time to take control. Looking down from the ceiling into the back of Tommy's skull, I saw the little flickering lights of his pleasure center—activated now by the whiskey and the feel of the bottle in his hand. I intensified this nervous activity with an idea about a blonde woman and a fire hose. I used the bottle as a physical cue. The clown's eyes glazed.

*Transition.*

I was grinning stupidly and looking at the whiskey bottle in my hand. Suddenly all the sensations of life came flooding back to me: the after burn of whiskey in my throat and its faint aroma, the growing smell of death—coppery and visceral, the tang of Elmo's cologne, and the sudden detonation of pain. My head rang like a broken bell. I gasped, brain grating and grabbed the desk for support. *BANG!* A deep throb that felt like cranial arteries bursting. *BANG!* A knife of fire pried between my vertebrae. I said something like: "Sh-shag-guh!" And I dropped to one knee; my hands pushed against my face to keep it from falling off.

A blinding second flashed. I flinched when Elmo's dark hands gently touched my shoulders. I saw concern flickering over his face as he smoothed the shredded fabric. I grimaced—frozen features of pain—and whimpered.

"You're hurt, Boss!" He softly coaxed me to my feet.

But I shrugged his hands off—teeth locked—and climbed up the side of the desk. “Thanks Elmo,” I growled, reaching out and turning the whiskey bottle up. I didn’t stop drinking until my face was burning. There were no complaints from Tommy. I had no idea where his psyche hid during possessions—and I didn’t care. He was probably just as glad to let me take over. Get through the painful part of the healing. “I’m fine.” I turned to my partner—my double vision resolving into one and a half. Elmo’s eyes glistened; the lids went slack as he studied my face.

“What h-happened?” he asked. *Throb.* Elmo could see that something had changed in his boss. We were partners. *Throb.* We’d been in business long enough for him to know that his boss’ moments of amnesia were usually followed with sudden calm certainty. *Throb.* I don’t know why he put up with it. Maybe I did something for him. *Throb.* Kept death interesting. *Throb.* I took another drink.

“That guy,” I explained, gesturing to the body on the floor, “is an Authority Operative. Works at the City of Light Bureau.”

Elmo’s eyes closed painfully. He turned to the dead man’s body. “A F-f-federal Op?” His head followed the line of the blood spray, and then swung back to me. “Who—who killed him?” he stammered, fearful that *I* had done it.

“Somebody out there.” I walked over to the window, keeping most of my body hidden by the wall. The new infusion of whiskey was giving me strength, masking the pain in my head and shoulders. “Across the street. An assassin—had to be.” Elmo was beside me now. He peered hesitantly out into the rain.

“Why’d they k-kill him?” Elmo craned his head into the rain, steadied himself with a hand on my arm.

“He knew something.” I patted my pockets for cigarettes. Elmo produced his pack. I noticed his shoulder had moved past the edge of the window frame so I pulled him behind the protective wall. “And I agreed to take the job before the bullets started flying.”

Elmo held a match to my cigarette and then he lit his own. The low amber light played off his dark features. For a second I imagined us as ancient cavemen sheltering from the terrors of the world. The rain continued to pound down on the street.

“He *had* information that he believed could take down the Prime and most of Authority,” I said. Elmo’s glance turned out into the night again. Something thumped behind us on the floor. There was a low moan. My client was just coming out of Blacktime. “I guess we’ll find out if he still has it.”

## Chapter 5

The operative’s first steps into his afterlife were sickening to watch. Blacktime was the state between life and death that came with the Change. Those who experienced it described it as such: a ‘black’ time devoid of memory and sensation. The resurrected individual would come out of it dead. No heart beat, with varied degrees of physical sensation, and would begin to degrade if he didn’t take preventative measures. Suddenly you could spend your own life insurance money so there was a whole industry grown up around preservative treatments for dead flesh. The funeral business saw a market open up and took the lead on that one.

It was impossible to predict how much of the individual's mind would return. Many came back as themselves, though dead. Psychological problems often rose soon after that. Being dead was a shock to anyone who experienced it. How much of one's character remained depended upon the amount of brain that was left. All dead tissue was reanimated by whatever force was affecting the world. It's true, sirloin steaks moved, so did severed limbs. Undead tissue would reanimate, regardless of a controlling cerebral mass...the Landfills were a joy to watch because of that.

But many individuals would rise from the dead and attempt to pick up where he or she left off. Not an easy thing to do when taking into account the rabid necrophobia that overcame the living population after the resurrection started in the months following the Change. Dead wounds wouldn't heal. No rebirth was involved. You came back however you went to your grave. Not always pretty. And those who were buried before the Change came back too, if they hadn't been whittled into dust by worms and time. They were a scary bunch. And Blacktime after the Change, the actual length of it, varied from person to person.

So the operative spent some awkward moments moaning and thrashing in the congealing puddle of his blood and brains. The assassin's first bullet went right through the operative's skull—really did a job. It was anyone's guess who we were about to meet.

I struggled with the scene, shouldering some of the blame. The booze had made me reckless. *I* was reckless. When I came back to the office and failed to notice the light was off when I'd left it on, that gave the operative the drop on me. And I left it on after, even as he talked about being a hunted man. I didn't even turn the steel shade down toward the desk. That light, the shadows, gave the assassin time to orient, prepare his shot—cost my client his life. And I could see he was going to pay a lot more than that.

