

When Graveyards Yawn

First Book in the Apocalypse Trilogy

1

The dead man looked at the clown and smiled. The clown was draped over a chair and desk across from him in a semi-intoxicated state of contemplative repose, and was too busy studying his reflection in a hand mirror to notice the nervous gesture. The clown's small black eyes studied the image in the mirror with something like the concentrated discipline of an astronomer. They squeezed into tight whirls of flesh and pondered, peering at the silvery surface from cavernous sockets in a right then left canted head as though such contortions could help him fathom what the eyes saw. A hazy border of greasy fingerprints obscured the image more giving the reflection a dream-like quality. The clown could easily make out the dark spiky hair that grew to his shoulder and the tip of his nose painted black. By lifting his chin he revealed a wide grin scrawled across his white-powdered cheeks, by dropping it he showed scripted eyebrows swooping up and over the tall forehead in exclamation or terror. They wrinkled, gleaming with sweat. Perhaps they posed a question.

An ill-fitting coverall hung on the big man's frame with all the sophistication of an oily tarp thrown over discarded car parts. The apparel was decorated with faded colored spots that vied equally for notice with stains of various sorts. His boots were black and heavy, better suited to combat than office work. They were crossed on the desk, and threatened to upset the telephone where it had been pushed with a pile of papers and overflowing ashtrays.

"What?" The clown drifted from his reverie. His gaze fell evenly on the corpse that sat across from him. "What?"

"We was talking." Said Elmo, always reluctant to prompt his boss. "About the Change."

"Oh." The clown's eyes did an inward turn, pupils flashing for memory. He dropped the mirror in a desk drawer, slammed it. "You remember the earthquakes, Elmo!" He leaned back in his chair with an air of authority, but a thin quaver in his voice denounced it. "Airplanes fell from the sky. There were riots and civil strife! And that millennium bug..."

"True," rasped the dead man, exhibiting a rare display of assertiveness. "But could'a been coincidence, could'a been anythin'." He gingerly nibbled a yellowed fingernail. "Could'a been the ozone, or the greenhouse gases!"

“Rumors of war—nation rising up against nation! And all that cloning...oh that was bad!” The clown suddenly animate lurched forward, pounding the desk. “It’s not coincidence! It’s all there in the book, that Bible! John saw it didn’t he? And it wasn’t any hothouse effect!”

“But the Bible talked about seals and lambs and such. I ain’t seen no lambs nor seals.” Elmo’s hands shook, almost overwhelmed by his own bravado. “I seen hardly any animals at all.”

“That’s where we let ourselves down. It’s not going to happen like a TV show. The world won’t end after the closing credits or following a commercial break.” The clown swept his legs back onto the desk as he tapped his forehead with index finger. “We’re going to have to think about this one, Elmo. Think about it! A lamb might not be a lamb, so to speak. Could be a man or a thing. Could be a lamb.”

A stream of derisive air shot from between Fat Elmo’s pursed lips. “Still ain’t convinced.” He hissed. “Nations is always rising up against nations. And a lamb is always a lamb where I come from! And seals, I ain’t driving to the coast just to see them.” He drew a curtain of silence as he crossed his arms.

The clown silently studied the dead man. His partner’s head was round and the black skin on it was drawn tight over the exposed crown. What remained of his hair was fair, almost a strawberry blonde, and long and lanky. Elmo had pressed or ironed the kinks out of it. It could have been the bleach he used that pacified the ancestral convolutions. Large dark eyes sat in a very thin face with a broad broken nose splayed across it. A long skinny moustache trailed over thick lips. As always, his clothing was impeccable. Even with the frayed cuffs his dark wool suit was head and shoulders above of the clown’s ensemble. He even had matching silver tiepin and cufflinks. The slack sag of skin against cheekbone hinted at Elmo’s need for re-hydration.

Suddenly, the clown’s eyes burned with revelation. Leaning forward on his elbows he barked, “For Christ’s sake, Elmo. You’re dead!”

Fat Elmo shifted nervously in his chair then rolled his eyes at the ceiling as though a suitable rebuttal might be written there.

“Course I am!” His eyes dropped beneath loose lids. “Still don’t prove it. Just ‘cause I’m dead...”

“The dead rose up from their graves...” The clown started, but Elmo was saved from this difficult position by the annoying rattle of the telephone. Glaring, the clown scooped the receiver up and wedged it between his chin and collarbone. “Yeah.” His inky black eyes darted back and forth. He wrinkled his eyebrows then picked at something under a thumbnail.

“This is Wildclown Investigations,” the clown whispered, as the dead man across from him strained his leathery ears toward the squeaky chipmunk voice on the phone. Elmo’s eyes were otherworldly in the extreme shadow of the office, bordered as they were by sooty black skin. The inconsistent lighting from the street was sending flashing bars of

lightning through the blinds—the lamp on the desk flickered as another blackout loomed. Madness nibbled at the edges of the scene.

“Yeah, I’m him. I’m Tommy Wildclown.” The clown repeated, drilling a bony finger into his nose. He made a flicking motion, then gestured for a cigarette. With creaky deliberate movements, Elmo produced a pack and tossed one to Tommy, who lit it with a match.

“Yeah,” he said as Elmo noisily slurped water from a glass.

Tommy continued like this for some time, chanting his approving mantra. “*Yeah.*”

The dead man passed the time lifting and flexing his thin legs where he sat. He hoisted a foot up to chest level by gripping an argyle-covered ankle and held it there a few seconds before repeating the process with the other leg. The post-mortem aerobics produced creaks, snaps and rubbery thrumming sounds from the dead muscle and connective tissues. Irritated, the clown pressed a petulant finger to his puckered lips. Elmo stopped stretching, cowed, but continued to shift uneasily in his chair. All dead people had Elmo's problem. The joints froze up with extended inactivity.

“All right!” Tommy growled as he crashed the receiver into its cradle. Elmo’s eyes snapped wide. “God-damned, son-of-a-bitchin’ Christ!” The clown leapt to his feet. “Damned if I’m not going to have to work.”

Elmo’s face made crackling sounds as he worked up a grin. “Got a case?”

“Yeah,” said Tommy pouring two four-finger whiskies. “Seems some lawyer got himself whacked, and he’s pissed right off. *Shit.*” He raised his glass and smiled. “He’s coming over which means money, Elmo. No more of this sitting around, this senseless fucking arguing.”

