



WILDCLOWN

HIJACKED

by G. WELLS TAYLOR

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G. Wells Taylor
(eBook Sample)

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Edited by Julia C. Moulton

Cover Design by G. Wells Taylor

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Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45

[Other titles by G. Wells Taylor](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Connect with the Author](#)

For Larry and Peggy Chapin

My other parents.

Good friends and great examples.

Chapter 1

I finished my coffee and contemplated replacing the cigarette I had just put out. Its last puff of smoke was floating across the Formica countertop like a homeless cloud of ectoplasm. I was thinking about having another because I was way ahead of schedule and had time to burn, and because I was intrigued by a woman who sat on the far side of the oval sandwich counter.

The green Formica wrapped around an open space where a balding man of pre-Change fifty was frying up two-dozen mock sausages on an oversized grill. A pair of young-looking soldier

types had ordered four of the breakfast specials to sit on their hangovers.

A loudspeaker reported the approach of the airship. A group of heads in the station looked up from their magazines and knuckle-biting to distinguish themselves as passengers from the human flotsam that swirled around the central ticket booths at Greasetown Aerodrome.

The brilliant panels of lights overhead flickered, turned the air green, and then burst into blinding white. I could have used a pair of sunglasses if the Change hadn't almost made them extinct.

The extremes in lighting seemed to bother the woman across from me—the

one that intrigued me—because she turned her head from her pile of papers and glared upward. She was wearing a dark blue business suit—white collar and jacket trim—an expensive looking cut.

I caught the hem of her skirt hugging the soft shape of her thighs when she first came in. *Lucky skirt*. A delicious sneer crossed her features as she watched the lights flicker—something frustrated and ironic brought bright white teeth from behind her full pink lips. I could see that even angry she was beautiful.

A silver bang cut a line across her eyebrows, and her hair cascaded down the back and sides like a shower of

platinum pausing to splash outwards over her shoulders. I had already noticed that her features were sharp and angular, and that she moved her lips as she wrote in any one of her three notebooks.

She did a similar thing with her fingers and hands. Tapping, twisting and bending them as her mind worked. Her eyes scanned her surroundings quickly, had seen me a couple of times, but never did the double take over my makeup.

Her attention returned to the file folders and the notebooks in front of her. She ate a muffin and drank a coffee. Something about the way she did it washed away the clouds of Greasetown momentarily—made me remember

growing things, and fresh air, and healthy appetites.

I was pretty sure that she was ahead of schedule too. Whether she was meeting someone, or was going somewhere herself. The loudspeakers went off every ten minutes, and none of the messages had brought her out of her fugue. Her nimble hands worked the pen feverishly, tapped her inner rhythm on the Formica. The lips kept moving.

“Don’t worry,” I said, lighting a cigarette. “You’ll get it finished on time.”

Her body went rigid. Then I saw her eyes flash at me through a curtain of silver. The eyes that regarded me were blue—then they did an amazing

chromatic shift to yellow-green a moment before darkening to a deeper shade of blue. Must have been the weird lighting—must have been the metallic hair.

She turned back to the paper. Her eyes skipped up to mine, held them through the curtain of silver. Then her lips moved and formed the shadows of what she was about to say. She pushed the papers into an untidy pile before she said, “You’re aware that a full grown man wearing clown makeup at a sandwich counter could be considered abnormal.”

I took a deep drag of my cigarette. “More than you know.”

Her eyes watched me, her lips

moved, and a subtle muscular twitch slipped behind her fine features. She shook her head.

“Just looks like you’re in a hurry,” I said. “For someone who isn’t in a hurry.”

“Look...” She sighed, shoulders drooping, “I’m not used to being hit on by ‘real’ clowns, so forgive me for not getting into the witty back and forth.” I watched her, and was appalled by the beautiful strength that suddenly filled her eyes. “Okay. You’re a mystery—a paradox—whatever... Feel better?” She shook her head. “I have a pile of case notes to prepare.”

“Case notes?” I said, billowing smoke. “You a lawyer?”

“Social worker,” she said, the hint of a defensive tone entering her voice.

“Social worker?” I flicked ash on the floor, waved the cook toward my empty coffee cup. “I thought *I* was an optimist.”

She glared at me and immediately started shoving her notebooks and papers into file folders. Then she reached down and pulled a briefcase into view. She stuffed her files into it and rose from her stool.

“Nobody cares.” Her face filled with tragic power as she walked around the lunch counter toward me, struggling into her raincoat. She was close enough now that I could taste the smoothness of her skin. Her perfume descended on me like a conquering army.

The eyes burned at me from beneath platinum. “So they cut the number of workers. Those of us left struggle under a crippling workload, with only the uncertainty of contract positions to hang our lives on. Barely any more hope than the people we help.”

Both of us regarded each other; the only movement was the smoke curling from my cigarette. Then she whipped up her free hand and pointed a clean white finger at me.

“But I will not take shit from any fucking clowns.” A look crossed her features that spoke of a spirit overwhelmed by Greasetown, by the Change, twisted humanity, and now by me. Then something softer, wiser entered

her expression and she hissed, “Get some professional help!”

A look in her eyes told me it had hurt her to say that. She was getting tired of being helpful. Snarling silently, she turned on her heel and threw her smoldering intensity toward the outside platform and the group of people gathered there to watch the approaching airship. She hit the crowd and the bodies rippled outward, like water does when you drop a stone in it.

Poor paradoxical mystery that I am was focused on her lithe and powerful dancer’s body—dark blue stockings hugged perfect calves, disappeared into busy white pumps—her feet barely touched the ground. She moved well,

sort of the way I wished all women would move—just grace and power.

I glanced up and into the cook's face. I tried to look as sad as possible in the clown makeup.

“Now, there's a woman a smart guy's going to settle down with,” I said attempting nonchalance and failing. “Anybody with any brains would stop what he's doing and...”

The cook looked at me with flat brown eyes as he carelessly wrangled the soldiers' sausages onto thick plates. Truth was: I saw more tragic hope in that woman's eyes than I'd seen in all the crowds of Greasetown.

Truth was: I saw a spark there that kindled something deep inside me, made

me think there might be an answer, that there might be a way.

Truth was: I was glad she was willing to pay the price to be out there. I didn't know anybody else who would.

But the truth was: I was stuck at the Greasetown Aerodrome ahead of schedule waiting for the two-fifteen from the City of Light. I was on a case. Truth was.

Chapter 2

I sauntered around the edge of the crowd that huddled out of the rain on the covered platform, pushing through a tangle of body odors. Wet wool, expensive perfume and cheap, alcohol, aftershave and cigars. Those were the ones that stood out and really slapped me in the face as I made my way past. There were others, but I tried to put them out of my mind before they became part of my permanent memory.

The departure area spread out across the front of the aerodrome terminal supported some fifty or sixty feet from the ground on a forest of rusted iron

girders. From this, a series of six wide ramps fanned outward at angles to meet the platforms where the big ships moored. A half mile to the north, a group of massive hangars looked ancient and decrepit in the gray light of midday. I knew that was where the lighter-than-air ships called home when it was time for maintenance, and in extremely foul weather.