Elmo and I watched the grisly spectacle like we were in a trance but snapped out of it when the operative's movements began splattering blood all over the room. We hurried around the desk and grabbed his smeared and sticky arms and pulled him upright. A thick gout of red and gray spilled out of his shattered skull and poured over Elmo's arms. The operative moaned again. Now blood poured out of his mouth, and a few teeth tiddlywinked across the carpet. We pulled him over to a wooden straight-backed chair—pushed it against the wall. Elmo winced with disgust at what had just happened to his suit, but held the Operative upright.

The bullet wound in his chest, though ugly, was not causing much trouble, other than a wet sucking noise that happened every time the Operative tried to breathe. He was dead when that bullet went into him, clearly breaking ribs and pulverizing tissue inside. But there was no arterial flow left when the chunk of lead did its work.

His head was another matter. The bullet that killed him had split his skull across the top from temple to temple and made a real mess where it exited about an inch behind his left eye. That socket had burst outward—bone and flesh oozed from rips in the skin—a path of least resistance for an ejecta porridge of pulped eye and gray matter. This substance had flowed down the front of his suit like lava after the shot, and some of it still dripped from his chin with sickening smacking sounds. There was lots of it on the floor too. Not good news for someone coming back from the dead.

The Operative groaned. More blood flowed out of his mouth. The bullet must have made a mess of his sinus cavity too. His remaining eye looked around, and blinked. There

was no anxiety in it, only confusion. I was already hoping that there would not be enough left of him to understand what had happened.

Elmo looked at me. His expression was building toward panic. I couldn't blame him.

"I have a plan," I reassured him, holding my hands out, and letting gore drip on the floor. "But we have to get him cleaned up first."

"C-c-clean him up, Boss?" Elmo's look was stretching to madness. "Clean him up?"

"We have to get him ready to travel." My plan was still in its early stages. I was nauseous. The air was full of blood. A tang of vomit played around my molars. I was angry too. Looking at my client's ruined skull had me clenching my teeth and fists. I still didn't recognize the guy, but he said he knew me. And if he was a friend of Mary Redding's...

"We have to get out of here!" I whipped my hands toward the floor and more gray tissue spattered on the carpet. "He wanted me to protect him."

Elmo shook his head, trying deftly to avoid more blood and gore that poured out of the operative's mouth.

I looked around the office. "Do we have any paper towels?"

## Chapter 6

We cleaned up fast with a bucket, mop and towels from the corridor washroom that was shared among the other offices in the building—all vacant except for a dentist at the end of the hall. He was either out, or enjoying a little downtime with his nitrous oxide bottle. By the time we finished a pair of big garbage bags was bulging with bloody towels, paper napkins and toilet paper. We pulled up a large blood and brain-soaked, roughly rectangular section of carpet in front of my desk and rolled most of the gore into it. I slashed it free with a penknife. We tucked away any of the long twisted fibers and hoped that it would look like a half-assed renovation and not a compromised crime scene. It was the sort of thing that wouldn't stand out. People were used to worse in Greasetown where everything was done half-assed. We worked quickly; worried that someone had heard the gunfire and racket and called Authority. But it was a bad neighborhood. Gunfire was as common as rain. So far, there were no interruptions. The broken window would have to wait. I knew the landlord wouldn't care if it didn't cost him anything.

During the operation, we walked the still-dripping operative into the waiting room and I bound him to the wooden chair with some duct tape. He wasn't really trying to do more than look around with his remaining eye, and was occasionally vocalizing random sounds, but I didn't want him tracking any more of his mess around if he did get ambitious and start walking on his own.

When we turned to him, I realized the operative presented more of a problem. I was beginning to hatch a plan, but he wasn't going to be much help. I already felt responsible for him. I had provided an easy target for his killer. If I were thinking fast I would have kept him away from the windows. But if my plan was going to work, he had to look like he could give evidence. It was the least I could do, considering. And he was a mess.

After removing and bagging his bloody clothing, we used another couple rolls of paper towel to clean him up as best we could. Elmo used a bottle of Lysol he found in the washroom. It was smelly and caustic, but as he put it: "It ain't what we should use on d-

dead skin, but we don't want him smelling and he's already gonna be leaking with all the holes in him." Elmo was referring to the many products on the market that dead men and women used to keep fresh and deter rot in any of the forms that remained. The majority of bacteria had died out with the Change. Certain yeasts remained that worked in the fermentation of alcohol—there is a God, but the traditional causes for decomposition had gone the way of the stay-at-home mom. Of course there were still mildews, fungi and various burrowing insects to contend with but the dead could stave off disintegration with a daily regime of strong body cleaners. Most of those products were scented so dead people tended to smell like the inside of a brand new portable toilet.

The wound in the operative's chest was easily closed with duct tape. The ribs were broken inward, so they were no problem. The tape would keep most of the fluids from leaking out, and if we kept him upright they'd pool low in his body cavity. But his head was a different story. It required time and jigsaw puzzle skills to clamp his skull into a shape that was almost natural. We tried to match the lesser-damaged entry wound side of his skull. The missing eye would be easy to cover with a patch and sunglasses. The bulk of his face was relatively undamaged, once we pushed and prodded the pieces of broken bone back under the skin. He watched us the whole time with his remaining eye. It glistened, but held no more human emotion than empty curiosity. And the dead didn't always feel pain. It was different for all of them; many reporting varied degrees of sensation, flavors of food, sensation of touch, and phantom hunger pangs. But pain was a sporadic sensation to them if it was available at all—lucky for the operative.

I decided we could cover the duct tape repairs with bandages from our First Aid kit and cook up some story about him coming fresh from surgery. Hell, that would only be required for the public anyway. Whoever had shot him would know his target was injured—he had watched the whole thing through a sniper scope—and would also expect his target, if he survived, to disguise his appearance.