Elmo declined the drink offered opting instead to fidget noisily in his chair.

Tommy drank. He sauntered to the window, made scissors of his fingers, cut a hole in the blind and peered out at the flickering lights. A big Packard sizzled by on the rain slick street—its retro-fenders glistening like wet blisters. It was a dark afternoon. The sun hadn’t broken the cloud in years.

The clown’s teeth clinked against his glass. He wiped whisky from the corner of his mouth. Quivers ran from his shoulders to his hands as he downed the rest of the drink at suicidal speed. He glanced back at Elmo creases of fear marking his painted cheeks. The dead man watched him calmly.

I watched the scene from where I floated near the ceiling. Tommy’s nervousness had nothing to do with the fact that Elmo was dead or the impending mayhem inherent in any criminal investigation. It was me. I was about to possess him and he didn’t like it. Every time he got a case, I stepped into his head and like Pavlov’s slobbering dogs, the clown was conditioned to expect it. Not that I was a goblin or a devil. I had no interest in making him vomit, levitating his bed or forcing him to speak in tongues. When I took over I worked. He didn’t like it because he couldn’t remember anything that happened when I was in charge.

That bothered him. And so his reluctance to enjoy the work on the rare occasion that it came. I guess it would bother me too.

I was in no rush to take over just then. It had been a while since our last case and I spent the time between them in my invisible, odorless state. The longer I did that, the more complicated my love-hate relationship with corporeality became. I enjoyed my time in Tommy Wildclown's body, but I had a habit of getting hurt when cases came up and I was no fan of pain. Neither was the clown and he was the one stuck with the bruises at the end of the day. But understanding it didn't make me stop.

Chapter 2

I walked to the desk, set the empty glass down, and refilled it. Elmo fidgeted across from me. His eyes were fixed in a slack-lidded stare unaware that anything had happened to his boss. I pushed the glass against my lips—ran its cold pucker over them for a moment—then drained it. A good drunk was always tempting in the first giddy moments of possession. There is nothing like drinking as deep as a fish and feeling it when you spend most of your days hanging around ceiling fans with cigarette smoke for company. But as usual, Tommy was running at a fair intoxicated clip already, and I had to be sober enough to handle the interview with the lawyer. I had an impulse to knock another one back anyway, resisted it for a second and then gave in. That's the way of it. I'm not back in a body for five minutes and I'm all impulses. I could argue that the booze kept my host sedated wherever he lurked at the back of his mind. But the truth was, sensation was a drug that I became instantly addicted to.

"Elmo," I said, pleased with the sound, pleased with the sight of the dead man—even pleased with the bite of the fiery hemorrhoid that dictated terms to Tommy's nether regions. "When this lawyer gets here, I want you to keep a close ear to the door from the outer office. I never trust a dead man. Present company excepted."

"Sure, Boss. I'll keep an eye out for him." Elmo nodded and climbed to his feet. No offense was taken.

He left to take his seat by the lamp in the waiting room where he kept a pile of yellowed newspapers and tattered magazines. I had told Elmo the truth—I didn't trust dead men. They had different motives. Things outside of normal human experience governed their actions. I couldn't figure Elmo. He worked slavishly even though Tommy was a good six months behind on his paycheck. I couldn't figure me. I made the claim that I hated injustice, but there I was taking over another man's body. What could be more unjust? Of course, justice is a word and any word can be conveniently lodged in a web of semantics. I also made the assumption that I was dead so it could be argued that the words required definition before the debate could ensue. So my unique perspective made me a little protective of Tommy Wildclown. It's not that I liked him but he was my only doorway to the land of life and limb and though the rigors could be painful, I knew that to remain in my incorporeal state—devoid of sensation—would drive me mad in time. I raised the refilled

glass, finished it off in one lusty bite then slid the bottle back into the right hand drawer of the desk. I stretched and flexed my borrowed musculature.

Tommy stood about six-one when he didn't slouch. His shoulders were heavy with long arms made strong from lifting whisky bottles and chronic masturbation. Yes, they broke the mold before they made him. He had an almost constant erection. As always it was urgently present beside the .44 automatic that was thrust through his pink skipping rope belt. For a moment, I imagined Tommy's warped and buckled soul residing in that particular part of his anatomy during possession. It wouldn't surprise me—of course, nothing does.

I yanked open the top drawer and pulled out his mirror. I studied what I could see of my purloined face. The eyes struck me right away. They were painted black and sinister as though drawn on by the devil himself. I noticed the makeup was smeared on the left side and mended it with pancake and greasepaint from the desk. I had tried to remove the stuff the first time I had possessed Tommy, but his psyche had bucked me off like a bronco at the very idea. I had been poised with cold cream and towels when without warning he appeared as a memory of rage. I was flung from him like a sneeze. Life is full of compromises. The deal was I could inhabit his body to do my detective work, but I would have to do it dressed like a clown. *Oh joy.*

Tommy lived life simply, slept and ate at the office and wore functional if austere clothing. He kept another spotted white coverall draped over the coat rack in the waiting room, and one in the trunk of his car. Fashion free and painfully utilitarian. I had made the mistake once of thinking the others were clean. Tommy went to the airing out school of laundry.

I carefully re-drew the tall false eyes on my forehead. *When in Rome, right?* Then, I put the makeup and mirror back into the drawer and closed it, before sitting and kicking my big black boots onto the desk.

Elmo poked his head through the door. "Client's here, Boss." He disappeared with a snap of skin and was replaced by a tall thin gentleman in the early stages of death. His face was a mottled blue and gray hue with stains of dark purple shadowing each eye. It took a long time for oxygen to leach out of blood when it happened from the inside out. It made for some startling skin tones. From his complexion, I judged him to be recently deceased. His almond-shaped face was crowned with an expensive fedora that hung low over his brow—I immediately liked the hat. A crisp gray sharkskin suit showed off a lean and angular form. His large wool overcoat was draped across thin shoulders.

I rose and reached out to shake. The dry skin on his extended hand tickled the hairs on the back of mine and I giggled reflexively. I quickly covered my hypersensitivity by coughing and gesturing to the chair I kept across from me for clients. He set himself into it like a jeweler would a prized gem in gold. It was common among the dead to act like that for a while—all eggshells.