In the first days following the Change, people found out that there was more to the phenomenon than just constant rain, the end of aging, and the rising of the dead. It became apparent after the twentieth plane crash in a month that the Change was also affecting computers and electrical systems.

As the planes kept falling, and the body count skyrocketed, a powerful fear of flying was burned deep into the human psyche. The sane traveling public abandoned airplanes en masse. They were so terrified they embraced a form of air travel that had been abandoned for similar reasons long ago. But it was starting to be a long time ago—like in another life, for everybody.

Devolution had occurred in which we saw the adoption of outmoded forms of air travel. Old propeller-driven workhorses were dragged out of mothballs and given a once-over in design. The memories of all those burned out and mangled airplanes just after the Change was impossible to

forget.

Then one day a group of rocket scientists took out the old lighter-than-air ship designs and marketed the hell out of them. Filled with helium, the new zeppelins were safe from the destruction the *Hindenburg* and others of her kind were prey to. Those used explosive hydrogen for buoyancy. It was easy to sell the public on the new airships. It was a safer form of air travel that could give you a rough landing at worse.

Travel was slower, but more luxurious. Very few complained. Everything had slowed down after the Change—and with living death for the dead, what's the hurry? Speed kills, right? Authority still toyed with

technology. They were still blood and guts; hell bent on their way somewhere as fast as possible. But the public seemed to gravitate to old-fashioned and more predictable machinery.

I watched the two-fifteen approach. They had christened her the *Boris Yeltsin*. She was almost invisible against the gray cloud cover, and would have been if not for the flicker of running lights and the various advertisements painted across the underside of the hull. The dull throbbing roar of the engines preceded her. A hundred feet below the airship, the landscape was its usual gray and muddy. Blackened trees grew in low, heavy copses, their naked branches woven together like spider webs.

A nearly inaudible voice spoke from the many speakers bolted at intervals overhead. It snorted and yawned—barked electronically, before blaring a warning to the crowd to wait for the ship to moor and for its passengers to disembark. A barrier kept the travelers from moving out onto any of the ramps until the ship was moored.

I hung back in the crowd because that was what I'd been paid to do. I was waiting for someone. The day before I had been hired to chaperone Daniel Rutherford the Second—that's what his father insisted on calling him. *The second*. I wasn't going to say it too many more times. His father had worn all the fun off of it. But I was to bring Daniel

from the Greasetown Aerodrome to the family home in New Garden. He had been sent to the Gorshin Institute. That was a world-class detox-center that nestled in the forested Blue Ridge Mountains west of the City of Light's landward walls.

I had read that it looked like a castle, and could only be reached by airship or by following a winding road through the countryside. The literature said that the Gorshin Treatment was so successful because it depended on strictly controlled environmental factors and social isolation. That was why the institute's clients could experience a more rapid recovery than traditional therapies offered. Having a working

knowledge of substance abuse myself, I knew that the technique might also considerably speed up the relapse upon release. But I wasn't a doctor.

Daniel Rutherford the First, the father, was given my name by an acquaintance of his. He did not feel compelled to divulge any more information than that. Some quick research informed me that the Rutherford's made their fortune by handling other people's money. Daniel Rutherford the First was good at it, like his father was before him. It had become a feeling among his offspring that the acquisition of all that wealth surpassed mere skill and talent, and fell somewhere in the confines of a God-

given right.

I had the feeling that his son grew up like the offspring of many fabulously wealthy families. Feeling on one hand that he deserved the excess he hadn't earned, but struggling with the accompanying guilt that went with it.

You couldn't blame him; he was brought up in an 'anything money can buy' household. To feel better about his lot in life, Daniel had chosen to drink all he could buy.

Chapter 3

Daniel Rutherford the Second looked like he had tumbled down all twelve steps and was stumbling around the basement when he staggered into the aerodrome departures and reception area. His head floated past the ticket booths, followed noisily by a body that wanted to do a little sightseeing.

He was drunk—drunker than one and a half of me on a good day. I had followed the crowd back into the building after the airship moored. Passengers disembarked at the end of the mooring ramp and then followed a gangway to a circular room that

contained the luggage carousel. I knew they would then be directed down a stairway that would put them into the area where they could meet friends, connect with a train, hail a cab or limo, buy tickets or grab a bite to eat.

Daniel wore a well-tailored dark blue suit, fedora and rain-speckled overcoat. At the moment the ensemble hung half off of him like another drunk—hat canted at an angle opposite his body's, one arm in the jacket and overcoat, a pants leg stuffed in a sock, shoelaces untied. An expensive leather suitcase swung wildly from a manicured hand. I didn't waste any time attributing his stagger to air legs.

I knew it could take a few minutes for

people to get used to walking on solid ground after the trip down the coast, but I could see right away that Daniel wobbled more than all the other passengers put together. He was stinko. He was not cured; he was on his way to being well preserved. And it didn't affect my job one bit.

I did more than dabble in alcohol. There were days I came clean and admitted that sobriety was only a hobby to me. I was an expert on the condition of drunkenness. Maybe that's why I got the job. Daniel the First had wanted me to meet his son at the Gorshin Institute, but had balked at the ticket prices and travel expenses I said it would cost me to fly out.

An airship line did round trips every day going up and down the coast from Levytown to the City of Light, making short stops along the way—connections to go inland to Old Vegas, the Rockies, and north to the remnants of Canada across the border. The Gorshin Institute shared a stop with a top secret Authority Research Facility in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Driving out would require taking the western turnpike that descended from the elevated north-south highway that hugged the coast. The institute was a good seventy-five miles into the mountains from there. That was a dangerous drive through the wilderness. The risks involved would have brought

the price up too, and Daniel's father had rejected that as well.

Like most rich men I had met, Daniel's father got cheap at the wrong times. If I'd met his son at the Gorshin I could have steered him clear of the flying bar that he'd made the trip home in. I shrugged and started toward him. The job specs remained: I was to bring Daniel home to his father. I was not responsible for his state of mind. I could still get him there in one piece. He wouldn't feel a thing.

He smiled when I caught his eye, before lunging at me with a loose-limbed swaying gait. I saw that his grip on the suitcase was failing, so took it out of his hand when he lurched to a

teetering halt, right hand outstretched for me to shake.

“Oh God! Dad said it would be you!” He dropped my hand and grabbed my shoulders squeezing. His bright green and red eyes stared at my face. “That’s just perfect!”

“Thanks,” I said, waiting for him to get tired of using me as a lamppost.

He laughed. “My God! I’d read about you. When Dad said he’d send you to pick me up, I thought he was kidding.” Daniel brought his face in close and whistled ninety-proof rum at me. “A fucking clown!”

“You ready to go?” I grunted, already feeling my host’s, Tommy’s, presence beginning to rail. I borrowed his body to

work cases, something he didn't seem to mind; but he hated being singled out or made fun of. Too much attention gave me trouble maintaining control of him *and* the body.

“Yes.” He suddenly looked at his empty hands, then at the floor behind him.

“I've got it.” I shook the suitcase in my hand.

