

**The Variant Effect
PAINKILLER
G. Wells Taylor**

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CHAPTER 1

Borland cradled a glass as he sprawled on his swaybacked sofa, a half-bottle of whisky on the coffee table in front of him. He was too tired to do more than zip open his Variant Squad jumper for a bit of relief, so his belly bulged out and up toward the cracked ceiling like someone was inflating it.

Coming out of retirement was thirsty work.

He had set himself up under a dim lamp he kept on the cracked veneer side table in his living room. The television sat across from him. He'd already turned it on, but only got a bright blue screen. Since his reinstatement as a Variant Squad Captain he'd found enough extra money to hook up the broadband again.

The fact that he'd ordered it four weeks ago and the television was still a blue screen with nothing on it gave him something to chew about at coffee break if anyone would listen, but he didn't really care.

Borland never watched much broadband anyway. Getting drunk and arguing with a blue screen made as much sense as yelling at the news. But hooking it up in the first place seemed like something that a normal person with responsibilities would do.

Stay focused. You rattled some chains.

He'd been on his feet all day talking to recruits so he'd grabbed his bottle when he got in, stuffed a couple pillows and an old winter coat against the arm of the couch and propped himself in a drinking position. There was still time to get a bit of a glow before bed—and he found he slept better with a few solid slugs in him—at least for the first half of the night.

Also, the triple-meat sub sandwich he'd had for supper would start to react with the whisky if he was stupid enough to lie down too soon. Borland was not a fan of heartburn, especially now that he was on the road to recovery.

He'd never be healthy, and he'd never be young again. But at least he could be watertight.

He had just finished reading a *Team Omega* comic book that he took from Zombie's locker at the stationhouse. Two days after quarantine ended, the other baggies were cleaning out his personal effects when Borland happened by. The young man's involvement was weighing on him.

Not so much from guilt—he'd do it again in a minute, the sacrifice had been worth it—but he was stricken with an intense curiosity about the young man who picked the shield-name Zombie. Borland had walked past a second time as the locker's contents were being stuffed into a box.

Zombie's parents had been told what happened to their heroic son, and would be anxious to get their hands on his possessions: just toiletries and T-shirts, underwear and hairbrush. But it was Zombie's stuff, their little boy's gear.

The third time Borland walked past the lockers, the box was sitting there unattended so he reached in and grabbed the comic.

He didn't think mom and dad would miss it. And if things continued with the new Variant hybrid the way Brass' scientists were predicting; they'd soon have too much on their minds to worry about their dead son's possessions. Hell, they might even come to envy the boy in time.

Beachboy had said Zombie read re-issues of the actual *Team Omega* comics. The originals were published decades before, but had been re-released with upgraded artwork and re-purposed as graphic novels.

Borland couldn't have cared less about the history lesson and he told Beachboy as much, but he could understand the novelty of a full-color paper version of something, over the insubstantial virtual incarnations that were flickering on e-readers and tablets everywhere.

He left the comic book on the coffee table for weeks—forgot about it for a time when other things came up.

Distraction from hell...

The comic was ragtag, the paper worn from many readings. There was a picture of a kid eating radioactive waste on the cover. But Borland had been pleased to find that the issue included Zombie's namesake, *Zombie* the superhero. He turned out to be some dreamy character all in white and glowing green that had these foot-long eyebrows.

It turned out that his powers came from insomnia. Not being able to sleep gave him the ability to talk to the dead and communicate and fight through the dreams of others.

Borland sneered at the stupid pack of made-up geek talk, but he found the story and pictures interesting enough, and easier to read than a wordy eBook. The story followed Team Omega fighting the Robot Maker—a mad scientist who wanted to rule the world with machines.

Borland had read through most of it the last couple nights, but had just finished the final chapters and epilogue.

He flipped it back to read the last page again:

With the world safe from evil once more, the team returns to Omega Island to unwind...

One joker named Blackout wore a dark hood with a single eyehole. He got his powers from boozing.

Borland liked him.

Deciding he needed air, Blackout tucked the bottle of whisky under his arm and took the long stairs to the top of a tower to relax and, Borland imagined, get stinking drunk.

That's the spirit!

And that was when Blackout ran into the prissy caped hero, this Zombie fellow, standing up there in the dark, watching the full moon and thinking.

Blackout was at the top of the stairs, and drinking up a storm. Then he noticed light coming from ahead.

Blackout said: "Oh, Zombie, can't sleep either, huh? Want a drink?"

"No my friend, drink will not help," replied the taller hero. The full moon was behind him. "I never sleep. That is the source of my power. I could not speak to the dead otherwise."

Blackout drank.