I returned his gaze across the desk.

“Mr. Wildclown?” His voice was not so thin and reedy that it couldn’t carry the tone of genuine disbelief. He looked at my painted face with something like horror.

I nodded, “and you’re…”

“Conrad Billings.” He screwed up his eyes, then tilted his head from side to side. His chin dipped, lips forming an ugly triangle. Carefully, he lifted the hat from his dead head with his dead hand.

A ragged hole sat high in his forehead about the size of a penny. By the shape, I figured it was the exit wound from a low-caliber bullet. Apparently he had decided to charm me with the sight of it because he set his hat softly in his lap.

“I’ve been murdered!” His words knifed out at me.

I pulled my bottom lip. “Looks like the bastard shot you from behind, too.”

Billings made fists of his dead hands and pounded the arms of the chair. “I want him!”

Chapter 3

“All right,” I said. “How’d it happen?”

Mr. Billings looked uncomfortable as he squeaked around in his seat. I knew the look; he was about to be fairly dishonest with me.

“You must realize the importance of—confidentiality.” His eyes did a conscientious little roll of self-possession until they came to rest on me again, quivering and uncertain like bad actors. They were indefinite and restless on either side of his hatchet nose. Perfectly unconvincing so far.

“You may not believe this, but under all this makeup, I’m a god-damned angel.” I sneered. “Besides, there are few people who take my word seriously.” I flashed him a quick idiot grin.

“May I ask?” The dead man nervously pulled out a package of cigarettes and lit one.

“The makeup?” I cut him off. “It’s none of your business.” In truth I only had vague suspicions myself. The clown’s thoughts, public and private, were only dull impressions to me. I reached into the desk drawer over my knees and pulled out a Photostat of my license. I had three copies. One I kept in Tommy’s egg-shaped plastic change purse, the other in the Chrysler’s glove compartment. I threw the license across the desk. Billings leaned forward, studied it for a minute then pushed it awkwardly out of the lamplight with his numb hands.

“Very well.” His face held an uncomfortable, chastised look. “I’ll have to trust you.”

“Yes, you will. Besides, even if I am just another asshole who thinks he’s a detective and happens to dress like a clown, you could use me to get whatever’s bothering you off your chest. It’s free for the time being.” I could feel echoes of Tommy’s psyche rise angrily within. I released the ire through a pair of clenched fists. I squeaked my chair. I liked the sound of it. Mr. Billings screwed up his face. He didn’t. He began.

“I was visiting a friend—er, a specialist, she’s a massage therapist who treats me for a back problem...”

‘*Bucking hips syndrome,*’ I thought, and grinned at the idea of a dead man trying to cover up his living tracks. He continued.

“It happened in the older part of town—the Downings—47th Street. I met with her for a treatment and must have fallen asleep. I woke up around three a.m. and I guess I was dreaming, because I thought I heard a baby crying. I was up, so I decided to go to the

washroom. I went—the washroom adjoins the bedroom—and when I was through I heard the sound of a door opening and closing.

“There must have been another blackout because I tried to turn on the overhead light. When nothing happened, I felt around on the bed and found my therapist. She was in a deep sleep—we’d shared a bottle of gin earlier, so I grabbed a candle from the nightstand—lit it—and walked out into the living room. The candle didn’t throw much light. I took about six steps, felt a minor pressure at the back of my head...then it was B-b-bl-blacktime.” His newly deceased tongue machine-gunned the word. ‘*Blacktime*’ was the catchphrase for the amnesia dead people experienced in the moments between life and death. The length of it varied from person to person.

“How long were you out?” I asked.

“I don’t know, you’ll have to understand my condition, having just been shot, I was rather frantic. Though I do not remember the moments immediately following my waking, I know it was morning. But the impressions I have of that time are funny—fuzzy.”

I nodded my head, lit a cigarette of my own. “So your therapist found you.”

“No, I was alone. I can remember wandering downstairs...it was a horror! I spoke to someone then, a little fellow—the night clerk, I think...”

“So,” I said. “What happened to your therapist?”

His face drooped like someone had yanked the bones out of it. “I’m afraid that is a problem. She disappeared.”

I clicked my tongue and felt adrenaline prick the hair on my scalp. The prickling caused a distracting shiver to itch quickly down the length of my back. “How long?” I drummed fingers on the desk—enjoyed the feeling.

“You must understand, that being newly deceased, my mind was preoccupied with many details. I spoke to Authority, told them what had happened. They’ve investigated, I’m told. My wife had to be notified...it was a very strange time.” He studied his fingernails like they were unfamiliar to him. Maybe he was realizing they would never grow again. Billings would soon find out there were varnishes on the market designed to thicken and preserve them. “They told me about you though.”

“Who?” I tried to imagine a single Authority Investigator who hated his career enough to recommend Wildclown Investigations.

“You were recommended to me by an Inspector Borden. He interviewed me later, after the initial questioning.”

“Don’t know him. When were you killed?” I snatched a notepad and pencil from the desk, wrote *Borden*.

“It was two nights ago, Thursday, the first.” He said this in hushed tones, as if we were at a funeral in the rain. “The Authority Investigators said they tried to question my therapist, but she has simply vanished. They’re still investigating—said they’d contact me if anything turned up. Jan Van Reydner is her name—my therapist. She hasn’t been seen since that night. Left her valuables and everything—apparently.”

“It will cost you a hundred a day to find your murderer, plus expenses.” I murmured, jotting the therapist’s name beside Borden’s.

The dead lawyer smiled and shook his head. “I was told you worked for two hundred dollars a week on your last case, Mr. Wildclown.” I could tell that for a moment at least he was feeling like his old self. “Nevertheless, I’ll pay you seventy-five dollars a day to get my killer. Authority is too big and clumsy; they’re investigating too many murders now—others that are more—more important. I’m at the back of the line. ‘Be patient,’ they said. Patient! It’s not right! It’s not right! I’ve been murdered, and they ask me to be patient!” He rose to his feet, dead voice alive with rage. He shook his thin arms at me. “Well, I’ll show them patience! I want my murderer dead! There’s a ten thousand dollar bonus in it if you make sure he experiences...that he feels what it’s...only his death is good enough for me!” He rasped—his face was strained and oily in the lamplight. A last wave of anger caught his fists and pounded my desk.