He laughed, slapped my arm and then slid a hand over my shoulder, turning me until his wavering finger centered on a sign that said the “Greasetown Aerodrome Arms.” I knew the bar; it specialized in settling air traveler's nerves.

“What do you think?” He gave me an

awkward, one-armed hug. “One for the road?”

I looked at him. He giggled. Daniel was already in full relapse. Stopping him from having one more drink would be like shutting a barn door after the horse was glue. My job was to get him home in one piece. His father had greater confidence in the Gorshin cure than he should have. Nothing was ever said about getting him home sober.

And I wanted a drink. The cigarettes I had chewed up while waiting had dried my mouth out. Besides, that metaphysical slap from the platinum social worker still stung and the slight clip I'd started after lunch had been worn down to a gauzy afterthought. Yeah I could use a

drink, too.

I nodded at the bar, waited for Daniel to take the first wobbling step toward it, and then followed him through the door and between low tables into the darkness. If I were lucky, he'd quiet down after a hard one. Maybe I could get him a bottle with a nipple on it.

Chapter 4

Daniel Rutherford, son of the First, knew how to drink. After picking a stool and landing hard on it, he'd put down a double bourbon before it hit the bar. I was just shoving some cigarette smoke out of the way to take a snout full of scotch when he ordered another from a big bartender with Chinese letters stenciled up and down his arms.

The barkeep had the thick-browed look of a man who was willing to take a punch to prove a point. As I dispatched my drink I noticed that his nose, like his choice of tattoos, drifted to the east. His name, Terry, was sewn onto the shirt and

was stretched over pectoral muscle that swept up out of his T-shirt just beneath his Adam's apple.

Daniel smirked at me over the rim of his second drink, and then slurped half of it down with a chuckle. "So much for the Gorshin cure..." he giggled. There was a trace of embarrassment in his voice, but you'd have to find its DNA to prove he cared at all.

"Maybe Gorshin has a different definition for cure." I downed my own drink and ordered another from Terry who had clearly seen enough in his career to overlook the fact that a fair-sized gothic clown in a black hat and overcoat was sitting at his bar.

"I guess I must look pretty weak to

you,” Daniel said, as he studied my makeup.

“It doesn’t matter to me.” I shrugged. “I’ll get you home.”

“Dad will be pissed with me.” He bummed a cigarette from the pack I left on the counter. I lit it for him. “The Gorshin Institute isn’t cheap.”

“The cure is,” I grumbled, nursing my drink now, sharing a busy view of the bar with him through a mirror behind the bottles. “I take it they don’t give guarantees.”

“I didn’t want to go,” Daniel snarled cheerfully. “But Dad cut me off from the company expense account. Gorshin was the key to reactivating my credit cards.”

I watched him dribble bourbon onto

his tongue. He was a hell of a drunk. Once he got his ass on something solid, his brain kicked in and he could almost pass for normal. That was the worst part of it for those poor bastards. Nobody knew when a real boozer was unconscious.

“Well, this will hurt you more than it will your father then,” I said.

“I know.” He looked downcast, slapped at ash that had settled on his arm. “But the whole thing—the institute—it was well, I think it was worse than boozing.”

He got that part backwards. I still needed proof that there was something better than boozing. I said, “What did they do? Ozone shots and high

colonics?” I didn’t think he knew what a high colonic was, no one did these days. But I liked the sound of it: nasty and scientific. I pulled another cigarette out, decided to chew it unlit for a while.

“I never thought I’d say this, but I’d have preferred the club soda enemas to the Gorshin treatment,” he laughed, but some memory colored his eyes dark.

“So you didn’t like the treatment. Who would?” I didn’t care much, but the look in his eyes made me ask.

Daniel smiled shyly. “You have to see this place, the Gorshin Institute. It makes Frankenstein’s castle look like Club Med. I read on a plaque in there that the institute was built on the site of a pre-Change asylum. Lots of dark stone in the

basement, anyway. Ugliest place I've ever seen. I asked the doctor about it, and he said half of psychology was living up to the expectations of the patient. He said the gothic design was like a white lab coat. Whatever that means..."

"I think I get it," I stared at the edge of the bar. Someone had started carving his name there. "You met Dr. Gorshin?" I had read about him, seen a few newspaper articles about his revolutionary techniques in psychiatric medicine.

"Yes. Old guy. Turkey neck. A limp. A twisty hand." Daniel had ordered another drink. "I'd been to him before, for therapy, at his office in the City of

Light. But he must have figured I needed the whole treatment. Anyway I guess I was kind of a V.I.P. when I got to the institute. My dad arranged things.” He stubbed out the borrowed cigarette. “First week all we did was talk.” He frowned shaking his head. “Then the ninth floor.”

I grunted. I didn't bother translating. It meant: *continue, I'm listening*. He got it.

“Then Gorshin started with the injections. He stopped talking and just lay in with the syringe. After the first day, I don't think I even got food. Can't remember eating anyway—probably vitamin injections, or something. These got me so punchy that I lost track of time,

and damned if I can remember what he talked to me about. Some therapy!” He took a drink. I noticed a tremor run along his arm and hand. “I think I was in a coma for a while, then it got weird. I just started dreaming out of nowhere. Freaky stuff.”

“Like what?” I asked. The scotch was making me slightly more human. Slightly, I still didn’t care.

“Well, Gorshin had me in a coma or something. After that week of talk, then lots and lots of darkness—like I say, I can’t remember—all the sudden I came out of it dreaming this really strange dream. Very, very sexy—which was weird, because after the third shot from Gorshin everything from my bellybutton

down felt like it was made of rubber. So in the dream, I was with a woman, Angie Carter, a secretary from my father's firm—hot, brunette, and round in the right places—and things were going hot and heavy: really sweaty. So Angie is a kind of a fantasy of mine and all the suddenly it was like I felt another person or pair of eyes with me, watching me. It felt as real as looking at you right now. But in the dream, the watcher, whatever, it gave me an even bigger, kind of sick thrill. Then as the dream sex got wilder, and I mean wilder—like nothing I ever felt before, but I suddenly—well this was weird but I found myself floating over my body, up at the ceiling... I swear I was wide awake... it felt so real I

thought I was going to fall.”

“At the ceiling?” I was just getting bored with the story when that last note raised an eyebrow. “Floating.”

Daniel nodded. “What do they call them, out-of-body experiences? Well that must have been what happened. Because I was having this dream and then it was like I was wide-awake floating over my body, looking down at it on the bed.”

He watched his shoes. “Then I’m floating there, looking down, and my eyes opened up, my body’s eyes—I know that sounds weird—but they opened and it was strange, but there was my face looking up at me. And then I smiled, or my body did, and it was like my eyes were looking up and seeing me

—like a knowing expression spread over my face and my body sat up. Kicked the covers aside. Very strange—because my body sat up, swung its legs over the bed and then stretched its arms up over its head.

“I was starting to get too freaked out, wanting to wake up or something—I was spooked and trying to convince myself it was dream—because the first thrill had worn off and then my body stood up, took a couple of steps across the room toward the door.”

“It looked up?” Daniel’s story had the sound of a pink elephant act—some kind of side effect from an opium dream, from detox. Hard to believe anything a man experiences when he’s got the delirium

tremens. Still, I said, “Before it walked.”