"And because I never sleep. I can never dream," Zombie lamented, while Blackout kept swigging whisky in the foreground.

Zombie drooped into a sad pose overlooking the moonlit sea and said: "And without dreams, life has no meaning."

That switched in the next frame to Blackout sliding down the wall drunk saying: "Sure sounds to me like you need a drink."

Borland knew that was supposed to be a funny ending to the adventure.

He turned the comic over in his hands before setting it down. The cover was frayed, and the pages tattered. It was clear that the issue was important to the *Zombie* Borland knew.

He had read it to pieces.

Dreams.

The kid got something out of it. Maybe something that made him decide to quit training for a mechanized army unit to volunteer for the Variant Squad.

Maybe something he thought would give his life meaning.

But it was something that got him killed.

Death can have meaning, too.

Borland struggled to get comfortable on the couch, but the action brought a riot of twinges, cramps and pains from his rewired guts.

Felt better, but just a bit.

He'd lost some weight too.

But just a bit.

Brass had come through on his offer to get Borland's hernias fixed. That was five weeks ago, and the doctors said they wouldn't do it unless he lost a lot of weight, but Brass just started pulling strings. The big man was good at that. And like his bosses, he thought pulling strings didn't leave fingerprints.

Borland winced again as his muscles cramped around the steel threads.

The sutures on all three hernias still stung—a mess: umbilical, right and left inguinal—both sides of the groin. There were disconcerting ridges of sewn muscle tangled in twists of fat, and post-operative drainage left his scrotum looking like a rotten avocado.

Not much of an improvement.

But even with the pain and discomfort, he couldn't miss some of his old confidence creeping back.

How can you have confidence after what happened?

Because *you're* a captain and *they're* the little people.

He was overcome by a wave of nausea as new memories crowded. Ghosts freshly buried shimmered in his mind.

It didn't go well.

And right on the heels of the Parkerville tunnels and the business with Hyde's daughter—it was almost too much for him.

And then...

The hernia operations were supposed to be simple. Textbook. Easy.

A bore.

Nothing to write home about.

Borland snarled, swung his legs off the couch and poured himself a drink.

He rolled the cool glass over his lips and remembered the clinic.

No. *That was bad. The worst.*

Things hadn't gone well.

CHAPTER 2

The unmarked cruiser left Borland at the curb with barely a nod or a minute to pull his bags out of the back seat before the driver completed the circular loop of asphalt and tore away. The car pulled out with a lurch that caused Borland's door to swing shut.

That after a long drive through Metro morning rush hour traffic with Borland's guts nagging the whole way. The driver had said little as he navigated the crowded streets.

That would have been fine because Borland didn't want to talk, considering his destination; but it ended up pissing him off because the driver had to know who he was. He had to know something about Borland's past, if not about the recent events in Parkerville.

A week after his release from decontamination, there had been a gathering in the Metro HQ auditorium. Closed to the public, it included a long-winded and rambling speech from Superintendent Midhurst. Brass chipped in with an equally boring talk of lost heroes.

The higher ups had decided to link the squad memorial with Borland, Hyde and Aggie's official reinstatement to active status. Someone up the chain had decided the reactivation of retired captains would somehow seem hopeful against the background of Stationhouse Nine's first devastating win.

Lots of people in uniform died so words had to be said, but Parkerville was shut down and the threat slowed if not stopped. The Variant presentations in Metro seemed to be leveling off—for now.

The dead baggies had been cremated long before the memorial, while the surviving squad was still in quarantine.

Borland had felt cheated that they combined the events, and worse that he and Aggie had to share the stage with Hyde's hooded, but scene-stealing mystery. The old cripple had opted to ride his wheelchair to the event, even though Borland had noticed the cuffs and leggings of a new skin-shell suit protruding from his long black coat. He could have walked.

Playing the sympathy card.

He'd seen him at the stationhouse, mostly healed from his wounds, moving on his legs and canes like a mechanical toy.

But he got back into the chair for the big night.

Borland had trouble narrowing it down, especially since he'd consumed the better part of a mickey before the event, but there was something different about Hyde as he rolled across the stage.

He wouldn't say "confidence," but there was something in the way the freak held himself that spoke of willing compromise. If Borland didn't know better, he might have thought it was pride.

Hyde didn't save his daughter but he had tried. Was that all it took?

Just trying?

I'll have to try it some time...

Memory of Hyde's daughter caused a twinge of guilt, caused Borland's chest to cramp and draw him gasping back to reality.

He'd done some terrible things.

And Brass knew most of it.

But not all and the information they shared created a checkmate.

Nobody could talk. Or everybody had to.