I was beginning to doubt that the operative's mind would return. There was a massive amount of brain damage so we'd have to do the talking for him. He was still slow to show any signs of higher consciousness. Good partner that he was, Elmo helped with the clean up and even provided one of his old suits to our dead client. It looked small on the operative's long, lean form, and the trouser cuffs fell far short of his ankles. But I knew my partner deserved some answers. He was just waiting for me to break the news. In time. In time. The operative would be worth more to me if he appeared to have survived the attack. He was no good to anyone dead. The courts did not accept the testimony of the dead. At least, they took it with a grain of salt, since no one knew why the dead were walking around in the first place. Their motivations were suspect.

Near the end of our labors, as the operative was looking more like a wounded man than a dead one, he started to groan from time to time. Nothing mournful or sad, just low animal noises as his dead lungs worked reflexively and blew air over dead vocal cords. We'd have to watch that when we got moving. That would be hard to explain. Of course, as long as the assassin didn't know, my client could still move among the public as a living man with brain damage.

I wasn't sure how much of him we'd get back in the end. Most of his brain was blown away. But the Change, whatever, was unpredictable. If we could keep what was left in one piece, more of him might yet return. He took orders well though, and once we cut him loose he stayed where he was put.

We went through the pockets of his demolished clothing before we jammed them into the garbage. The only thing in his wallet was a plastic card with a metallic strip across the back. It was dark Authority Blue and bore no name or numbers. It was a key card. Computers didn't work well since the Change, but simple things like magnetic locks and coding were still fairly dependable, especially in Authority where the research was ongoing to figure out the problems with technology.

There was a ton of information on computer hard drives and memory cards that could no longer be accessed. And just before the Change people were more likely to do a computer backup file than print a hard copy. Now, trillions of bytes of information were locked up in silicon. Banks were leading the charge to find a way to open them. They needed to access their records to get access to their money. All over the planet, the financial world was in a deadlock. Oh, they still had money, anything they could prove on paper or base on gold reserves and valuables. But the majority of their wealth was in electronically calculated and stored stocks.

The key card was something. It was the kind of identification that an operative would have. It added some veracity to his story, but I had to be careful. The situation called for a screaming fit but demanded a logical response. I had to keep cool. The card could just signify an Authority connection. His story could still be a pack of lies.

Inside his jacket pocket was a thick manila envelope folded up around a wad of bills. There was at least twenty thousand in cash. That was a bit of corroborating evidence too. A man on the run would need a stake to hide with. The bigger the trouble—the bigger the stake. My first thought was to go out and drink myself silly. I'm sure I felt Tommy's id echo the sentiment from wherever he prowled during possessions. He'd never seen that much money in one hand. Neither had I. *Buy a few rounds*, floated up from the depths...but I knew that the cash would be worthless to me if the assassin came back to check his work. I decided to use it to bankroll the expedition. The operative had brought some of it to purchase my services. I could spend that with a clear conscience. One look at his ill-fitting suit made me decide to spend some of it on a better disguise for him. If all went well, the rest of it could go into Afterdeath treatments for the poor bastard. If enough of him ever returned that cared. Or, I could delay longer and make the enterprise so dangerous that I'd earn all twenty thousand.

I had to talk to Elmo. He was a stickler for protocol and cleaning up evidence of murder was rubbing him raw. So I gave him my version of events, and then explained my plan. As much as I'd made up at that point, anyway.

"So, we're going to pretend he's alive," Elmo said, watching our new corpse client gazed blankly around the room with his single eye.

"Yep," I grumbled, wiping blood off my hands with a rag. "You know that evidence of the dead is taken as hearsay in court." People didn't understand the Change well enough to give the dead full human rights or respect. "And at that we'll have to dig up evidence of our own to support anything he might be able to say. If he ever can." I looked at the agent dismally. He was squeezing his knees with numb hands. "But if people think he's alive, the possibility might give the D.A. leverage and it might flush the assassin out to finish the job."

"Why, Boss?" Elmo ground his teeth. He was a businessman too. And he could see our chances of profiting from this strange enterprise were next to nil. "We don't know w-

what evidence he had.” He gestured to the dead man. “And he won’t like-likely have the information now anyway.”

“I know,” I mumbled, drying my hands on my coverall and catching my reflection in Elmo’s flat dead eyes. “But he came to *me* for protection, and someone killed him after I’d agreed to take the job.”

“Right,” said Elmo defeated. “That’s different.” My partner was a stickler for honor too.

“And I want to get the son of a bitch who shot my client in my own office,” I growled flicking ash, groaning over the tortured muscles in my shoulders.

“So what do we do?” Elmo rose, patting dust off his knees and studying our dead client.

“He said he was going to give evidence in two weeks. And he mentioned a name I trust in Authority.” I walked to the window certain it was safe—at least from the last assassin.

“We have to hide him somewhere.” I crossed to my desk, decided to forego a glass and took a barefaced snort from my office bottle. My guts jumped, and I would have pitched the drink if it weren’t whiskey. “We have to get him out of here. And then I’ll make a call. And we’ll keep our eyes peeled for the hit man.”

We couldn’t go south. That would put us close to Vicetown, and that was flush with gangsters. I knew the assassin would be connected there. West took us to the lawless countryside, which presented a similar problem. East was the Old Atlantic, which left us traveling north. The most dangerous part of my plan was catching a train to Old Canada when we got to the City of Light. We’d find out how hot our client was then. All of his trouble came from the City—and if they were still looking for him, that was where we’d pick up a very dangerous tail. At least we could confirm that it was there. And we’d find out if it was desperate enough to risk an open gun battle.