“Not walk really.” Daniel set his glass down, the tremors had left his hands; his voice was even. “It was like my body was trying to walk without me, really wobbly, dragging the right leg. Then I heard my own voice say something, cursed—Goddamn it—something like that. Then my face looked up at me again, really pissed off.

“I started screaming, though I didn’t have a voice, I didn’t have a body, you know, but then my body started screaming... And it fell back and then I was suddenly back in my body and screaming. Orderlies came in and strapped me to the bed until I calmed

down. Shit. Anyway, after that I just wanted to get out of there—out of the clinic. Just out. I don't know what happened, what that was. But I figured the doctor's drugs were driving me crazy, way worse than being a drunk. I just wanted to get out of the clinic then.”

“Did you experience that again?” I watched his face closely. “Being out-of-body?”

“A couple of times too many. That's why I bribed an orderly, got to a phone—made a deal with my daddy the devil to get out. Before I could get sprung, Gorshin had me back on the drugs again. But there were times I had other dreams, the sexy kind. And I remember having that sense of being watched. But I was

so terrified by then. I woke up as soon as I felt that presence. Somehow I pushed up through the chemicals. Fucking weird.” He stood up suddenly looking around until he saw a neon bathroom sign pointing to a hall near the front of the bar. “Hey I got to take a piss.”

“We’ll leave after,” I said to his back as he walked away. Terry the bartender looked at me quietly. I agreed with his silent assertion and ordered another drink.

“What’s with the makeup, Mac?” He said setting the drink down.

“Ah, you were such a good bartender,” I grumbled, took half the drink in one bite. “You ruined it.”

Terry looked like he could care less.

“Had to ask.” He smiled and wiped the top of the bar. “I seen a lot of things in here, but that’s fairly unique.”

“Thanks.” I wasn’t sure, but something had just caught the corner of my eye up near the bathroom sign. A quick glance at Terry’s back stooped over filling a cooler with beer told me he hadn’t seen anything.

I dug three tens out of my annoying plastic mouth purse and tossed them on the bar. Hurrying to the washroom, I bumped into a pair of old travelers; they were on something like their eightieth anniversary or tenth honeymoon. My appearance froze them in their tracks. Made the two eternally old vacationers in roomy comfort-wear an immovable

object. Disbelief had them leaning back on their heels looking up. I hurried past them, pushed a chair out of the way, almost knocked it over and made a scene.

I hurried down the short hallway and stopped outside the men's room door, loosened my gun where it hung in my pink skipping rope belt, then pushed my way in. There was a tall metal divider that hid a line of six urinals. Opposite them were four toilet stalls.

“Daniel?” I barked, expecting him to grumble something from one of the stalls. Nothing. He could be sleeping.

I hurried forward, pushed the stall doors aside. Nobody—nobody, nobody home. The last door was locked.

“Daniel?” I peered through a crack between the metal panels on the locked stall, saw that the toilet had been removed and the plumbing around it had the look of reconstruction.

“Damn!” cursing, I ran out of the washroom; then sprinted to the bar. Terry saw me coming.

“Change is right there.” He pointed to a couple bills and some coins on the bar.

“Did you see the guy I was drinking with? Did he come back?” My eyes kept flashing toward the door. I was trying to remember the layout of the aerodrome. Multi-level parking lot, taxis, limos and shuttle bus service.

“Nope.” Terry gestured to the short fridges behind the bar. “I was...”

I didn't wait to hear the rest. I was running across the reception area, attracting lots of attention. Travelers hugged their bags, pointed and gaped and gasped. I was waving my gun; I was asking for trouble.

I ran to the front of the building where an entrance and exit road circled, saw that a bus was not due for twenty minutes, memorized the names of the three cab companies that had taxis at the curb, then hurried on toward the multilevel parking lot. I shoved the crossbar on the door that said Level Three. A set of stairs led down to Two and One. I peered across Level Three's asphalt: cars, a couple of trucks, and a white van. Nothing moving.

I ran down to level two. Pushed the door open. A big black van was ten feet from me; the engine was running. I took two steps and something hit me on the back of the head. My vision went black before I hit the asphalt.

Chapter 5

I dreamt of stone walls, antiseptic air and heat. There was a sound, some kind of drumming in the background, hollow and rubbery. Lightning flashed against a screened window and threw burning diamonds across a tangled bed sheet. There was a body on the bed. He was naked: no clothes, no skin. A deep purple stain filled the hollowed mattress under him. The eyes opened and he screamed through torn gums.

I woke up hissing, my fists clenched. A dead man looked down at me, shock and concern on his old features. His skin was gray with olive tones around the

eyes—he had an Italian look to him. His lips trembled and pulled stickily away from his over-sized false teeth. I think he was trying to smile, reassure me.

It was hard to tell. His incisors were the size of matchbook covers. His lean dead hands were on my shoulders. He must have been sixty when he died. The wispy remnants of his curly white hair vibrated in a damp exhaust-filled breeze. My hair was wet. I smelled copper and motor oil.

“Took a fall, Mister.” His eyes looked me over with a mixture of fear and apprehension. “By the seeming.”

I grabbed his thin arm, and he pulled me into a sitting position. The drumming from my dream was still with me. It

wasn't muffled anymore. Each thump echoed pain, reverberating down my neck to my shoulders. I gingerly touched the wet lump I found under my hair. My hand came away bloody.

The old guy had parked a pair of suitcases behind him. "Sorry, Mister. But I'll miss my train," he wheezed, before grimacing or smiling again. "You going to be all right?"

"Sure," I said, gulping down air and bile. "Thanks." My cheekbones hurt. He helped me struggle to my feet, led me to the wall where I could brace myself with wide-spaced legs.

"You sure you'll be all right?" he asked, backing toward his cases.

"Yes, thanks. Did you?" I shook my

head. My vision swam red. “Did you see anyone else here?”

“No sir.” He picked up his luggage. “Just you. I parked...” He gestured to an old yellow Buick thirty feet across the lot. “And saw you lying here.”

I nodded, gave him my greasepaint smile. It suddenly dawned on him that he was looking at an oversized clown in black. This time, big teeth or not, I was sure he grimaced in fear—his eyes glimmered like oily brown olives—they wrung my heart. Then he smirked apologetically and hurried through the door and up the stairs.

I gave myself the once-over: still had my gun, I’d picked it up as I got to my feet; my money, there wasn’t enough

there to steal anyway; and my hat, it was floating three yards from me in a pool of oily rainwater. I glanced around the parking lot as I staggered over to pick it up—spots flickered in my eyes when I leaned over. I turned, glared at the ten by six rectangle of yellow-trimmed asphalt where I had seen the van. The orange overhead lights accentuated all that nothing.

I made my way back up the stairs and to the Aerodrome Arms. Terry was still there. He watched me squeezing water out of my hat as I approached. On the way I'd cast an eye over the crowd. No sign of Daniel Rutherford the Second. That didn't surprise me.

“You look like shit,” Terry said.

“Not bad, eh?” I leaned my full weight on the bar. “Did my friend come back?”