Borland realized he was still in place, glaring down the driveway after the cruiser.

A thought had struck him: *The driver acts like he knows...*

But Borland knew his first years of service back in the day had enough uncomfortable truths and rumors attached to warrant some suspicion if not outright disdain or hostility.

Never get a break.

He winced as he hefted his bags and turned. The action brought a hard and painful tug from his hernias.

Borland stood where the flattened wheelchair curb led up to a short sidewalk that crossed a narrow lawn to the front of the building.

It didn't look like much. But that was a trick of the eye.

He knew from the website that the Shomberg Clinic was a sprawling complex of hospital rooms, dining areas and operating theaters hidden behind a 'false front' like the fake western streets in movie studio backlots.

This false front consisted of a main door and entrance arranged center to a set of four 30-foot pillars holding a paneled cupola that bore a spotlight pointed at the sidewalk. This would shine down where the circular drive met the walk. The driveway formed a tight oval around a bricked-in strip of grass bearing three crowded flower gardens.

The gardens reminded Borland of corsages.

The doorway and cupola were set on a large white-paneled building with black shuttered windows. It resembled a large house, its gaudy entrance crowded by tall thick cedars.

All of it was intended to evoke a colonial country charm but managed to remind Borland of a southern Civil War plantation house, slaves and secrets. A closer look showed him fake cedar shingle over aluminum siding, and false masonry glued to concrete.

Nothing old under the sun.

Coming in the drive, he'd already noticed the willows, blue spruce and pines that towered in groups around the property; giving the grounds a country club feel.

Paused before the entrance now, Borland could hear the unnerving repetitive action of many sprinklers: *Hiss. Ssskin. Skin. Skin. Skin. Click. Hiss. Skin. Skin. Skin...*

Everywhere water spurted or sprayed from spigots and sprinklers. A small army of people in blue coveralls tended the plumbing, moved about the grass and spring gardens with purpose.

On both sides of the winding drive coming in, Borland had seen sections and segments of brownstone wall construction with cedars and gardens hugging them tight. The fortifications suggested a maze, defense and battle.

And confusion.

Unless it signified a war on hernias? That was all they did at the Shomberg Clinic: eradicate the scourge of ruptured abdomens.

Borland managed to chuckle at that, was sure he would have laughed if he wasn't sober. He couldn't drink before the operation.

That was the deal.

And the hard part.

His face drooped into a frown as he hefted his bags and walked toward the entrance.

CHAPTER 3

A pair of middle-aged nurses with throaty, heavy smokers' voices scowled at Borland after taking his name and then they ordered him to have a seat in the waiting room.

He hesitated to give them a glower of his own.

What's your goddamn problem?

He crossed the carpet and paused at the open doors of the waiting room to frown at the crowded couches and chairs—hoping his toxic expression would free him from doing more than sitting quietly and waiting for his turn with the hernia doctors.

Borland resented the Joe Anybody approach but he'd already messed up his first *exclusive* crack at it, and he didn't want to—check that, couldn't *blow* it again.

One short week before, Borland showed up drunk for his appointment and the doctor that Brass had arranged for his pre-op wouldn't touch him in that state. When the sawbones asked Borland to leave and he refused, a couple of burly orderlies dragged him out.

They'd been nice about it, like the doctor gave them a wink or something—but the bulls deposited Borland on a bench at the curb and called a taxi for him.

He'd only meant to have a couple blasts to take the edge off. After all, it wasn't much more than a month after Parkerville and he was still feeling shaky with nightmares full of panic, spooks—and zombies now.

Ssskin. Let it go. Get past it.

Night terrors were old hat; it was the day terrors that he couldn't get used to.

That's why you're a captain and they're not.

The Variant Effect was on the rise again. Simple as that. He didn't believe Brass' projections that presentations were gradually tapering off, and he knew that maintaining a cordon around Parkerville was just a show for the media.

Variant was already in Metro.

Borland knew how it worked. The Variant Effect came out of the shadows, explosively. One minute, it was on the decline, the next you had presentations everywhere. And with a new hybrid on the loose, anything could happen.

Knowing that, it was understandable that he needed a drink before he'd let some stranger handle his testicles in a building full of scalpels. That was part of the reason Brass had arranged his surgery at the Shomberg Clinic.

It had an almost perfect record going back long before the day, and was the favorite of armies, law enforcement and athletes. It wasn't state-of-the-art in hernia repair; it was the art with only a one percent failure rate.

Safest place in the world to get it done.

So why are you worried?

Borland slapped a hand against the ornately molded doorframe and glared at the assembled guests, some rookies and others he knew would be veterans either getting old scars checked or new holes plugged. You could tell by the look. Anyone showing confidence either wasn't about to have his groin cut open, or he'd had it done before.