“Be careful.” I gestured to his fists, then the desk. “You’ve got to learn to take things easy. You don’t heal any more.” I spotted Elmo’s face peeking in the door. I shook my head—he vanished. I lit a cigarette.

“I’ll tell you what, Mr. Billings. I can’t guarantee I’ll kill him, but I’ll find him for you. Killing is still illegal in the eyes of Authority, and I don’t want to experience one of their jails. I’ll find him.” I smiled. “I’ll need your massage therapist’s address and a number where I can contact you.”

Billings fumbled in his vest pocket and produced a business card. He scribbled something on the back. It skimmed across the desk, hit the phone.

I read the address. “The Morocco Hotel?” I looked at him. “That’s where she lived?”

“No. That’s where we got together.” Billings’ eyes trembled under the weight of disclosure. “I first met her at the gym I belong—*belonged*—to.” He paused, saying goodbye to another facet of his life before continuing. “She convinced me to try one of her treatments.”

“How long did you know her?”

“About three months.” He looked away.

“She didn’t have a phone number?” I put the card on the desk.

Billings deflated. “Jan called me to arrange treatments. I assumed she was married too.” His hat had fallen to the floor as he had risen. He shuffled over, bent to retrieve it. From my vantage point, I could see that his left buttock was indented like a punched pillow from a wayward spring in the chair. It looked like Mr. Billings was in need of a lot more re-hydration therapy.

He cocked an eye over his shoulder as he set his hat over the mortal wound in his forehead. “You’ll contact me.” He whispered like he was exhausted.

“Yeah,” I said and watched his back go out the door.

Elmo came in and took his seat opposite me. His face looked anxious, but it was always hard to tell what was really going on in his head.

“Warm up the Chrysler, old boy. It looks like we’re working again.” I grinned through a cloud of smoke and watched him leave the office.

Seventy-five bucks a day wasn’t much, but it would buy us a few more of these dismal days and—what did Tommy say, more senseless arguments. *A lot of whisky!* The phrase floated up through my mind from the depths where Tommy’s spirit lurked. “It *will* buy a lot of whisky,” I agreed then pulled the bottle out of the desk and took a barefaced snort from it. I relished the burning pressure in my throat and the cool slap on my face and neck where I spilled it. I took another belt and smiled wildly at my reflection in the door’s dimpled window. I put the bottle away, checked the action of my gun and left the office with a cigarette clamped between my teeth.

Chapter 4

“Sleazebags will be sleazebags ‘til the end of time,” I said, gesturing to a pimp who counted money in the dim light of a flickering street lamp. Two foxy lady corpses in tight red skirts leaned provocatively against the front fender of his mint-green Cadillac. I lit a cigarette.

“No kidding,” muttered Elmo nodding his knobby head. His hands moved in swift practiced motions on the wheel. “The way I see it,” he continued. “Everything’s going to be everything ‘til the end of time.”

“Just my luck.” I chuckled at the absurd humor and flicked ash out the window. I imagined an eternity playing mental leapfrog with a loser who dressed like a clown. “No thanks!” I sneered at the idea and blew a thin stream of smoke between my teeth.

Our sleek retro 1965 Chrysler Newport roared past a group that stood on the crumbling curb. A gang of dead youths with spiky hair and pierced faces dressed in studded leather and chains made threatening gestures as we passed. The light from a truck they’d set aflame had the pavement at their feet glowing illuminating a body there. The tires of the Chrysler hissed like cobras over the damp streets, still wet with rain. Dark alleys yawned on either side of us and passed quickly like gaps in the giant bars of some terrible cage. I caught glimpses of figures moving jerkily in the amber light of bonfires. They were silhouette monkeys clambering through a grim jungle of twisted steel and night. In the air, there was the thick scent of oriental oils dead men used to keep their skins supple. Burned rubber colored the reeking breeze black. A group of pariah dogs quarreled over something that waved a walking stick. A shot echoed out of an alley. This was Greasetown after dark. The city’s original name was left behind with the world it belonged to. *Greasetown* had been adopted soon after the Change and it stuck, it was said, because after a walk down one of its streets, you got something on you that wouldn’t come off.

A graffiti sign three stories tall screamed *DOWNINGS*. The letters were painted in neon orange on the wall of a burned out warehouse. The residents of this fair neighborhood had put it up for reasons of their own—either as welcome or warning. Authority had little influence in this section, which was good, because it gave a guy like me freedom I never had in the controlled parts of town, like New Garden. Authority, which was all that remained of law and order after the Change, had reprimanded me a few times about my

occasional excesses. I usually just shrugged like a bad little boy and kicked my heels whenever I was dragged in. For the most part my cases were nickel and dime divorce stuff, lean on the odd creditor—nothing worth mentioning. After all, I knew they needed guys like me. Poor slobs who bust their knuckles and cheekbones because they think they know what’s right and don’t have the sense to become newspaper reporters or social workers. Guys like me who did the dirty work, bush beaters.

The car fishtailed silently through the puddles, and I had to lend Elmo a hand on the wheel. It was no trouble. The force of his turn had put me into his right hip pocket.

“Thanks, Boss.” Elmo chattered as I inched back to my seat. “That was one wild mother corner.”

“Just keep her between the curbs, Fatso.” I stared hard out the window and tried to unclench the muscles in my back and shoulders. My spine felt like a rusted spring. Elmo had a tendency to be a little brasher than other dead men I’d known. The majority of them walked around on tiptoes, trying to keep from scratching a body that wouldn’t heal. As one dead acquaintance, Smilin’ Riley, had told me, “A hangnail on a dead man. Fuck, you might as well sew a zipper on!”

I chuckled at the memory and vaguely wondered what had happened to him. Smilin’ Riley got his name because he had thin lips. Death had shrunk them to the thickness of a rubber band and stretched them back to his ears. I looked at Elmo’s full lips and knew he was one of the lucky ones—of course, he had to take care not to bite them. I watched him from the corner of my eye. He was a mystery. I knew only that Elmo used to be grossly overweight, and went by the uncomfortable nickname *Fat Elmo*. I suspected he worked as a detective or private eye at some time because he behaved more professionally than I did. I couldn’t prove it because the dead man’s memory was hazy and in some places blank. Since my time in Wildclown’s body was limited, Elmo’s full pedigree was a puzzle I didn’t have the leisure to investigate. I believed that Elmo and I were brothers in a sense. It was my assumption that like him I was dead. Our major difference being that he had a body; I did not. As a result I was forced to hitch a ride on Tommy’s square-wheeled wagon.