## Chapter 7

I had a gut sense, something churning, that we had to get moving. We’d already delayed long enough. The feeling was there through the cleanup but a biting urgency came on all the sudden. We still paused for a quick wash at the sink, and Elmo slipped into a clean suit. After I’d changed and given my clown face a quick touchup, I balled up a fresh coverall and underwear and socks and threw them into a bag with my makeup kit. I looked at my overcoat, trailing long strips of cloth from where the car bit it. I tossed it into the bottom of the closet in the waiting room where I kept my clothes—coveralls on wooden hangers, extra socks and underwear on the shelf. Quite different from Elmo’s set up. He kept his suits zipped up in dry cleaner bags—used his savings to keep his wardrobe presentable. It must have twisted his gut to have to travel with my ragtag little sideshow. I grabbed my extra overcoat from the rack beside the office door. This one was thicker, a tighter weave of black wool that I kept for cold days. It was in slightly better shape than the coat I’d just served to the moths. I checked my .44 and packed a couple boxes of bullets I could feed the extra clips. I liked to keep a full one handy. And I slid an extra gun, a .38 into my boot. Elmo filed away a box of bullets and a speed loader for his snub-nose.

We coaxed our dead client down to the street and into the car. I left Elmo watching him while I lugged the bags of bloody evidence behind the building and chucked them into the Dumpster. It was Greasetown. Anything that was nasty enough to end up in a Dumpster was not wanted by anyone. Hobos wouldn't even touch the stuff.

When I got back to the car, Elmo swung out of the back seat and took up his position behind the wheel. I saw that he had belted the operative into the seat directly behind his. That way I could keep an eye on him.

"Did he tell you his n-name?" Elmo asked without looking at me.

"We didn't get that far." I took a look into the back seat. The dead man's single eye regarded me blankly. I looked past him. Cars and trucks were parked sporadically along the curbs. No engines idling.

"Does-doesn't seem right." Elmo started the car, gunned the engine. "We got to call him something."

I watched Elmo, could see the strain on his dead features. I watched the street behind us. We were still alone. "You're right." I pondered that as the Chrysler pulled away from the curb and found its way to Main Street. After that we'd grab the Greasetown Station Road. That would take us to where the highway pierced the inland wall. "Magnet..."

"Magnet?" Elmo stopped for a set of lights. All of them were flashing yellow. A steady drizzle was polishing the pavement. I saw him study the rearview mirrors. He didn't want company either. "Magnet," he repeated.

I smiled. "He's going to attract a lot of iron."

Elmo grinned weakly before his face tightened up. He didn't always appreciate my humor. "S-so, but..." He drove the Chrysler through the intersection. We both went quiet when we passed a long black Authority squad car parked in front of a tattered office building. A couple of hookers leaned in talking to the Enforcers. Money was changing hands. "But, so..." Elmo continued, "We call him *Mister Magnet*? Or what's the plan?"

"Yeah," I said, glanced quickly back at the operative and the empty street behind us, and then I turned searching for a cigarette.

"Cause, we should work that out," Elmo continued, stuttering with his dead mouth. "In-in case people ask us."

"Sure, Mr. Magnet, if they ask..." I lit my cigarette.

"But don't that me-mean he has a first name too?" My partner looked at me. "I mean, doesn't it?"

"No," I said. "Yes, well, look Elmo, we'll just call him *Magnet*, okay."

Elmo shook his head; let his hands play over the wheel as he turned the car onto Station Road. He muttered something.

"What?" I had a neurotic moment and attacked my pockets until I found the wad of Magnet's cash.

"Just that it d-don't—doesn't—make sense," Elmo stuttered, took his own cigarettes out, and gingerly lit one with his free hand. "If pe-people ask and he doesn't—don't have a first name."

"Look, Elmo." I swung an arm up on the bench seat, turning to him. "If they're asking us that, we're already in trouble, okay?"

"Oh," Elmo said and nodded. "I guess that's true."

I kept an eye peeled for tails as we made our way across Greasetown. So far we were lucky. We had a six-hour drive to the City of Light ahead of us, and it was clear to me

that if the assassin were curious, he'd be keeping an eye out for the Chrysler, and me. It was possible that he thought he'd already killed me in the alleyway. But a true professional would be looking for his target's body. Maybe take a picture, or grab some other trophy so he could collect on the kill. If he'd returned to the neighborhood when Elmo and I were cleaning up, he'd have seen the office lights. We weren't being very secretive about it. And that might have made him think we were waiting for Authority. That would be too hot for him.

But I had expected to pick up a tail by this time. Unless he was that good. It was possible he was so confident in his killing skills that he didn't doubt the results. Still, that much professionalism demanded professionalism. He'd want some kind of proof that he'd killed his mark.

Remarkably, we passed through Greasetown and up to the open northern gate in the 30-foot tall inland border wall without any sign of trouble. I started to think we'd run into some on the highway. That was going to be risky. Elmo was no slouch when it came to driving, and I still had my cannon to answer questions with. We'd been in tight spots before. Then it started to make sense to me. The assassin would lie low until he saw us leave our building. He'd see three of us walk out. One, Mr. Magnet, looking wounded at the very least. He'd watch us climb into the car and head north. I had an image then of the assassin behind our building cutting the garbage bags open. That might be proof enough for him. There was brain tissue in them for Christ's sake.