Most everybody looked nervous as hell. Family too, he guessed, and friends were packed into the large waiting area looking put out.

Then he realized with some chagrin that his eyes had lingered too long on a wrinkled old face—fat jowls sagging—white brows clenched over furious blue eyes.

Similar, he realized, if not exactly the way his own face would be—if he lived that long. Borland had to admit that his own rugged good looks had hit the road so many times that applying the term ‘good’ required some mental soft focus. But that was the way it was for the survivors. Time passed and the years had their way.

Borland covered the social discomfort of locking eyes with grandpa by gripping and pulling on his own tie—and playing with the lapels on his jacket.

He let a great puff of air buzz over his lips as he scanned the room trying to find a chair where he could hole up.

Private clinic maybe—but the waiting room was public.

Borland cleared his throat and lowered his gaze before bending to snatch up his bags. He shambled across the thick carpet to an easy chair covered in antique floral upholstery. It didn’t suit him at all, but the seat was wedged into a corner away from all the faces.

Borland was still feeling the squad’s first mission, and he’d tapered himself off the painkillers, thinking whisky could do the trick.

Then they told him to lay off the sauce.

His back and knees were killing him and there was a clicking noise when he breathed through his nose. The squad doctor who’d treated it said the septum was fractured and would require surgery to mend.

Thanks Aggie.

Crossing the room, Borland noticed that the old man read the move as rejection. He heaved himself out of his chair with a grunt to show his displeasure. A white plastic bag was wound around the old man’s wrist. French doors set in the wall behind him allowed Borland a backlit X-ray of its contents: pill bottles, toothbrush, razors and comb.

Borland huffed derisively and his nose *clicked*.

A life’s work in an airsick bag.

Borland dropped his luggage and settled into his chair, but something caused his hair to prickle. A sound: a curious clicking, tapping background noise that filled in the edges of the scene. Then he grumbled.

Phones.

All of them had phones, eBooks and palm-coms: a menagerie of wireless devices, one in every hand. *Touching base. Updating days. Messaging machines.* He frowned at the behavior. That was why Varion was gobbled up by the bottle-full—why the day got out of hand so fast.

Obsessive tendencies from cradle to grave.

Borland grunted.

Obsessed with their obsessions.

Fingers tapped and stroked at keys and touch screens. *Click, tap, and rattle, click, click, click...*

They were all the same. *Tappers. Clickers!*

No better than Biters, a waste of...

Ssskin.

He cleared his throat, compelled to make some kind of human sound to cover the mechanical whispering.

But the cough was answered by a painful throb behind his navel, and he burped.

The hernias got worse after Parkerville. He was a wreck generally, with an injured lower back, pains in his legs and bruises all over. And there were several deep ugly

lacerations on his face, neck and side that were barely healed. No question though: the hernias were worse. All the fighting had torn things up. When he sneezed now it felt like his guts were coming out.

A nurse appeared at the doorway and yelled a name. A rustle went through the gathering as a woman in her early forties got up, grabbed her bags and hurried after the nurse.

Borland's stomach made gurgling noises. His belly button had completely inverted, and the grapefruit-size hernia in his right groin bulged out under his belly. He had gas all the time and he couldn't get comfortable.

It was time.

He dropped his chin and peered around the waiting room: queer gold filigree against merlot wallpaper, all the furniture had ridged backs of highly polished wood. The legs too, they were carved into organic shapes.

Three sets of French doors opened the wall at intervals across from him and showed him a broad deck with a wooded scene beyond. Some men stood out there smoking, and Borland's hand instinctively reached into his jacket for his flask

Then he stopped.

He wasn't drunk now. It was early enough that he'd managed to get to the clinic without needing a drink. And that was one of the requirements. But they didn't say anything about *after* the operation. His flask was just a sampler. He had two bottles hidden in his bags.

For later.

You need the surgery.

He was tired of getting old.

They said he'd be at the Shomberg Clinic for six days minimum with time off between the surgeries. He'd be cooperative, but knew there was time to bend the rules.

Too crowded here.

He was always nervous in crowds. And with Variant Effect on the rise...

The nurse returned to the doorway and called another name. She waited, and then called the name twice more. The assembled guests shifted uncomfortably.

The nurse glanced back at her e-board and left the room.

Borland noticed a gorgeous young brunette on a couch who was either accompanying a male relative, or was about to make some surgeon's day.

There has to be an upside for them...

"Joe Borland?" The nurse's voice echoed through the waiting area and Borland looked over to see the woman scanning faces.