I had few clues to where the two of them had met and they, true to form, shared the ignorance—or were reluctant to discuss it. I had hoped that casual conversation elicited by me, and eavesdropped from my place near the ceiling would fill in some of the pieces of the puzzle; but they seemed to be disinterested in the past in any way other than how different things were now in comparison to it. I was in business with the pair for about six months before I quit trying to find out. Now, two years had passed. I was still pretty sure that neither of them knew I existed.

Elmo slammed on the brakes and I took a mouthful of dashboard. I came up cursing and spitting and looked out at a long roadblock that stretched burning across the street. Poisonous black smoke billowed from it.

“Queens!” Elmo shrieked in a voice that would have shamed a choirboy. My gun was already in my hand.

“Back it out!” I barked before throwing my head around to see a truck was pushed across the road behind. The cab was burned out—the windows were black and puckered like scar tissue.

Against the flaming barricade before us, strange shapes suddenly began to appear. Except for a few short squat forms, the majority of these Queens were tall and burly. They wore pink silk panties and black leather chaps. Brassieres cupped muscular chests while skirts of chiffon and taffeta curled and licked at the smoking wind.

I stifled a giggle. I could feel Tommy’s hidden mirth tickling at the back of my mind. True, they were as dangerous as hell, but they looked like assholes. Elmo began to chatter to himself—frightened. He knew the stories of Queens dismembering the dead as climax to their experiments in the necromantic arts—heavy on the *romantic*. I casually patted his arm with my gun, hardened my nerves, and stepped onto the street.

The pavement was greasy under me as I glared into the whiskered faces of the hormone freaks. The Queen leader stepped forward. He was huge, made taller by a mountainous blonde Afro. He completed the picture by sporting a leather pantsuit with studs.

“Fucker, you...!” He shouted through thick painted lips, then twisted his face in recognition. “You’re that Wildclown asshole.”

“Unfortunately for you,” I growled. “You’ll never see the real McCoy.” Inside me, Tommy’s spirit tittered wildly. My hand clenched the gun nervously. “You all look lovely tonight. But why don’t you girls find something else to amuse yourselves; go do your nails.” I was about five feet from the car. I could sense the approach of other Queens behind me. In all, I think I was facing twenty of them. The only thing keeping me virtuous was the .44 automatic that was plainly visible where it snaked around in my hand. Still, I only had ten shots in it and would never get another clip in. If these guys were glueheads or PCP freaks they might make a rush for me.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Wildclown.” The head Queen had a very good growl of his own. “I hear you’re crazy as a Varsol drinker.”

I smiled beneath my painted grin. “You girls and your gossip.”

The Queens had gathered in a thirty-foot ring around the Chrysler and me. Their leader moved smoothly toward me letting his spiked hormones work for him. His face was obscene.

“I’ll tell you another thing, my sweet-assed clown. I’ve heard that you like it like a woman. I bet you’d beg for it if we spanked you hard enough.” He drew nearer. “I’ve heard about your hard on, boy, I know you like to use it.” I noticed that as he approached he was slowly inching his lace panties down. He was now close enough that I almost choked on his cheap perfume. It smelled like turpentine and sweat. “I heard you like fuckin’ like a bird likes flying.” He dipped his whiskered chin and looked at my gun. “I also heard, my sweet baby boy, that you don’t kill people.”

“One thing you pasties have to learn about gossip,” I stared at the garish false eyelashes over his sick eyes. “It’s never a hundred per cent true.” I fired a single shot into his chest that lifted him off his feet and dropped him six feet away.

I spun on my heel and jammed my back against the car. “Next one of you sisters that moves, gets it—Blacktime!” I waved my gun at them. “I don’t play games like your dear leader, so whoever wants to be the runner up in the dead queen contest, step forward!”

Elmo gunned the engine. I swung the automatic around, trying to give them my ‘I eat nails for breakfast’ face—not easy in clown makeup. “Go! Now! Run away!” I yelled. “This isn’t the real world any more.” I fired a slug and tore open the thick calf of a bearded Queen in perverse yellow tights. He dropped shrieking. “Eight of you can still take the death walk!”

They turned and ran as a unit, taking their wounded comrade with them. Their ridiculous hairy asses bobbed beneath thin silks. My eyes glared after them then fell on the dead Queen. He lay in the street like some ill-fated Hollywood starlet. All he needed was a bouquet of withered roses and a shoe box full of yellowed love letters—maybe a princess phone, receiver off the hook. I felt like I’d done the world a favor.

I slid into the car next to Elmo. The engine roared hungrily. “Sorry, Fatso.”

“That’s okay, Boss. I never seen a man needed killing more’n that one.” Elmo muttered this as he drove onto the sidewalk and dragged past the barricade with a scrape of painted steel.

As we moved through the scene of death and destruction, I could feel Tommy’s soul glowing within. It was as though he were happy for the first time in his life.

“The Morocco Building,” I muttered and began to wrestle with thoughts of my own.

Chapter 5

The street lamp buzzed and sawed overhead like an angry bee. Sparks leapt from the naked bulb. The Morocco Building was constructed of dirty red brick. About fifteen stories up, a wood and neon replica of an Arab minaret hung awkwardly from its moorings on the roof. It leaned over the street menacingly. I watched as people instinctively darted from beneath its shadow.

Candles colored the building's many windows with an interior orange light too warm for this neighborhood. That light belonged in the hearth of some long ago home—not here on another godless night in Greasetown. My eye caught movement in a window, and I watched as a slack-breasted woman stripped with skinny arms. I turned away and nodded to Elmo. “Wait in the car” I said, got out, then hurried under the shadow of the derelict dome. It was Saturday night, around eleven—thirty minutes after I had killed the Queen. Rain continued to fall in an oily drizzle.