“I was going to ask—see if you found him.” Terry gestured with a glass, and I pointed toward the Canadian Club behind him. “Cause I haven’t seen him.”

“Can I borrow your phone?” I could see it nestled in the crowd of empty glasses behind the bar.

“Sure.” He set the phone beside my drink.

I called Greasetown Authority, got a desk inspector, told him about a possible abduction. He laughed and told me he already had lots of abductions—they weren’t all that interesting anymore—maybe give him a call in a week and he

might be feeling nostalgic.

I took the wise out of the ass when I told him the name of the missing man. The inspector let out a gulp I could have parked a cement truck in. He quickly went off the horn a minute before returning and assuring me a cruiser would be at the aerodrome inside the hour. Not to worry, sir. That's right, he even "sirred" me.

While I waited, I visited the bathroom again and found a smear of something, a dark red-brown liquid on the floor about the size of a quarter. I scooped up part of it with a handkerchief, went back to the bar and drank whisky.

Chapter 6

The Authority Cruiser arrived in just over an hour. In it were two junior inspectors, Hardin and McDonald. I didn't listen too much to Hardin, young-looking guy, maybe pre-Change twenty-five, with a red crew cut and too many freckles to trust with power. My attention kept swinging back to McDonald, if it ever left.

She had shoulder-length brown hair parted in the middle and swooping down for a little flip under at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were bright blue-green—glistening with promise and enthusiasm. Her lips were full and swept out in a

natural pout—no collagen there, and when she talked, a small pink tongue danced across the top of even white teeth. Her skin was the color of a full moon, back when we had them, accentuated by the tall black coat collar she'd pulled up under her high cheekbones.

She wore her long leather inspector's coat with the kind of confidence you find in textbooks. McDonald had introduced herself and her partner as junior inspectors, but her mannerisms and attention to protocol had already given them away. She was new to the job. The notebook in hand, both of them jotting with identical pens, and nodding almost in unison.

Something in McDonald's gaze kept me from seeing the humor in it, camel-clutching my tongue before it could get within an inch of cheek. She was new, but she had conviction. I had the sense that she was following the book for my benefit, and maybe her partner's. They listened to my story while we sat in the Aerodrome Arms, pausing occasionally to see if Terry the barkeep could corroborate anything.

He told them he saw Daniel Rutherford, "the clown's drinking buddy," he said helpfully; but didn't see him leave or know anything about a black van.

The junior inspectors kept looking from my makeup to the glass of scotch I

nursed through the discussion.

“So let me get this straight...”

McDonald said, her eyes close to mine. A slight wisp of perfume reached me through the stale muck they called air at the Arms. It made me think of bath soap and terrycloth. “You were to pick this man up, Daniel Rutherford the Second, and drive him to his father’s home, and you lost him before you got out of the building.”

Hardin snorted before I could answer. I glared at him, but couldn’t put any fire into it. Especially when McDonald said flatly: “Nice work.”

I let it slide. I had it coming. They were having fun. Who was I to rain on their parade? I gave them the

handkerchief with the red something on it, suggested it might be blood.

Hardin asked: “Are you sure it isn’t yours?”

I let them have that one too. I even laughed along, offered a round of cigarettes. Suggested I buy them a drink next time they’re off duty. Just the tip of the iceberg, this. Wait till you see what I do for an encore.

They took a look around the washroom, said they’d get in touch with me at my office and left.

Right after that I drove back to the office to pick Elmo up. I’d left him behind to work the phones. I was expecting a call about a payment. I needed that money more than I needed

my partner on what was supposed to be an easy pick up and delivery.

I deflected his questions about how things went and hurried him to the car. I climbed into the passenger seat, hoping he'd be too busy driving to press things. He was a sharp tack, my Elmo, and he let the questions drop after a few long pauses. He knew something had gone south, and I'd come clean when I was ready. But I was still trying to get my head around things, trying to get rid of all those justifications and excuses.

Otherwise, I'd be blind to the real problem, never be able to figure out what had happened. Never be able to put things right.

We were on our way to see Daniel

Rutherford the First. He was bound to be happy with the way things had worked out. I'd made a quick call to him, gave him the gist, said I wanted to give him a full report in person. I was looking forward to his comedy routine, wanted to make sure he had time to put some good material together.

New Garden District only existed because of its paranoid penchant for security and segregation—and its comfort with the liberal application of well-placed bribes. The old days had seen Authority transports and cruisers on every other corner. Money talked, and New Garden had slowly absorbed the northern side of Greasetown along with much of its modern business section.

That had encouraged a stronger Authority presence, much of it on the take—soon all of it on the take—that had allowed the rest of the city to deal with substandard security and law enforcement, or none at all. Authority in those days behaved little better than the mob. There were disappearances, turf wars, assassinations and worse.

Over the last couple of years, Authority re-structuring had seen the arrest of corrupt inspectors and command officers, and a break up of the internal gangs and extortion groups. That should have freed honest inspectors and enforcers to investigate and patrol the remainder of the city. The logic suggested that law and order would

move outward through the rest of Greasetown, but things had changed.

Rather than cleaning up the corruption in the rest of the city, the corruption had started to leach its way into New Garden District.

In response, gated communities sprang up in New Garden with their own private security forces. These interfaced with Greasetown Authority, along with the well-placed bribes, to create a potent, and by small degrees, less corrupt force for law and order. These security forces were then as a whole less powerful but individually more dangerous.

The rules had changed. Rule number one: you could travel the streets of New

Garden without Authority permission, even if you were dead. Rule number two: Don't try it in a gated community.

A twenty-foot-tall wall circled 'Monument Heights,' the gated community that partitioned Daniel Rutherford the First's neighborhood from the rest of Greasetown. A cop at the gate looked us over, raised his eyebrows over the rims of his sunglasses and returned to his pillbox to open the motorized gate. They screeched apart on rusted wheels.

Elmo followed the double ribbon of new blacktop until he pulled up to the front door of the Rutherford House. I was on the edge of feeling sufficiently inferior. My blunder regarding the case

was working on the inside. The money they hung from every lamppost in New Garden was pounding it home from outside.

Rutherford's place was a mansion of three stories that loomed out of close hedges like a specter of the old English countryside. The gray brick walls looked like they could take a mortar round without blinking.

“You wait in the car, partner,” I said, earning a shocked look from Elmo's dead face. “It's my bullet.” I tossed my cigarette on the grass beside the drive. “No sense both of us ruining our careers.”

Elmo was shaking his head as he slid the Chrysler into a space beside a small

blue sports car and a long silver-black limousine. My boots scuffed on the wet pavement as I climbed out. Rain had slowed to a drizzle. The butler answered on the fifth knock. He had been prepared for me, and only allowed an economical look of disdain.

That made sense. The family he worked for was wealthy from generations of breeding exceptional moneymen and bankers. They wouldn't want him wasting any of the blueblood snobbery on the help. The Rutherford's held controlling interests in a quarter of the banks in Greasetown and a number of the City of Light's investment firms. They had a history of being ruthless moneymen, with a taste for the highlife

and all its attendant vices.