And yet, we'd already created enough doubt for him. He'd be curious. That had to be frustrating for assassins after the Change. You couldn't just rely on a cause and effect relationship. Because the dead rose from the, well, dead...it was impossible to tell, from a distance anyway whether a hit was successful or not. I'd heard about other hit men, other assassins, who collected heads, hearts, you name it. They needed concrete proof to turn in to employers on payday.

The Chrysler roared through the gates of the inland wall. There was an Authority guard station there, but nobody gave a damn who left Greasetown or who entered it. The gates were always open. They were only in place in case of emergency or disaster.

It was raining as Elmo set a course along the elevated highway toward the City of Light. The road was in bad condition. There were debates about who was responsible for upkeep, so that left it in the hands of nervous road crews who didn't care, so they did a half-assed job. The northern highway had numerous turnoffs and fortified rest stops and motels. The City of Light was the only real destination to the north. There were some small coastal cities with numerous turnoffs, and military bases and the like. But most of the remaining settlements were girded with stout concrete walls on three sides and bounded in by the Old Atlantic on the fourth.

There were abandoned and derelict towns and villages along the way, but they like much of the countryside had been left to the wicked and the dead. It was safer in fortified cities by the sea. After the Change came and dead riots followed, the walking dead who wouldn't play along with the survivors either disappeared in the hands of Authority or were relocated or chased out into the abandoned towns and countryside. The dead were free to live in towns and cities where they living made their homes; hell they were relatives to some. But there were rules they had to follow. Greasetown had neighborhoods they were welcome and places they were not. As I understood it, the entire ground level of the City of the Light had been given over to them.

An hour into the trip and my guts were stinging over the medicinal shots of Canadian Club I'd been taking. My eyes were burning on cigarette smoke. My right shoulder was soaked every time I opened a window for air so I started cranking it down every three cigarettes. And it was slow going. Elmo was cautious at the best of times, but out on the highway moving through all that countryside his driving became a jerky and jaw-clenching ordeal. I couldn't blame him. We'd gotten in trouble out here before. Elmo had one shot of whiskey, but contented himself with cigarettes. We didn't talk much. I knew why. The gruesome scene we'd just participated in kept replaying in our minds.

Maybe it was the quiet—maybe there was a glimmer of him left that felt the awkward silence; but it was during this period that Mr. Magnet put together a couple of strings of words. Usually nonsensical, barely intelligible at first, but his language evolved into strange slogans like “Triple levels of velvet fur,” he might say; or “oil those hens before infection, damn God it.”

I looked at Elmo, who was not smiling, but seemed a degree or two less tense.

It was promising, if nothing else. Check that. Even if it was nothing else, I knew we might be able to scare the guilty parties into making a mistake—as long as Mr. Magnet appeared to be alive and willing to give evidence. If he remained a wild card, the other players might start to bluff, or even better, the most neurotic among them might be induced to turn on the others. And if Magnet's story was true, the stakes were high. It was a long shot, but it was something. I just had to make sure my bluff didn't put me in the operative's condition.

I fell asleep and started to dream. I saw rain spatter on the surface of the ocean. White flashes against an iron gray rolling carpet—sparkling spray that concussed with momentary impact craters as fragile as glass, appearing and dropping away to nothing, only to be created again a second later. They kicked up silver bowls that wet my cheeks. The water was up to my neck and my heart was laboring against the cold. My breath came in a painful shiver. I heard the word: *Joe*.

I opened my eyes. I was still in Tommy's body. I wiped at some drool and stared blankly around. Elmo was looking at me, his features eerie in the dashboard light.

“Joe,” Elmo repeated.

I shook my head and adjusted myself on the seat. I'd been slowly sinking toward my partner. My neck and back ached like hell—my head thumped as it detoxified. We hit a rise on the elevated highway that gave us the first distant brief glimpse of our destination. It was a mammoth black mountain of steel and concrete freckled with lights.

“Joe?” I muttered sleepily.

“Yeah,” Elmo's said smiling. His face glowed red as he drew in on his hundredth cigarette. “I'm go-going to call him Joe. Joe Magnet.” His chuckle sounded like dry leaves. “It's got a got a good sound to it.”

I grunted my agreement, jamming a hand under my seat for the bottle of scotch I'd hid there. The long cold body had a reassuring feel. I pulled the cap off, lifted it to my mouth and paused. “Joe Magnet it is.”

## Chapter 8

It looked like the rain was washing the inky black out of the sky as we drew nearer the City of Light. The sun was coming up out there somewhere—hidden from view. The clouds were thick and low. I knew that a dull gray was all we'd see in way of daylight. That's the best we would get. And by the constant dabble our windshield wipers tossed aside; I knew we wouldn't get a break from the rain.

But as the new dull light came on, angling in over the waves it gave us a view of the City of Light. The name was ridiculous. What rose up in massive sheets, in curving gigantic layers of protective concrete and steel had nothing to do with light. It should have been called the City of Weight, or the City of Heaviness—the City of Big and Ugly.

It looked like a god-sized beetle kneeling at the ocean to drink. All words for bigger than big were understatements around this monster. This thing held millions of people. Held them and kept them safe and confined under overlapping layers of reinforced concrete. Protected them, housed them head to foot: one metropolis growing out of the back of another. Four Levels now, including Zero. That's what people called the ground level—the one that was snuggled up to mother earth. Zero. The level they'd abandoned to the dead. Zero. This level was where the first people looking for refuge came after their island city drowned in the rising sea levels of the Change. Zero swelled and grew until it was dangerously overpopulated. But by then the inland was screaming with the damned and dispossessed. The first inland wall was built and as the population of living came out of the countryside begging for help they were admitted, but there was no place for them to live.