He waved to catch her attention, stood up, then winced as he grabbed his bags and followed her.

CHAPTER 4

The nurse ordered Borland to wait in a narrow hallway crowded by a long line of chairs. A pre-op doctor would soon go over the basics with him.

Most of the seats were taken by people chattering nervously or tapping on their palm-coms. He avoided inclusion by dropping into the nearest chair and sinking into himself. He lowered his eyelids to half-mast and crossed his forearms over his gut.

He hoped this posture would convince people he was dead, or at least asleep. So long as they understood that he was not open to interaction.

Not long after, the frowning old man from the waiting room stumped into the hallway and jammed himself into the last empty chair on Borland's left. The old man's plastic bag rattled.

The two men grumbled simultaneously.

And time passed.

The four doors across from them opened occasionally as patients were summoned. Then more waiting.

One stifling hour later, a man in a suit with thick glasses, bald crown and bluish jowls opened one of the doors. He held up an e-board and read Borland's name.

About goddamn time...

Borland followed him into a crappy office that looked like something you'd see in a low-budget movie.

Or like the Salvation Army had furnished the dump.

The doctor's expression was frozen in place. Oh he *fake smiled* once, but that was it. The man looked bored, distracted—like he was remembering another time and place. Borland was forced to repeat himself whenever he asked a question or answered one. The doctor had an accent...Eastern Europe? He had to be 35.

But the man's disinterest was soon getting under Borland's skin.

"I saved the world once, you know..."

He muttered this under his breath, but the doctor wasn't listening. The man sat at his desk across from Borland, scrolling around on his e-reader like he didn't care.

Borland froze.

A kinderkid? It's possible!

Then Borland realized he might have been studying the man too closely, but the doctor just glanced at him from time to time, looked up from his file to ask a question without focusing his eyes on anything.

What's his problem?

Borland wondered if the Shomberg Clinic had received the Variant Effect Alert bulletin that HQ was sending out to all health care providers and hospitals. That was bound to rattle anyone holding a doctor's license.

Maybe *he* was afraid of Borland. Especially with the doctor's age being what it was: did he think his patient was cooking the Variant molecule? Or was he afraid that the new hybrid in the bulletin might set off his own inner beast?

Borland shook his head and took a deep breath.

"I know too much," Borland mumbled matter-of-factly.

The doctor looked up then, asked more questions about Borland's health: Do you take any medication? When was your last physical? Do you have any allergies?

After much repetition, Borland managed to provide answers and clear up a few questions of his own, or at least as much as he wanted to know. He'd didn't care for the play by play.

Cut. Snip. Whatever.

That was when the doctor slipped in a bulletin of his own—how the Shomberg treatment stood up so well to scrutiny because it depended on the patients being awake during the procedure and did not involve dangerous anesthetics or lengthy recovery times Borland's mouth dropped open.

"What?" he asked.

"Drop your pants please." The doctor circled his desk and pulled a short stool over as Borland got to his feet.

The doctor sat and pointed at Borland's groin. "*And* underwear."

"I'll be awake for the surgery?" Borland grabbed at his belt.

"Pardon me?" the doctor asked, slipping on a pair of vinyl gloves. He peered up over his glasses as Borland repeated the question, and then answered: "Oh, yes. It simplifies everything. People do not realize how risky anesthetic can be during a procedure and post-operatively."

"But—I'll be awake when you do it?" Borland asked again, lowering his pants and underwear.

"I won't be doing it." The doctor contemplated Borland's hairy crotch and swollen belly.

"You really should have lost some weight," he sighed, looking up, sheathed fingers reaching out and abstractedly manipulating Borland's testicles. "We shouldn't even operate."

"I lost 15 pounds..." Borland grumbled defensively, feeling his face flush unexpectedly when the doctor told him to turn his head and cough.

"Not enough," the doctor replied, shaking his head, his gaze shifting up to Borland's navel. He stared at the swollen lump of flesh that protruded. Then he reached out and forcefully pushed it in.

"Hey!" Borland gasped, coughed and stepped back. He almost lost his footing when his pants tightened around his ankles, but he caught himself against his chair.

"You could lose 30 more." The doctor grabbed his e-board from a short side table and tapped something on the virtual keys.

"Inguinal hernias, left and right," he said, checking something off on the cartoon abdomen displayed on the e-reader's color screen.

He reached into the breast pocket of his lab coat and pulled out a large pen. He uncapped it, and then stroked it deftly across Borland's belly, leaving a thick horizontal line of black ink above the protruding navel.

"The surgeon will cut *here*," the doctor said, gesturing at the line before turning away. "He's not going to like the fact that you're *obese*."