The butler hurried me through the tiled foyer and along a marble-veneered hall. Portraits of ruthless, seemingly sober men glared at me as I passed. These guys didn't like slip-ups; they didn't get that far up the ladder by making mistakes. God help you if you did. I think the portraits were issued by old Fort Knox. This was going to be fun.

At the end of the hall, the butler turned a steel knob on a heavy mahogany door. It swung inward. Directly opposite was a massive desk. Behind it was a lean-faced man of pre-Change sixty. Stiff white hair added an inch to his height. An expensive wool suit hid his actual dimensions as he rose to his feet.

“Mr. Wildclown.” He gestured to a seat in front of his desk.

I shook my head, adopted the military stance—hat off, stand at attention and take your beating.

“I’m sorry to report,” I said, shoulders back. “That I lost your son.”

Mr. Rutherford took a cigar from a decorative box, and returned to his seat nodding his head. He opted not to light it.

“So I gathered from what you told me on the telephone.” He shook his head now.

I told him the story of how I lost Daniel Rutherford, his son. All the while, his father played with the thick cigar in his hands, tapping it on a

knuckle, and then rolling it on the sculpted arm of his chair.

“Yes, well. And these events transpired after you took him to a bar.” Mr. Rutherford’s green eyes began to blaze. He turned them away from me and down to burn holes in the palms of his hands. I could see his fingers had formed into rigid talons. “*Detective Wildclown*, why would you take him there?”

“He took me.” My experience with the junior inspectors had left my sense of humor a bit ragged. “He’s not a juvenile. My job was to see he got to you in one piece.”

“By taking him to a bar—first... That worked well...” Mr. Rutherford shook his head. His brush cut scraped the air

until his head stopped.

“Why did they let him leave?” I tried a bit on the offensive. “He sure as hell wasn’t cured.”

“I’m afraid I indulged my son.” Rutherford coughed. “He telephoned and made some promises if I brought him home. He sounded fine.”

“Did the doctors agree?” I leaned forward on my toes a bit.

“I didn’t even ask.” Rutherford looked embarrassed. “I wanted my son out of there. His distress was apparent.”

“So he was released prematurely,” I said to myself. “Before he was ready...”

“You took him to a bar, Mr. Wildclown. Unwise, wouldn’t you think, considering that you were hired as

chaperone to safely return him home to me. You understood why he was at the Gorshin Institute? You're familiar with the concept of detoxification." A wicked grin cut his thin face. He enjoyed that one. "I was assured by my Authority contacts that though your methods were unusual, you could be trusted with a simple job like this. This is my punishment for pride! No media. No attention. Hire a nobody!"

"He was drunk when he got off the *Yeltsin*," I continued. My hands slapped my coat pockets. I was out of cigarettes and had bummed a couple from Elmo on the ride over. "So whatever the Gorshin Institute did, they didn't do it well."

"Of course you would be a competent

judge of third rate jobs,” he sneered, smiling harshly. “I could agree or disagree with that summation if you had brought him directly to me.” Mr. Rutherford’s hands continued to claw the air in his lap. “At which point I could have perhaps done something about getting a return on some of my considerable investment for his treatment.” He shook his head again. “It is a pity that you couldn’t have done a better job at handling him. A pity?” His eyes flared. “Almost criminal...”

I shrugged, really enjoying the coals under my feet. “I know enough about drinking that once a man settles on taking one, the best course of action is to let him have it. When your son’s had

enough, you pour him into a car and drive him back to Gorshin. The drunker he gets, the easier he'll be to handle.”

“Forgive my reluctance regarding your advice, Mr. Wildclown. My son is missing.” He turned to give me a hot stare. “Abducted, you suggest.”

“Yes. I believe he was.” I assumed the parade rest position, hands folded behind my back, legs apart—ready for orders or judgment, or a firing squad.

“By someone you did not see. In a van that no one else saw.” Incredulity pulled up the corners of his mouth again.

“Yes,” I started to growl. “I've got the cracked skull to prove it. And it was a black van.”

“Oh...” Rutherford nodded

patronizingly. “Right, a black van. Thank you.” He scowled. “You mentioned that you know something about drinking.” Scorn was vying for a position with anger in his tone. “How drunk were you when my son disappeared?”

“Barely,” I spat, no point lying about it. “Look Authority has the evidence I collected. They’re aware of who is missing, and they’re opening a file on it.”

“I spoke to them myself, Mr. Wildclown.” He looked at his hands, squeezed them together to remove the steel rigor that was shaping them; then he reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a checkbook. “They also suggested that they could handle this without any

help from you.” He started to write a check. “This amount should be more than fair for the services you have already provided. And for confidentiality of course...”

“No,” I growled, “pay me when I find him.”

He looked at me, pen hovering over the checkbook. “When you find him?”

“Yes.” I slapped my hat down on my head. “I’ll call you with updates.”

Chapter 7

“What do you think happened to him, Boss?” Elmo asked as he worked the wheel—he’d been avoiding my gaze for the last few minutes. It was about eight o’clock. I’d finished telling him the story by the time we drove out of New Garden District.

The Chrysler passed under the first set of malfunctioning traffic lights that welcomed us back to our neighborhood. I had noticed my partner throwing me a few wide-eyed glances. I was kind of tired of talking about it, wouldn’t have minded giving it a rest. But who could blame Elmo? He was a good detective

who wanted to be up to speed, and didn't know how to get the whole story without making it look like his boss had failed. And he relied on me.

“The van tells me it was organized,” I muttered through a cloud of smoke.

“Sounds something like that...” he said, slowing the Chrysler to avoid a hobo with a shopping cart full of tin cans. “Wouldn't just walk away.” He cleared his throat. “Especially since he had someone to drink with.

“That's right,” I said, not bothering to look for judgment in what Elmo said. A detective just needs facts, and you can't get facts and protect egos at the same time. “I'd put money on him coming back and talking me into another round. I was

game.”

Elmo nodded his head slowly.

“Sides,” he said. “Who’s gonna knock you out and not take your money or gun? Van or not, that tells me something more is going on.”

A sudden bubble of flashing red and yellow light exploded through the rear window and filled the interior of the car. A low throaty whoop of a siren followed.

“Authority cruiser...” Elmo said without emotion, after glancing in the mirror. He automatically pulled toward the curb and stopped.

“Perfect,” I muttered, turning my head. Two Authority traffic enforcers climbed out of a long black cruiser—

rain steamed on its hood. They wore helmets like their riot squad equivalents. An expressionless steel face was bolted to Kevlar headgear, but the rest of their formidable armor was lighter, and had a more flexible look.

They remained intimidating, clomping toward us with their pistols drawn. Someone in their tech department had added the effect of a red glow around the eyes. It gave them a demonic look as they moved through the shadow.

They'd pulled us over near a large vacant store, hardware or department goods—a stone's throw from a Chinese food place called predictably: Hong's. The window was greasy and flyblown. I could just make out the shape of a pair of

customers. Chinese characters were painted across the front of the building.

Witnesses, good—for what it would do me. But it was something. Acting on instinct, I took the .38 out of my boot and tossed it under my seat—I didn't have time to ditch my .44 cannon.