So the first level was built over top of zero on gargantuan legs of stone and steel. This thing slowly took shape, soaring over the first neighborhoods and was populated as quickly as it was constructed. And no sooner was that finished than it overpopulated. It was a big countryside, and the smaller cities and towns were giving up their survivors who came looking for safety and hope. And so a second level was started—people moving in as it was constructed, and after that came the third. A fourth level was being erected over that.

The designers and architects, having started this vertical craze were now extending buildings that had their basements on Zero and One—reinforcing and coaxing these towers and structures into ever higher and more mammoth beasts many piercing all of the levels that flew over them. And to move that population from place to place they built the Skyways. Wild careening ribbons of blacktop that ascended and descended from one level to the next at hair-raising angles and pitch. And these Skyways interconnected and wove together to form spiderwebs of transport that hugged the underside of the levels above swooping down at intervals to collect and deposit their traffic on the levels below.

It was a City of Madness.

And each level formed a roof for the level below, and the constant rain was collected in enormous gutters and sluices and was channeled at horrific speed toward the shoreline where it frothed and boiled volcanically at the breakers or roared toward turbines in the many generating stations needed to power the City of Light.

And they needed power for the lights because the City was so dark.

Over the whole thing, like a collection of retractable stadium roofs were gargantuan sheets of vinyl and aluminum held in place by cables and pulleys. This thing, gray by construction and blackened by age and pollution, was positioned in pieces over the City's growing Level Four to allow continuous construction on buildings that would never be

finished for a population that would never stop growing. They called this cover the carapace. Some bespectacled wag, some wiseguy with a book on entomology had cooked it up, when the designers sat back and had their first look. It hung and glistened on the bony spurs of concrete and massive superstructures. Tarps and temporary covers vibrated in the rain and flapped in the violent ocean winds like wings.

The City of the Bug.

And there centered for all to see, ripping its way through all four levels of the City was the spine or stump of Archangel Tower. This massive structure poked upward through the sheets of concrete and steel. Rose relentlessly skyward attached by roads and entryways to the levels through which it passed. The Tower was not finished, nor would it be for decades to come. Its designers planned for it to pierce the permanent cloud cover—become a platform from which people could see the sun again. But even now, unadorned and incomplete, this god of all office buildings was impressive to see. The brainchild of a minister born again after the Change, it was a testimony to two things: Fear and fear. This man, Stoneworthy, had convinced representatives of the worlds religions with flocks gathered in the City of Light that the only response to the Change was for the faithful of whatever faith, to pool their resources. The Change had knocked the wind out of most religious sails, and it was a safe bet that the other religions were open to discussion. Archangel Tower, that was its Christian name, was going to be a meeting place for the holiest of the holy: for the believers who believed despite the Change, or who started to believe because of it.

The Change fit handily into most crackpot religious views of doomsday and Armageddon. They just didn't know if it was the end or beginning of something. Who did? Fear had united old foes and competitors.

Even Islam had toned down its rhetoric and the most fundamental of its satellites had come in toward the center. The Change had taken all the fun out of suicide bombing. One or two lucky jihadists coming out of Blacktime—mangled screaming in pain instead of enjoying the pleasure of a thousand virgins tarnished the whole idea of paradise as a reward. It seemed there was no longer any way off the planet. The doors to Heaven were closed. The ensuing anger ate the fascist leaders alive. In the following carnage, the long-silent moderates found their voice. And Stoneworthy was waiting to talk. There were still suicide bombers, but these ones did it for recreation.

And there it was: Archangel Tower, centerpiece for the City of Fear.

Looking at it now, I started to realize how optimistic my plan was. I had been kicking the idea around of delivering Magnet to Mary Redding. I had to admit that she would have a better chance of protecting him than I did. It was just two dangerous weeks before the Grand Jury was convened. But looking at the massive city and imagining the mental buzz of its millions, I could understand how difficult it would be to maintain some bastion of law and order amid that anonymous mob. How easy it would be for corruption to thrive in such an oppressive metropolis.

My best bet would be to take Magnet north. On a train it would be a clown with a gun versus an assassin with a gun. Out on the more isolated northern highway, we could be overwhelmed very easily. On the train, at least it meant a fair fight. This trip into the City was going to answer a lot of questions, and it was the riskiest and dumbest part of my plan. Of course, this was Magnet's home turf, and there was a good chance that there

would be heat burning all over the City for him. The City was the Prime's home too. Pure or not, how could Mary ever hope to fight his power.

We took the Level One Skyway ramp through the City's mammoth southern gates cut in its fifty-foot outer wall. There were other entrances, but those would be controlled. Authority didn't care so much about who came and went from the City's lowest levels. And we had no interest in sightseeing. My plan was to dump the Chrysler and catch a train north. There was still passenger service since there were still northern cities—outposts really, grown up at the edges of dead and abandoned towns. They were recyclers harvesting raw materials for the City from her dead sisters. And there were places, north of Yorktown, the last major city in Old Canada that catered to vices, sexual, monetary and adventure. These were built like fortified casinos. And there were still people living up there. A couple cold winters in old Canada had done in the first dead and dismembered that wandered there. It wiped out any that were loose in the wilderness or traveled the highways between old cities. Frozen muscle breaks and bones shatter. After a couple winters with the Change, the snow turned to rain and the weather never reached much below zero. But the ranks of the dead had thinned out by then.