The double door hung from mismatched hinges with dirty light creeping out around it at odd angles. I grabbed the handle; it crawled under my grip. I pulled the door open and was slapped in the face with the reek of urine. I wiped my palms over my coveralls, then moved them up to the gun at my waist. It felt two bullets light. I cursed my carelessness and then did a quick inventory. Bullets had grown too scarce for such haphazard killing. Authority was doing their best to enforce their ban. But as always, the Black Market picked up any slack the legislation created. The Black Market loved a ban—it drove the price.

I walked over creaking floorboards to a front desk that resembled a battered truck fender. Just behind it was a ruddy balding head with a mixture of black and gray hairs straggling from it like dying weeds.

“Good evening.” I said to the cranium.

A pair of eyes peeked over the counter that were so deep and dark they seemed blurred as though hastily sketched on with a felt tip pen.

“What?” Drawled a voice of gargled glass.

“Interesting how you can cut through all the semantics and see the pure essence of the matter.” I replied glibly before continuing. “I’m looking for a woman—a massage therapist of the carnal kind, I believe. Her name is Miss, Ms or Mrs. Jan Van Reydner. For that matter she could have been a Mr. with a taste for women’s hormones and clothes.”

“Gone.” Growled the eyes before they looked away. “Gone...” The voice mumbled.

“I can see they don't pay you by the syllable.” I smirked behind my face paint.

Suddenly the eyes whipped toward me and flashed angry little egg-rings of white. A distant rumbling began. The eyes rose, followed by shoulders the size of an ox. His deep chest was covered with bear fur and heaved like an asthmatic's. He stood for a moment looking at me. The face perched high above me was scarred and dented. A baseball bat in one hand smacked the other with a dead meat abattoir sound.

“Fuck off!” He bellowed. My hair curled behind me in a garlicky breeze.

“I'm a detective.” I said, watching the results of years of steroid abuse climb up and down his arms like Swedish mountaineers.

“Okay, fuck off, detective.” I noticed for the first time that he had mastered the art of eye-socket dilation.

“I want to talk to her.” I insisted.

“Did ya hear me, shithead? Or do you want me to cut you another ear. She ain't here.”

“Excellent use of the rhetorical question, very good.” I leaned toward him. “My name's Wildclown.” I wasn't afraid, but for some reason my testicles were rattling around in my lungs.

He paused for a minute and clenched his craggy face. He was not beautiful. Under an ambiguous cherub nose was a scar where someone had tried to carve a smile across his cheeks.

“Wildclown...” He muttered, scratching his head with a bratwurst finger. “I heard'a you. You in good with Authority?”

It was a question with dubious implications. For all I knew it was Authority who had decorated his face. I gambled. “No. If Greasetown were an asshole, you'd put cream on Authority.”

His face blanked while tremors churned his muscular arms. The bat, which had been tenderizing his palm, stopped with a final thwack! My hand slid along my belt nearer the gun.

He smiled and flung the bat behind him, then reached out a mammoth paw. “Fuckin' -A, Man.” I slipped my hand into his and let him squeeze the marrow out of it. He gave it back and started talking. “Yah, fuckin' Authority!” He laughed. “You're okay, Wildclown. Not bad for a little shit in makeup.”

He leaned heavily on the counter. His callused elbows were rough enough to cut glass. He rammed a finger in his nose in introduction. “I'm Douglas Willieboy, man. I'm from down south.”

Now that he was using more than one syllable, I did detect a slight twang.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Willieboy. Can you answer a few questions?”

He laughed and slapped the counter. “Oh shit yah, for a price, Mr. Wildclown. There was a murder in her room up there, you know.”

Usually, when a mountain tells you this, you prepare to part with a sizable sum.

“How much?”

He looked me up and down. “Authority is looking for that Van Reydner broad. They got her room closed up tight. I think I’d have to break a law to get you in.” He rubbed his chin.

“How much you got?”

“Forty?”

He laughed, “I’d a done it for twenty.” Willieboy guffawed; his laugh was incongruously high and ladylike. “Forty it is!”

I pulled out Tommy’s annoying plastic mouth-purse and after a short struggle, produced the forty dollars.

Willieboy cackled with glee after he had cast an eye over me. “Shit, you even got a gun, Wildclown! You’re one soft touch.”

I grinned along with him. Beneath my consciousness, I could feel an instinctive pang of anger from Tommy. Apparently *his* pride was wounded.

“Okay.” I said as I watched the forty disappear forever into one of the sleeves of his T-shirt. “Where’s her room?”

“I’ll take you,” He grunted as he wrenched up a section in the counter top and moved his bulk toward the stair. Keys jangled from a chain at his thin waist. His battered denims, with the remnants of bleached out numbers at the cuff, told me of a Southern jail less one prisoner.

“C’mon.” He gestured with a large hand. “The elevator’s fucked. We’ll have to hoof it!” He walked to a wide stairway covered in moldy purple carpet—he began to stomp up.

I stomped after him. “What floor?”

“Twelfth.” He mumbled, laughed, then lit a cigarette.

“Twelfth,” I echoed, searching my pockets for my own.

Chapter 6

I was gasping and claustrophobic beneath my makeup by the time we reached the twelfth floor. Tommy didn't get to the gym very often. Upon arrival, Willieboy daintily removed the strip of Authority caution tape from the doorframe. He smiled as he did it. Then he wrestled with the lock and key. "C'mon, bastard." He growled. The name-calling worked because the door swung open with a hollow warped sound. Willieboy clawed and slapped at the wall inside until a light flicked on. A single dim ceiling lamp lit the room. The light from it etched a dirty yellow star above us.

"There, man." Willieboy gestured for me to enter with a quick snap of his head.

I walked onto dull brown wall-to-wall that had long since forgotten its original color. Two armchairs framed an ancient television and a tattered sofa bisected the room.

"Thanks." I said. "Mind if I look around?"

"Nah," he grunted. "Just don't take nothin'. We're holding her stuff until she comes up with the rent she owes."

"Did you know her?" I asked, idly gazing around the room. My guts jumped as I made out a large dark stain in the middle of the rug. I moved toward it.

"Nah." He mumbled as he flung the chain of keys from hand to hand. "I only saw her the once or so. Great lookin' piece with red hair. Her tits was out to here!" He made an exaggerated motion with his hands. I hoped he was exaggerating. "I just started here a couple of weeks ago. She dressed real fine and had an ass she could roll cigarettes with, I'll bet. She was kind'a snooty though—didn't have the time of day for me—or nobody else who didn't pay."