Borland stared down at his swollen navel and sighed.

Obese?

He felt a sudden urge to hit the bottles tucked away in his bags. Call an end to the whole drama.

The hell with this!

But from Borland's point of view the doctor's black line appeared to curve down to either side beneath the plum-sized hernia like a frown.

He had to get this done.

"That's all there is to it," the doctor said, saving the information on his e-board and copying it to Borland's file.

Wincing at the painful throb in his abdomen, Borland pulled his clothing back into place, loosely fastening his belt.

The doctor held out his file—the flash card on it flickering as the data saved. He set it on Borland's palm. "Take this down to accounting. They'll tell you where to go from there."

CHAPTER 5

Borland had read the background on the website.

The Shomberg Clinic sold unique soft tissue dissection and repair that had an almost zero failure rate, so sufferers came from all over the world to receive the famous treatment. They used industrial production techniques in their war on hernias because the injuries were so common.

Dr. Shomberg had developed his innovative surgical repair techniques during World War Two to help young men who were unable to enlist because of their hernias. His repair soon fixed these recruits for service, and before long all branches of the military wanted his aid. His methods soon became the favorite of construction workers and anyone in a strenuous line of work.

And the repair was so solid his patients could get back to work or service in record time with little chance of re-injuring themselves.

Shomberg founded the clinic and the clinic grew into a hernia-repair factory.

Day surgery at most hospitals, the repair as Dr. Shomberg saw it required an extended stay for lasting results. So he developed an assembly-line method that involved constant waves of injured patients arriving and entering the clinic to match the waves of recuperating patients leaving after the three- or four-day repair cycle.

The various stages of overlap that occurred were responsible for the strange population Borland found wandering the clinic halls.

There were check-in and orientation day patients, operation day patients, healing day patients and final day—*get me out of here*—patients. The result was a motley crew of anxious, wounded and relieved individuals—all of them wishing they were anywhere else on the planet, but all of them thrown into a weird brotherhood of embarrassing injury, violation and release.

Everybody had a limp or soon would.

Check-in day caused a lot of stress as new patients inserted themselves into the clinic's production line and bore witness to patients a day or days ahead of them in the process.

Operation day patients were the worst. They could strike terror into any heart—tumbling out of their beds and shuffling through the ebb and flow of arrivals and departures smelling of disinfectant and body odors, and sporting grime and fear and various fright-wig hairstyles.

Each of them moving gingerly; fearing that any jarring motion might damage their recent repairs of flesh and steel threads, or worse, according to rumor, start a gory cascade of abdominal wall and intestines.

Borland hated it all and decided to do his best to avoid identification with any group. He wanted to go in like a Sneak Squad. Keep his head low, have the treatment and get out of there without experiencing any but the absolute bare minimum of human contact.

As he stumped along the carpeted hallway after the nurse, careful not to jingle his hidden *cranking* materials, he mused over his ill luck and growing thirst.

Soon. He thought of the dark brown bottles of whisky so near. *Soon*.

The halls and rooms were designed and built in the 50s, all Arborite and chrome, with 70s upgrades like faux stained glass lamps and dark wood paneling and room dividers decorated with super-graphics.

Time had stopped at an ugly time.

Borland wondered if that happened in efficient places. They were too busy doing their jobs in its deepest and darkest rooms—the OR and labs—unable to give more than a passing thought to decor.

Borland was aware of the ever-present hum and rattle of air conditioning units—the buzz and click of old light fixtures and the starched rustle of the scrubs worn by the nurses and orderlies.

He realized that the more he tried to shut them out, the more he noticed the sounds. And then he understood an important underlying factor.

He needed a drink.

Borland had been cranked for most of the last couple decades so sobriety was close to an alien concept. And that's what was pushing in on him, causing his ears to ring, allowing him to feel his pulse in his fingertips.

He needed a drink.

So he tried to distract himself with the nurses. They went by all manner of kind: fat, thin, broad, awkward or dippy; dressed in ill-fitting floral patterned pants and jackets.

And they made annoying rustling sounds when they moved.

As he glanced at their pastel forms he realized that the majority were approaching retirement. These ones either had their men or were moving into a new phase of life.

Join the crowd...

As he moved past a recreation room with a pool table, loungers and couches, Borland ignored the mincing nods of the new boys that needed friends, the salty glances of the seasoned who had stories to tell, and the normalizing, shifting gaze of those who desperately wanted to leave their hernias and all Shomberg associations behind them.

Borland had been through too much to fear a surgical procedure—even one he had to be awake for—but he knew enough about people and Variant to keep an eye out for the wrong kind of look.

There *was* a look, and he knew it.