And there was a booming tourist industry that had started up over the last decades. True, the endless forests were home to the Change's feral animals, but smart operators offered fenced and protected areas for the rich, and for the adventurous to travel to away from the stinking asphalt valleys of hopelessness that most cities had become.

If Mary couldn't protect him, we could find a place to hide Joe Magnet up there.

But it didn't take long for me to realize that the train was out. After traveling a few bleak streets and ramps down to Zero, we rolled slowly up to a huge station surrounded with acres of shining steel rails. This station yawed right up to Level One, and I imagined would go on to Level Two and perhaps Three. I understood why. People who lived up there needed trains as much as the next guy, but they couldn't be expected to drive down, or rub shoulders with the walking dead that occupied the levels in between.

I abandoned the idea when I saw the bullet-like bodies of Authority Transports parked all around the station odd and even with taxis and Authority Cruisers. Joe Magnet was no dummy. He'd abandoned the City quietly, and the Prime was looking for him. They were watching the train station with a microscope. That was good and bad. Good because it meant Magnet's assassin might be a private contractor without direct Authority connections. Bad because it might mean he was connected, but wasn't ready to report a kill yet. I supposed that was good too, since it meant my plan was working, but it was a very dangerous part of my plan and hard to celebrate.

"This was dumb Elmo." I looked over and saw a greasy sheen on my partner's dead features. "Let's go. Let's go. There's no way. They're still looking for him."

So we stayed with the flow of traffic and soon found ourselves cruising the Skyway between Levels One and Two.

"Find a gas station. Something with a phone." I knew I needed to make a call, fast and get the hell out of town. We were in the City of Heat.

## Chapter 9

“There!” I shouted, pointing. The noise, millions of cars and trucks—endless construction, echoed between the levels and pounded its way into the car. We’d been shouting since we first entered the City. Ahead, across four lanes of traffic was a massive Iraco fueling station. It took up a square mile of property and had many long arms extending fuel pumps out to the waiting millions. I saw about a hundred telephone booths reflected in its polished ceramic flanks. Cars and trucks were coming and going. A wide set of lanes ramped down to it from the Skyway and another ramped up a short distance past the station. Other streets pulled away into the surrounding blocks to form a dizzying maze.

Elmo rocketed down the ramp with a sickening lurch followed by a metallic bang as the Chrysler bottomed out. Our car wasn’t designed for the Skyways. The City produced its own vehicles: powerful workhorses—engines with wheels and lots of clearance that sped up and down the ramps with pistons to spare. But they hadn’t caught on everywhere, and the majority still drove cars based on the old days, following this or that nostalgic fad. The Chrysler was a remake of another remake based on a design from the world before the Change. It was long and sleek and held far too much bumper out for the careening turnabouts we found in the City. We rolled onto the parking lot and coasted up to the phone booths.

“Keep the engine running,” I said and climbed out of the Chrysler. The noise pounded down from all sides: engines, tires, sirens, movement; it pushed me against the car. Drizzle, something was coming down, heavy in droplets and mist. Something settled on my shoulders and cheeks. An Asian chap in a green van was watching me. His eyebrows flipped up when he registered my makeup. He turned back to the complicated layers of City map in his hands. I could see he was contemplating suicide.

A step or two past him I saw a pair of twisted legs hanging out in the damp. Layers of socks and ragged shoes jutting from dirty brown pants. They belonged to an old man in a wheelchair. Most of him was parked in a phone booth. He saw me coming and weaseled his dirty shoulders and greasy yellow hair out between the doors. A soup can jangled in his right hand.

“God bless,” he said with an expectant look in his tired eyes.

“You’re one to talk!” I couldn’t resist saying it. The City was getting to me. The traffic was getting to me. The noise was getting to me. The rain was getting to me. The fact that the rain shouldn’t be getting to me had already got to me. Everything was getting to me. My teeth had been clenched for twenty-four hours and I needed a drink. I had to get wet on the inside.

“But God bless you,” the old man said smiling and shaking the soup can.

“Coming from you,” I snarled, “that’s a curse.”

The old man looked down at his wheelchair and back to me. “He works in mysterious ways.”

“And you’re supposed to be proof?” I leaned in fists clenched and pushed the doors wide. I wasn’t going to hit him, but I really wanted to. “And it isn’t our right to judge...”

The old man nodded, glad I finally understood.

“Listen to me,” I barked, grabbing his coat collar and pulling him into the rain, the leaks, the drips or whatever the hell it was—the greasy crap that was pouring over my shoulders and soaking through. I pulled him forward into that and shock ran over his features. He wasn’t used to people reaching out and touching him, pushing past his

defensive uphill battle. Especially big angry clowns. “Your optimism doesn’t impress me. You of all people should know that God is a gangster. A blackmailer. An extortionist. He hangs around this two-bit back alley of a planet running protection rackets—conning farmers out of their crops, mothers out of their children, people out of their hope.

Handing out offers nobody can refuse.” I let him go, unsettled by my own aggression.

“He will forgive you for that on Judgment Day,” the old man said weakly, rolling back into his chair and smoothing his coat.

“He better not,” I growled, digging into my pockets for bills. I threw a ten at him. “If he knows what’s good for him.”

I turned on my heel before he smiled at me. If I’d seen the little nubs of his teeth scratching the space between us I’d have hit him. Who did he think he was? Rolling around like a poster boy for pity assuming other people weren’t busy—that we didn’t have things to do. That we had to judge our own progress by *his* lack? Like I didn’t have direction. I stabbed a cigarette in my mouth and imagined flicking it in his face after I hit him. I was in a bad mood, and some hobo with wheels and a positive attitude wasn’t going to bring me out of it. People like him had it all wrong—all this stuff didn’t just point to an end for us—it was an end for God too. He was hanging on by his nails and doing what he could to heave himself back into the dominant position. Problem was, he couldn’t do that without destroying what we had become.

