

Murder in Movieland

Elmo watched with his trademark slack-lidded stare as I struggled to get the lid off a jar of pickles. I had been grunting and groaning at the job for a full five minutes and was fast approaching the moment that I would pull my gun and start shooting. The whole idea of an impulse buy like this was to brighten up my day, fit something simple into an otherwise work weary life. And here I was close to breaking out in a sweat over a jar of dills. I stifled a curse and dropped the jar onto the floor of the car after I paused long enough to read the label. In my youthful exuberance to make an impulse purchase I had grabbed a jar of bread and butter pickles instead of the dills I craved. I wouldn't eat a bread and butter pickle if it begged me to. I looked up at Elmo behind the wheel. A wave of uncertainty passed over his face as he watched the odd climax to my efforts. He looked at the pickle jar, then up at me.

I grimaced, pulled my cigarettes out, and lit one. Hell, I wanted to light two. Half the reason I'd bought the damn pickles was a growing interest in me to do something with my mouth other than crack wise, chew cigarettes and inhale whiskey. I turned back to Elmo, smiled humorlessly then fed a column of smoke into the radio. It was just buzzing now, had slipped into a cataleptic fugue after five frustrating minutes of radio station hunting. Oily rain slid down the windshield and obscured the world outside. I looked at the distorted view and felt no pang of nostalgia. There was nothing to see out there. We were about eight blocks from the harbor where ancient warehouses crowded. Nearby

a movie was being filmed. It was about two o'clock on Friday afternoon. It was October and the constant rains sometimes turned to slush at night.

I had received a call from Marvin Stewart about an hour before. He was a producer at Killzone Pictures. They were making a horror movie in Greasetown and there'd been some trouble. The movie, *Open Grave* was based on a runaway bestseller by an obscure author. The author was enjoying his leap into the spotlight because he'd specifically included his position as writer on set in the sale of the movie rights. Well, he had since stopped enjoying it. Apparently all the fun had ended the night before when someone shot him.

He was out of Blacktime, the amnesia like period between life and death that came with the Change, and so I'd be able to talk to him when he returned from Authority HQ where the Inspectors in charge were debriefing him. I didn't bother meeting him there. My work in the Billings Case had started a chain reaction that resulted in the firing of about half the force. I was still averaging two threatening phone calls a day.

Marvin Stewart said to meet him down at the Campbell & Dunn Warehouse. He'd said I'd spot the movie set. I'd know the place. Dingy trailers and recreational vehicles formed a small carbon monoxide belching town in a vast parking lot beside the old red brick structure. This view was past the sidewalk on my right—just over a rusted chain-link fence. Elmo and I had already seen a pair of strangely costumed corpses hurry by under an umbrella. A burly worker had rushed a tarp-covered cart full of equipment through a gaping door and into the building. It was at this dim opening that a man in a dark suit appeared waving frantically.

"Maybe that's h-him," said Elmo, anxious to break the monotony of our wait.

"Must be," I said, climbing out of the car into the rain. My cigarette hissed grumpily when exposed to the downpour, and I shifted my head to protect it beneath the brim of my hat. A heavy gray overcoat hid my spotted coverall. I was still soaked from my initial run from the office to the car.

Elmo climbed out of the Chrysler and with a flip of his hand produced an umbrella. He looked at me briefly then kept to himself. We'd already discussed my approach. I wore clown makeup as part of an unspoken deal I made with the man I borrowed my body from and that was enough of an icebreaker for me. I didn't want to present the scene of Elmo and me hurrying for shelter while struggling to hide from the rain beneath a shared umbrella. I had enough trouble making friends.

I clomped resolutely past the trailer park, lips buckled around my dying cigarette.

Marvin Stewart almost jumped for joy when I walked up and took his hand. His bright blue eyes vibrated over my makeup. “Wildclown! It *is* true!” He smiled and laughed nervously. His hands leapt to his thin lips. “I’d read about you in the paper. It’s perfect!”

He was referring to some articles about my involvement in the Billings case. I didn’t like all the interest but I had seen a sharp rise in business since the stories.

“Sure. This is my partner, Elmo,” I said. “Did the dead writer get back yet?” The change of subject was my standard refrain.

Marvin Stewart smiled. “You’re perfect.” His eyes slid over my makeup, he flinched with joy as he looked over Elmo’s dead black features, at his rain-dappled, ankle length overcoat. His attention shifted back to me. “We have got to talk...” He actually giggled, brushed a hand over my upper arm. “You should be in pictures.”

I heard Elmo clear his throat nervously.

“Talk to my agent.” I glared out into the downpour. “What happened to your writer?”

Stewart squeezed his eyes and mouthed the words: *you’re perfect*, before starting. “We started filming *Open Grave* three weeks ago. We’ve been in pre-production for a year...” He shrugged his shoulders at the weather and started to walk in away from the doorway. We followed. “The author of the book, Jason Davies, is in seventh-heaven. Do you know he was eating baloney and couldn’t afford to do his laundry a week before his book went on the bestseller list? Well, baloney, or whatever it is they make now.”

Stewart was referring to the fact that since the Change all dead meat was reanimate. No one knew why, it just was. So most meat-like foods were made out of a paste of something like seaweed and plankton chemically spiced to taste.

Stewart stopped where a massive set of spotlights rested on wheeled platforms. He looked for grease then leaned against a steel upright. “It was a real ‘Star is Born’ story. And more so, because he was not the real writer in the family.”

“What does that mean?” I watched a pair of women in bathing suits walk past. They looked to be pre-Change twenty—and both aware of it. I also noticed that they barely gave me a double take. I was just another oddity in their Movieland world.

“His brother, Steven, was the *up and coming*,” Stewart pressed a hand against his breastbone. “But he died in a sailing mishap.” He saw my

intent expression. “He and Jason were boating enthusiasts and were caught up in a storm—years ago. Steven was lost overboard. Jason, who had been a struggling musician vowed to find a way to memorialize his brother. Make his dreams come true despite the loss.”

“So Jason is writer on set?” I added to break the reverie I saw Stewart slipping into.

“Indeed. And yesterday evening he was shot.” Stewart’s eyes dropped. “He said he entered his trailer and surprised a burglar.”

“And he’s been talking about suing you ever since he woke from Blacktime.” I torched a fresh cigarette.

Stewart smiled then winced at the plume of smoke. “It has been mentioned. And our lawyers want to investigate it independently of Authority.”

“So you can fight it if you have to.”

“Exactly,” Stewart nodded. “Yes.”

“Can I see the crime scene while I wait.”

“Certainly,” he said and led us toward the makeshift trailer park.

We followed Mr. Stewart past something on a trailer that looked like a blood-covered flying saucer.