An enforcer's armored crotch appeared at Elmo's window as he rolled it down. I knew the other would be about two yards behind me, with his legs braced and .45 caliber gun pointed at my head. This was Greasetown after dark, the poster child for places to die quickly and easily. I understood their caution.

“License,” the enforcer buzzed with his mechanically enhanced voice.

“Yes, sir.” Elmo fished in his jacket

pocket, and produced his wallet.

The enforcer snatched it away with a gloved hand, passed his glowing red eyes over it—handed it back. He bent low, looked in the window. My face paint fluoresced as his electric eyes crackled over me.

“Mr. Wildclown, we’re going to take you downtown,” His mechanical voice was free of inflection, and somehow more threatening because of it. “It’s about a missing person.”

I looked at him. There was no way of knowing who this was, whether he was taking his medication, or whether he even liked clowns. My door opened suddenly, and the other enforcer gestured for me to get out.

“We can drive down ourselves,” I tried a touch of flare. “You can escort us.”

“Get out,” my enforcer said with a voice identical to his partner’s. He swung the long barrel of his gun toward me and away, and then repeated the gesture two times. You really don’t need that repeated more than twice. His meaning was clear.

“Sure. Okay, that’s convenient.” I climbed out, noticing the ten inches the enforcer had on me. I was looking up at the label on his chinstrap. “But we’d be glad to drive down ourselves.” There were too many unresolved civil suits in the courts listing Authority’s excesses for me to get too sassy. It was a problem

compounded by the masks. How could you bring charges against an enforcer if you never saw his face? My enforcer pushed my overcoat open with the barrel of his gun, quickly snatched my .44 from my pink skipping rope belt.

“You have a permit for this?” the enforcer slipped the safety off and on.

“At the office,” I said, pointing along the street. “Five blocks or so that way.”

“You don’t have a permit to carry it now.” He shoved my gun into his belt.

“We got reason to take you in. You want to resist?” he said that in a way a man might ask a woman if she wants to go to a movie or dinner.

“It’s got nothing to do with want.” I looked at his shoulders. I looked at the

barrel of the gun that was pointed at my chest. I looked into the car. Elmo looked back. He shrugged.

“Go back to the office and get the permit, Elmo. And my private detective’s license,” I managed before the enforcer put a vice-like grip on my shoulder and pushed me toward the cruiser.

“Yeah,” my enforcer buzzed to the other. “While it’s still worth the paper it’s printed on. The inspector might enjoy tearing it up.”

Chapter 8

The traffic enforcers drove south, flying past all the little precinct houses before delivering me to Authority Headquarters. That took about fifteen minutes. Authority HQ was a big menacing building built just after the Change with lots of stone scrollwork and ten floors of menacing screen-meshed windows. It occupied a piece of real estate about two blocks from Greasetown City Hall.

That put it west of Greasetown Harbor: murder, floating bodies, burning warehouses, crumbled concrete docks, cement shoes, rusted freighter traffic

with foreign flags, and rat-covered tie-lines—and north of my office, Gritburg and the sprawling decay of Downings District.

HQ's wide stone stairs led up and through a pair of massive wooden doors emblazoned with the Authority shield. A group of big enforcers were loading a parade of junkies, prostitutes, and thieves into a transport destined for one of the many correctional institutes maintained for holding criminals, who thanks to the effects of the Change were ageless and therefore highly likely to recommit their many crimes—immortal recidivists.

They just couldn't learn.

Throw in a generally hopeless

society, and you end up with a very busy legal system and overcrowded jails.

That was just for the living felons.

Authority had set up a separate penal system for the dead. Those who broke the law after death, and who made it through arrest in one piece, were sent to lockups built in the west end of Gritburg near the landward wall. The dead prisons were administered by living Authority but maintained by a special branch of Dead Authority—inspectors and enforcers who had died in the line of duty but who still liked the badge and office.

My enforcers shoved me past this procession and up the stairs. I swam through the thick atmosphere of cheap

perfume, alcohol, body odor, and chemicals that hung around them like a dense fog. I barely glanced at the faces going by me on the right. I heard a junkie giggle something about the clown before he shrieked from a mild electric shock meted out by his guard's zapbaton.

I resisted the urge to look at any of them because it was tough enough to get respect in my makeup without having an old home week on the headquarter steps with some rundown addict recognizing me from a case or my host, Tommy, from his mad forays into drink and despair. Tommy had led a life off the radar, somewhere the other side of the garbage heap.

My relationship with Authority had

deteriorated over the last few years. I'd made lots of enemies and a few friends. During the shakeup that occurred, my friends had been promoted to national positions to pursue the corruption there, or a price was determined that would buy them off.

That process left me with my enemies, or the friends of enemies. Whether they could understand it or not, we were on the same side—philosophically at least. But I'd helped to break up the old boy's club, and in the process offended their code. My friends had enough pull to keep me from turning up at the bottom of a river, but not quite enough to keep me free of harassment, knuckle sandwiches, and the general

rough stuff.

The enforcers shoved me through the doors and across the main receiving area. There was a huge oak desk along one wall manned by twelve inspectors. The buzz and jangle of phones added a noisy murk. Thickened the air. Across from them a gallery of chairs and benches held living and dead criminals, loved ones, victims and victimizers.

I was amazed at the dull look in the many eyes. It was impossible to know for certain who had done what to whom, because everyone had a similar near-catatonic stare. That was the Change working. People had been beaten down, and were breaking under the strain of endless rain; sidewalks crowded with

the living and the dead, and the general malaise that permeated everything.

In some respects I thought that the only excitement people had anymore was participating in the constant violent back and forth of crime. It was something like life. It provided a slow drip of adrenaline to the heart.

Behind the benches was a series of holding rooms that opened into the wall. I was shoved toward a wide set of stairs at the back, and up.

“Move,” I was told. A wasted order, but I understood the enforcers’ need to express themselves. There were many days I wanted to push my way through life, lash out a little, leave a mark on a chin bone, and I didn’t even have a

badge.

On the third floor I was pushed along a hallway past many doors and finally through one marked examination room 3-7.

“Wait here,” one of the enforcers buzzed electronically. I’d already lost track of which one he was. The faceplates and glowing eyes gave me nothing to work with. “The inspectors will be in directly.”

I walked in, sauntered around the plywood table and sat on a steel chair. The door closed behind me. The lock clicked. There was an ashtray, so I lit up. The air was already pretty bad, but the back of the Authority cruiser had smelled like vomit and perfume; so I

thought a good cloud of cigarette smoke might do something for my mood. I leaned the chair back against a water heater and pondered my situation.

It was clear to me that I was experiencing some of Mr. Rutherford's pull. He didn't give me the impression that he wanted to do more than fire me, but if Authority had found something out about his son, it was likely they'd convince Mr. Rutherford that cleaning their shoes on the back of my head might net them important information. And they might have had enough time to test the blood sample I'd turned in to them.

I doubted Rutherford's boy had surfaced yet, which meant that I was the last one to talk to a missing person, so it

would be the first place I'd look too.