The *Effect* was coming back and it could be, in fact was, lurking everywhere he looked in everyone he saw. Even in the doctors and nurses.

Everywhere, so then...

Then they wanted him to take powerful painkillers, lie down and have his abdomen cut open. He was supposed to trust a stranger to take him apart and stitch him back together.

They better have some world-class painkillers.

His hernias were 98 percent discomfort, two percent pain—he was used to them. He didn't care about his looks, so he could have put the procedures off pretty simply.

Until your liver falls out?

The nurse led him down the corridor, her voice a raspy horn of menopausal know-how, telling him about what he couldn't do and what he had to do.

“Don't remove your wristband. Don't remove your nametag. Wear it at all times,” she ordered and glanced at his tag as he followed her into the room. “Your number is 328-2. The ‘2’ stands for *you*.” She walked to the head of a very narrow single bed by the window. “This bed is number ‘2’, so you use it. Same as the closet.” She pointed at a pair of closets marked ‘1’ and ‘2.’ “Anything with a ‘2’ on it is yours.” She smiled through a mass of tanned wrinkles. “Your roommate is number ‘1.’”

Roommate.

“Who’s that?” Borland managed to hide his discomfort with the question. “I have to share at 200 bucks a night?”

“We’re not the Best Western, Mr.,” She looked down at his nametag. “*Borland*. Everybody gets a roommate at the Shomberg Clinic.” The nurse looked into his eyes. “Who knows, you might accidentally make a friend.”

Borland grumbled, scowling around the room.

“It’s a little late, but you can probably still get some lunch. There’s an orientation meeting at four o’clock,” the nurse said, pulling a pamphlet from where it was shoved under the pillow on bed number 2. “Bring that card. They’ll answer your questions there.”

She turned and in a flurry of action guided her wide hips out the door.

Borland set his bags by the foot of the bed and dropped onto the mattress with a loud *THUD*.

He looked through the window at a group of tall pines that grew over a walking path. They were rusty brown and green and somehow felt clean to watch.

CHAPTER 6

Lunch?

Borland knew it was late enough in the day for any meal to qualify as supper, but he was hungry from all the waiting so he followed the river of patients that flowed to and from the dining room.

They were milling about bored, coming and going, up and down the stairs. It was plain that if you weren't eating, you were walking around until the next meal.

It was an endless line of white hair and loose clothing, pulling magnetically, drawing Borland down the steps; they linked him to the daisy chain of aging.

He felt very old in such company.

Nothing new, he'd felt old for years, a fact pounded home by his hernias but for some reason the resolute, unrelenting shuffle of the hernia-borne, the operation and healing day patients; the core group of smiling gramps, hot wrinkles shot with red, chipped at his ability to confidently deny the overall affect of aging upon him.

He was feeling ancient and it was their fault.

This added to the fact that the gray beards automatically started to count him among their number, involve him in their mumbling irrelevance, made him reluctant to go to the dining room at all—*besides, no drinking, no point.*

And he'd never been big on company. The Variant Effect just made the apprehension worse. So Borland tended to eat at home or alone, choosing isolated places to sit or stand if he did have to be around people, especially when he was called upon to fraternize or like now, join the *crew* for dinner.

And especially if he was sober.

He needed a drink.

Then he imagined Brass setting the whole thing up. He'd know what the Shomberg Clinic was like, one of the strings he pulled would have told him how out of place Borland would be.

Brass was laughing...

Borland made his way into the room between 15 tables and 50 strangers and found himself exposed...too exposed. But then he'd walked too far, was up against a table full of patients snacking on cookies and drinking coffee, just a wall beyond them; nowhere to even sit and shield his eyes.

But a hand reached up on his left and patted his arm, drew him down to a seat between two total strangers. There was a group of five chairs around the table, and he sat closest to a man who looked about 35, was broad shouldered in his pajamas under a tousle of dark locks.

That left an empty chair on Borland's right, and then a rough-looking woman with rusty, over-conditioned hair. She had a denim vest over a stained pullover and green slacks. Her earlobes sagged from the weight of cheap brass jewelry.

Borland kept his eyes low after he sat, and then bucked up enough to nod quickly to the other guests, confirming their existence without drawing too much attention to his own. Then he started nervously arranging his utensils.

It was a mixed group in the dining room. New patients were being served lunch, and others in the repair process were cadging an extra bite or snacking, while healing day patients tried to make up for missed meals.

Borland didn't like it.

His discomfort must have thrown his instincts off too, because he got a gut feeling just then that something was wrong but he disregarded it. Too much was happening. It could have been brought on by the hockey dad, or been coming from the woman.