"Didn't pay?" I said as my fingers probed the sticky darkness that smelled of must and old pennies.

"Sure, she was a go-girl, you know. Oh shit, she might'a said she was a professional massage therapist or whatever, but I know she was a PRO-something else." He winked. I think he winked. I couldn't tell. His eyes were two bony caverns in the overhead light. I winked back anyway. It was one of those man-things.

"She just left?" I said absently, peering into a doorway that opened at the back of the room. There was a bed in it.

“Yah, so far as I know—course, I didn’t see her go. I was off that night. Hard to figure her leggin’ out without her silkies and stuff. Anyway, if you wanna talk more, see me at the desk. I been havin’ a shit-load of trouble lately with dead punks in the neighborhood. Jesus, those fuckers are hard to kill and they think they own the place!” His bulk moved from the doorway, a glassed picture of a schooner glinted on the wall outside.

“Lock up when you’re done!” He barked over his shoulder.

I nodded and walked into the bedroom. The bed was unmade and I could just detect the sour reek of baby oil. I moved to the closet—the door hung open. On the floor, a small travel bag grimaced at me with brass teeth. I pulled my mini-flash out of my pocket and quickly probed the floor with its fairy light. Beside the travel bag, a rectangle of wheel marks in the carpet told me a larger companion suitcase was missing. Farther in, shoes, purses, belts: the normal tangle you find on the floor of a woman's closet. My flash winked across the shoulders of a line of dresses. I brushed them. They swayed like the Supremes.

Van Reydner was about medium height, if the dresses told me anything, and she wore a particularly flowery perfume. There were enough gaps on the rack to make me think a dress or two could be missing. I shrugged at the heaviness growing in my shoulders, then pulled the chair out from under the vanity and sat on it. I had to be careful now that I had been in Tommy’s body for a few hours. There was a tendency to get overwhelmed by sensation at first, followed by bouts anxiety and introspection as the emotions piled up.

What in hell was I doing? It just wasn't like the old days. *What old days?* I couldn't remember them, any better than one remembers a childhood dream. Memories did come at me like shadows sometimes; but they were familiar feelings without a narrative, unrecognizable faces and places, nothing more. I just knew that life had been simpler then. Bodies stayed dead, and detectives possessed their own bodies. Impulsively, I tried to remember a time before I knew Tommy, before my death if that was what had happened and immediately felt the usual sharp pain. It always happened. For some reason, what was left of me refused to remember what I was before. The only thing I knew for sure about myself was that I was a detective. At least that was something. I had to get up, get working, get moving. That was something too.

I pulled the chain on the lamp that rested atop the chipped enamel surface of the vanity. It didn't work which didn't surprise me. Nothing worked anymore. Instead, my mini-flash's dollar coin light scanned the wrecking yard of new and used makeup and creams scattered around it. In an ashtray was the crumpled black nub of a cigar among a host of lipstick-stained cigarette butts. It was a cute little thing really—nothing big and Cuban about it. I pulled it out. It smelled like coffee or Irish creme. I pocketed it, then opened the single drawer and snooped inside—more makeup—a card for Simpson's Skin Tanning Salon for the Deceased. I almost thought that was strange, but matches of the kind were common. Advertising for afterlife products was an aggressive business. Flipping the matchbook over I found five numbers written in a strong hand. I put that in my pocket too, then rummaged a

little more. She must have had an appointment book. Of course, if she were on the run, she would have taken it with her.

I froze when the floor creaked in the outer room. I clicked off the flash and whipped out my gun. Dropped to one knee, I waited. Another board creaked, followed by the sound of cloth rustling. Edging forward quietly, I pushed a sliver of my eye around the doorframe.

Three dead men fidgeted in the doorway—the hall was a curtain of black behind them. One of them carried a double-barreled shotgun. He was very old and decrepit. His skin looked dry and cracked, and was heavily stitched with green shoelace around the jaw. Hair like weak spider webbing trailed at his shoulders. From his movements, I could tell he was the leader. The other two were in equally bad shape and dressed the same, in filthy knee-length overcoats. One had dark green lichen or mold on the left side of his head; the other was missing a shoe. A mangled foot showing yellow bones protruded from his ragged pants leg.

I listened.

“Dis da’ room, now dammit. We do wadda boss wants. Dis da’ room I knowed it.” The leader hissed. “Horley, got da jooze man?”

Automatically, I ran an inventory. They were obviously derelicts—the smell that tortured the air in the room gave that away—likely hired on a one-shot deal. I was positive all three were dead—which was bad. Eight bullets wouldn't guarantee a take down on any one of them. I knew I could take the head off the leader, but that would leave me with a scratch and claw finale with the others. My guts told me the dead men wouldn't respond well to a calm discussion. I watched the machine-like clasping of their withered hands. Their muscles would be like woven leather—hard to rip or cut. I took a bead on the leader's head.

“Okey,” he garbled in a guttural lipless slur, teeth clicking like a typewriter. “Doot!”

A flame flared in the hands of one of his cronies and a glass bottle of gasoline appeared in the hands of the other. The rag atop the bottle burst into flame and for a moment they stared wide-eyed. The dead feared fire. Their bodies go up like tinder. I knew this. With all the preservatives and oils they used they burned like torches. I'm glad I knew this because when the dead leader took the bottle and raised his arm to pitch the cocktail, my gun roared once. The bottle disappeared in a ball of flame—so did the dead men. The shotgun blazed, and the wall came away over my head.

I glanced in and saw all three doing a fiery dance. They were screeching, staggering and rolling—setting the whole room on fire. The outer doorframe burst into flame along with the hallway outside. They must have splashed a lot of gasoline around. In a moment, I knew the whole building would go up.

I turned; the only way out was the window. Twelve stories down—no net. That was the flaw in my plan. I slipped my gun away, and tore the sheets off the bed. I caught a glimpse of myself in the vanity mirror. In the eerie red light, I looked like some terrified clown in Hell. I knotted together the sheets and a blanket, then kicked the window out. Above me, I

could see the fake Arab minaret hanging drunkenly over the street. It was about fifteen feet above me, but its wooden supports looked inviting. A quick climb up onto the roof, and down the fire escape. Easy.