Which suggested to me my course of action: as soon as I was through with the jackboots, or they were through with me. I knew the best thing for me to do was get going, get something done. Find Daniel the Second. I was sure I'd have to run one more gauntlet before I was allowed to do that. The sap on the back of the head was the easiest thing I'd had to put up with so far. I lit another cigarette and hunkered down for the war.

The air was a nice smoky blue when the inspectors arrived about an hour later. One of them was the junior inspector from the aerodrome, McDonald. She tossed her long brown tresses as she entered wearing dark blue

shirt and black pants. McDonald fanned the air with a thick file folder. Her eyes glittered under full dark brows.

Behind her waddled a senior inspector I'd scraped up against over the years.

Garnett was a big fat slob with a prickly blonde moustache that stuck straight out over his puffy red lips; he wore a short-sleeved white shirt with mustard stains and high-waisted trousers that buttoned up just under his nipples. His suspenders were tangled, and by their flaccid look—useless.

At one time I thought Garnett might have been on my side, but I had since heard about his habit of turning a blind eye to the excesses of the more

enthusiastic inspectors—he'd put up with anything to solve a case—since the application of his brainpower alone couldn't do the job.

And there was something rabid in his little piggy eyes. They were cold, a pale blue gray, and seemed incapable of containing true emotion. His soul was hidden in there behind the sandbags of lard, peeking over a tarnished badge.

“Wildclown,” he said with a shake of his head. “You want fucking lung cancer?”

I didn't say anything. He had left me waiting long enough to turn the air toxic. He could live with the results.

He stared at me to get his displeasure across, both at the smoke, and my refusal

to enter into any of the witty cop/detective banter. From the gleam I saw in McDonald's eyes, I wouldn't have minded crossing swords with her.

He saw me looking at her, growled and then pulled out a chair for himself. McDonald chose to stand against the wall opposite me.

"I read McDonald's report." He pawed the air behind him with a chubby hand until the junior inspector slapped the manila folder into it. He opened it flat in front of him. "You're sticking with your story?"

"Of course," I said. "I have a habit of sticking with the truth. Inspector McDonald's already done her homework. Cross-referenced everything

I said with witnesses at the aerodrome, I'm sure.”

McDonald couldn't resist letting me see her appreciation for the nod: just a softening around the eyes—a pat on the head was ambrosia to the ambitious. Her look let me know she wouldn't take anything I said personally after that.

Garnett stared at me again, letting his hazy gray eyes work for him. I could smell his aftershave; it had an overworked cloying personality that overpowered my wall of smoke. It made me think of YMCA locker rooms, dirty sinks, pink jowls and burning skin.

“You got a lot of enemies down here, Wildclown. Too many to be driving around without a gun permit,” he said

finally. Garnett shook his head. “What the fuck kind of civilization are we going to have if we let clowns tear around with unregistered firearms?”

“It’s registered. My partner’s bringing the permit.” I picked up my cigarettes; decided they wouldn’t do without a shot of whisky so pushed them into my pocket.

“He ain’t here yet,” Garnett grumbled. I saw something pass behind McDonald’s features that said the story might be different. Well, she was still a junior inspector. She wasn’t used to twisting the truth in the name of law yet—her poker face had holes in it. Elmo was already here.

Garnett continued to stare, the whites

of his eyes growing red and angry. Finally he slapped the table. "I can't get over the attitude you bring in here!" He shoved the papers around in front of him. "A fucking peeper in clown makeup! The same asshole that stirred up all the shit down here." He tried to tidy the file in front of him. "You got a lot of the boys charged or discharged. A lot of my friends."

Garnett tossed a nervous glance back at McDonald. She was new, probably a replacement for one of the corrupt inspectors. And being new, he couldn't know how she'd take it if he decided to use the phonebook on me.

"I barely do any peeping," I growled back. "And I can't help it if Authority is

dirty. Do your own housekeeping and none of your friends would get discharged.”

“Least you could respect...” Garnett blustered. “Some of those men had friends.”

I glared at him from under my hat—tried to put as much of myself into it as I could. “Are you going to tell me why you brought me down here?”

Garnett blew a long blast of wind, and then snapped his fingers at me “The blood sample we found at the aerodrome bathroom matched Daniel Rutherford’s type. We need time to do the DNA match—the machine’s on the fritz—but it’s enough for me. You know anything about the blood?”

“I already gave a statement. I found the blood and I gave it to you.” I shook my head. “And I was told that Daniel was a big boy and it was too early to expect foul play, or to classify him as a missing person.”

“Well, he has a powerful daddy who called us in—didn’t feel right about you. Maybe you lost him. Maybe you’re part of a kidnap,” he growled. The effort of containing his violence sent a sheet of sweat over his face. “And we asked people at the aerodrome. You were feeding him drinks—maybe softening him up?”

“He didn’t need any help with that. And he was drunk when the *Yeltsin* arrived. He never really landed in

Greasetown.” I pulled out a cigarette and lit it. “What about the black van? Anything on that?”

“No,” Junior Inspector McDonald said. “Our highway guys have been quizzed going all points of the compass.” She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “Nothing.” A thin wave of perfume landed on me—no boots and zapbatons—something softer than I’d expect for a military girl. But a whiff of Garnett’s angry sweat was like smelling salts; put me back on the defensive.

“It’s got to mean something,” I puffed. “I saw the van idling before I got sapped. I was keeping an eye on him. There’s got to be a connection.”

“Yeah,” said Garnett, “you fucked

up.”

“Good one,” I snarled and smiled. “If the blood was his, that’s a bad sign, but it means something. Instead of wasting time resting your elbows in my kidneys, you should be shaking down the bars in town, asking taxi companies if they picked him up and spilled him somewhere. Save us all a lot of work.” I wanted out; my mind was filled with possibilities. “Maybe his friends were in the van. Took him on a bender. All he wanted to do was give me the slip.”

“We did ask around, Mr. Clown.” Garnett belched and rubbed the thin fur on his head. “His dad cut him off from the company accounts, so he’s only got the cash in his pocket. He’d have

surfaced by now.”

“A drunk without money can go a long way without cash in hand. He had a watch, cufflinks. Who knows what else he could have pawned. He was wearing a cashmere overcoat that would net a hundred at least.” I held my breath a minute, not really believing what I was about to say. “When he’s thirsty and begged and borrowed out, he’ll get God and make the phone call to his daddy.”

“He better.” Inspector Garnett glared. “And until he does, you’re the last person to see him.”

“I don’t know where he is, but I’m going to find him,” I hissed.

“Well, we’ll all breath a sigh of relief later...” Garnett stood up. Sweat from

his forehead spattered on the desk.
“We’ve still got you on a weapons violation.”

I continued to glare. “My partner’s going to bring it in.”

“You can cool your heels in the lockup until he does.” He swaggered to the door on his fat legs. Junior Inspector McDonald looked apologetic as she followed his sweat-stained backside to the door. “Until I see it, you stay put.”

End of this eBook sample.

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books@gwellstaylor.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

Still based in Canada, Taylor continues with his publishing plans that include additions to the Wildclown Mysteries and sequels to the popular Variant Effect series.