I walked a few yards on and swung the door to a phone booth open and closed it. There was a slight hiss of air—external sounds continued to echo slightly muffled. I might just be able to hear myself think. I snatched the phone from its cradle. The dimes and nickels jingled going in.

I dialed the operator, got a nasal sounding chap and asked him to connect me with the City of Light Authority Bureau. A secretary there said Mary Redding was busy and could only be reached by appointment. I decided to pitch all my pennies and told her that Ms. Redding would want to talk to Mr. Wildclown. That greased the wheels of progress. There were a couple of strong clicks and a buzz. And Mary picked up. About four minutes had passed.

“Where are you?” It was her voice. I remembered it: strong and soft at the same time. I remembered it moaning in my ear. I really wished she hadn’t asked me that question though. That question pretty much killed my idea of handing Mr. Magnet over to her. I couldn’t after she asked that. Too direct. And if I’d answered? If her line were tapped, it would be the end for my client.

“I’ve got him, he’s okay.” I wanted to say more. Hell I wanted to ask his name. But that would say too much about his health. And it was common knowledge that most Authority phone lines were bugged. I thought about entertaining the wire-tappers by asking Mary if I could come to her office and do another take of that sex scene we had shared, only we’d use *her* desk this time.

“Where is he?” Redding asked. So she wasn’t going to give up his name. She probably feared bugs too. “I’ve got conflicting reports...one of his guards was on the take.”

“From who?” I was full of paranoia. “What kind of report?”

“Greasetown Authority reported gunshots in your neighborhood. But that’s a bad neighborhood. Gunshots are reported every hour. An Inspector on my list finally woke up and went to your office.”

“What list?” I watched cars roaring by on the Skyway, picking up speed to take the dizzying ramp upward.

“There are people in my camp, pretty much everywhere. We’re not alone in this.” Her voice had hardened to the point that it could no longer sound wounded. “But people on my side reported to me. Local Authority went through your Dumpster, found a lot of bloody towels. Who got hit?”

“It was a nosebleed,” I sneered, looking out into the haze. Rain, water or runoff was falling through the cracks and holes of the levels above and was churned into a fog by all that traffic. The windows on the telephone booth were streaked with black.

“He has to give evidence.” Mary’s voice became urgent. “You have to keep him safe!” She went quiet a heartbeat, maybe two. The line buzzed. “Do you remember him?” My continued silence answered for me. “Now I know whatever happened to you is permanent or total or you’d take all this more personally.” Mary cleared her throat. Was she crying? “What happened to you?”

“I hope you’ll forgive my tone, especially since it’s been so long and we had such a fine time when we last crossed paths, but given the importance of his story, I can’t confirm or deny anything.” I went quiet for a heartbeat, wishing I could take the leap and trust her. I had trusted her before, but it seemed naïve now with the stakes so high. If I hadn’t already been bamboozled. It had been a long time since I’d seen Mary. And all that integrity she carried around could turn to defeat if enemies added enough fear and doubt to it. And that defeat could make her desperate.

“When’s the Grand Jury convene?” I had to test her. I needed something to check her out. I was already on a pretty high ledge and all the evidence suggested I was going to get more than nosebleeds. The telephone line continued to click and crackle.

“Judge Havelock set it for the twentieth. Two weeks from yesterday. The twentieth.” She repeated for my records. “At the Central Justice Bureau in the City of Light.”

“He’ll be there,” I said, watching a black van slow as it passed the parking lot and line of phone booths. I turned away from the headlights—hid behind the brim of my hat. It slowed as it passed the Chrysler. I could see Elmo nervously duck behind the wheel. The van picked up speed and roared back up onto the Skyway.

“Can you bring him in now? I’ve cleaned house.” Her tone sharpened. “We can pick a place between Greasetown and the City.”

“He wasn’t safe with your people before,” I said, and cleared my throat. “I’ll look after him until the twentieth.”

“If I couldn’t keep him safe...” She was anxious, worried.

“You can’t trust your friends,” I said this nonchalantly. Instinctively, I knew it was time to get off the phone. If someone were tracing the call, they’d have me pegged any second. “And I don’t have enough friends to worry about.”

“Whatever you do, keep him away from the City of Light!” Mary’s voice was hard as I hung up and stepped out of the phone booth into a drizzle of pollution.

“Will do!” I laughed weakly looking up at red lights flickering in the distance. It looked like the Skyway traffic was running from wildfire. We had to go. We had to go fast.

I hurried to the car, swung the door wide and leapt in.

“He won’t be safe here, Fatso. The City of Light’s on fire.” I looked to the operative in the back seat. His single eye blinked at me.

“On fire?” Elmo gave me a quizzical raise of his eyebrow.

“An expression,” I muttered, buckling up and shifting my gun free of the belt. “For dramatic purposes.” Now Elmo’s face went blank. “It was worth a try. That call was traced. We’ve got to go.”

In the distance, up on the Skyway roaring down from Level Two, I could see the flickering approach of flashing lights on big vehicles. They were coming. We had overstayed our welcome.

Elmo saw them approaching, and then turned to me with eyes round.

“Well Fatso...” I jabbed a cigarette between my teeth, “crack your knuckles and get driving.” I cleared my throat and fished under my seat where I’d jammed my bottle of scotch. “It’s time to earn that paycheck I owe you.”

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