The dead men were silent, and the heat of the flames was growing intense accelerated by the tough old flesh and ratty clothing. I turned back to the room to attack the vanity chair. In moments, I had it apart and had fashioned a crude grappling hook from its chromium legs. I knotted the sheets to this and leapt to the window. The flames were already licking the frame of the bedroom door. I glared down at the street below. News of the fire had traveled fast. A crowd had gathered. They chanted, "Burn, burn, burn!"

I tested the weight of the hook in my hand and swung it upwards. It lodged in the wooden framework on the first try. Doing my best to grin like Captain Blood, I tugged twice on the sheets and launched myself into space.

There wasn't even a single sound of protest as the whole structure came off the building. Not a creak of wood, no groan of tortured nails it just came off of the building like it had been balanced there awaiting the exact addition of my weight to upset its ancient equilibrium.

I think I screamed once as I fell toward the street with the strange, crumbling structure. I clung tight to the sheets. I really didn't have anything else to do. I remember a sharp, searing jolt to my shoulders, and a powerful tearing of wood. Then falling again. Then another jolt, a wild swing and a tooth chipping slap into bricks. More falling.

I tasted blood—there was another crash of wood and bricks and human—then a darkness that was complete. Which was strange.

Chapter 7

I awoke with a dizzy, sickening sensation. Strange, because since I had become what I am, incorporeal, a spirit, whatever, I had never lost consciousness. In the two years since my emergence from utter blackness, I had never felt any sensation that could be termed physical when dispossessed. I could hear and see—nothing else. Now nausea. I floated over Tommy's body where it sprawled across the back seat of the Chrysler.

“He going to be all right...” Elmo’s muttered to himself behind the wheel. His worried eyes appeared in the rearview mirror. “Yeah, he going to be fine.”

The closest thing I ever had to sensation when in my nonphysical state occurred during the process I used to prepare for possession. To take over, I had to link up with the pleasure center in Tommy’s brain. I don’t know if that’s what really happened, but I seemed to have some ability to excite his lower brain functions and trick him into an internal world of fantasy. I would begin by broadcasting provocative sexual images until I felt or saw their echoes mirrored in the nervous activity of his brain—tiny motes of light appeared like fireflies. At the right moment whatever force separated us seemed to disappear and the vacuum created sucked me into the driver's seat. The odd time I could sense Tommy’s soul flit past me like a shadow before it disappeared. Most often I experienced nothing more than a moment of transition, of null space and it was done.

As I struggled with this impossible nauseous echo, I listened.

“Jesus, Boss, that was somethin’—shit!” He glanced quickly over his shoulder. “Swingin’ down like a jungle man.”

I looked Tommy over and saw that he was breathing; though his body was peppered with cuts and bruises. On his left temple, an ugly gash oozed pink into his makeup.

“Jesus, Boss.” Elmo almost hooted. “You’re the luckiest man I ever met. If that power cord didn’t slow you down—you’d be as dead as me—but flatter!” His laugh was like dry leaves rustling.

Tommy moaned menacingly below me.

“Shit—sorry, Boss—ress, res!”

As Elmo focused on driving, I tried to concentrate on my problems. I’d been possessing Tommy’s body for about two years now and had never lost consciousness. The closest I came to that was a strange hallucinogenic trance I experienced in the wee hours of the

morning. I thought of it as sleep, but the images I saw in these trances occurred within my field of vision, overlapping reality and would cease the moment I wanted them to. In the past, if I got into a scrape and Tommy was knocked out, I was simply expelled from his body. There was some slight disorientation of transition, but nothing more. *Transition*. That was the way it always happened.

I looked down at Tommy and chased all thoughts of possession from my mind. I had no desire to feel his pain. Egocentric of me, but I had to think. Who had sent the arsonists? They were looking for the room, so either they were there to get me, or just the room. I couldn't imagine that it was an old score being settled. No one could have known I was there. If they came to get the room then Billings' murderer had hired them to hide evidence. Unfortunately, there would be nothing left of them to question after the inferno.

Elmo took a corner at about seventy and Tommy slid headfirst across the back seat into the door. He muttered and moaned—snatched at his belt—there was no gun—then at his head. He looked at the hand that came away red. He struggled upright, and for an uncomfortable moment his head entered the space I was occupying.

“Where the hell am I?” He grunted, leaning forward. “Fuck, what a dream!”

Silently, he watched the road, forehead wrinkled, mouth moving like a sleep talker's. Elmo answered in his dry-lipped lisp.

“Took a fall, Mr. Wildclown. Course the fire was already lickin' yer boots when you made like the jungleman.”

Tommy's face looked quizzically at Elmo, then he burst out. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

It was Elmo's turn to stare. His dead eyes were cue balls as he gaped over his shoulder.

“The Morocco...”

While these two conversed, the car took the opportunity to drive off the road, crush the fender of a parked truck and bend a street lamp forty-five degrees before Elmo could wrestle it back under control. I was glad Chrysler made big cars.

“Christ!” Scolded Tommy, hands clutching Elmo's headrest. “Would you watch what you're doing.” His fingers dropped to the skipping rope at his waist. “Where's my gun?”

Elmo related the story of going to the Morocco Building and waiting in the car while Tommy looked over the murder scene for clues to Van Reydner's whereabouts. Tommy listened blankly; giving no impression that he heard anything at all. Elmo ended the tale with an enthusiastic narration of Tommy's escape from the fire—his incredible jerking, jarring descent as the old minaret fell with him. A thick power cord bolted up the front of the building slowed its fall. I tried to imagine the ridiculous thing lit up like some Islamic casino...but was cut off by Tommy.

“Great Elmo, great, but this Van Reydner chick what was I gonna do, fuck her or what?”

Elmo started to retell the story from the beginning. This time Tommy became excited.

“Right, right—we were having a drink right!” He sat back, rubbed his chin—then blurted. “My gun!”

“Here Boss,” Elmo handed the .44 over the seat. “I grabbed it off the sidewalk after I pulled you out of that wrecked Arab thing.”

Tommy snatched the gun and slid it through his belt. He pressed its cold black length against his groin with a satisfied sigh, but the reassuring steel could not chase all the doubt from his dark eyes. Tommy spent the rest of the trip to the office silent smiling weakly as he stroked his gun. I continued to float overhead. I wanted to talk to Mr. Willieboy.

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