Maybe it was the weird little Chinese guy across from him listening to loud symphony music on his ear-buds, and slurping his water, but Borland got the feeling that something was wrong.

He could also blame the fact that he was drying out—sober, worried about spooks and zombies.

Why *zombies*?

Without the numbing effects of alcohol, he was flying sighted; his professional instincts frayed by awareness.

He still needed a drink.

And without one, his company was starting to draw him in and make him real with panic.

He tried to calm down by listening to the conversation from the man on his right. Deep-chested and kind-faced, a hockey dad who had introduced himself, but Borland had missed the name. Luckily he was content with Borland's input of a strained half-smile and nod because the fellow recapped the table talk. He waxed poetic about his kids on skates, and early mornings on the ice.

Sounded like hell to Borland but...

The hockey dad's companion, the rough-trade woman was convinced; but it was a selfish interest. Somehow she took the hockey dad's nostalgic dream and twisted it to talk about her Shomberg Clinic roommate.

"She had a bad day." Rough-trade nodded. "She wants to go home but the doctors won't let her—so she wants to go even more."

"She had a reaction to the painkillers, you said?" asked Hockey Dad, giving Borland a concerned half-nod.

"Yeah, and now she'll only use an ice pack," Rough-trade replied, "for the pain."

A waiter sped by the table and dropped a small plate in front of each of them as he passed. Borland started shoveling the meager portion of rigatoni and Caesar salad into his face—then paused when he caught the startled looks of his tablemates.

He was hungry.

Borland kept his skinned right hand hidden from the other diners. It was easy to miss at a distance but obvious up close so he hid it when forced into company. The scarring overrode whatever social manners social media and isolation had left, so he held his fork in his left hand, and bunched his napkin up over his scarred palm with the rest of the material draped over his knuckles.

He didn't want to go into it, and he didn't always want the responsibility that came with being a Variant Squad Captain.

"No wonder she's having trouble," Hockey Dad continued. "Not using painkillers is crazy."

"She's tough. Used to be a cop," said Rough-trade proudly. "*Shush*—here she comes."

And Borland reflexively shared their hunched, guilty postures as they turned to watch a tall, well-muscled woman with caramel blonde hair approach.

Borland remembered seeing her on his way back from the accounting office. Pretty woman, she'd caught his eye through the big bay window in the patient lounge. He'd stepped out onto the balcony to watch as she relaxed by the 'contemplation' pond.

Her golden skin had caught his eye.

The woman had pulled her sheer black pant legs up over her knees to expose long clean calves and thighs to the sun—before leaning back, letting her sharp profile cut the fresh air.

The woman was very pretty in a bitchy sort of way. She had lovely loose features that hormones or disappointment could easily tighten to petty, mean and selfish.

Borland remembered her.

As she approached the table, he appreciated her long legs again—and he especially liked the way she pressed the bright blue ice pack over her abdomen, accentuating the flare of her hips.

She shot a hesitant smile at Borland, quickly looked away, and took the empty seat between him and Rough-trade.

"What are they serving?" the woman whispered.

"Chicken," Rough-trade reassured brusquely. "And you can't eat chicken can you?"

The strange woman dipped her head and glanced at Borland as he almost cracked a tooth on a whole-wheat roll.

She can't eat chicken. So what?

A young black man, one of a group of kids doing the serving, hurtled near and the strange woman stopped him.

"I can't eat chicken," she stated, both hands raised.

The young man stared. He had a tray of dinners balanced over his shoulder.

"So I need the vegetarian menu." The woman pushed her explanation forward.

"I got to ask them in the kitchen," the young man said, delivering his tray of orders to the next table before spinning back through the kitchen door.

"She can't eat chicken," Rough-trade repeated.

"Is she vegetarian?" asked Hockey Dad, like the strange woman wasn't sitting just the other side of Borland.

The woman piped up, "Not a vegetarian...but I can eat fish."

"Fish isn't good for vegetarians is it?" Hockey Dad pressed her.

"It's the only thing they serve that's worth eating," Rough-trade clarified as the strange woman nodded, sharing a silent smile.

Suddenly the woman looked around the table—panic in her eyes, before she noticed her water glass and Borland's were upside down and unused.

She flipped her own and filled it from the pitcher and then smiling, looked at Borland's and gestured with trembling fingers. "Would you like some water?"

There was something in her eyes, some spark in the dark brown setting that dried out Borland's throat, really made him thirsty, so he said: "No thanks, I'm having coffee."

The pitcher hit the table with a *thump*.

There was a pause.

The strange woman's features fell, registering a rejection. A wounded look softened her eyes as they shifted off the table and over to Borland's belly. Then a tear rolled down her cheek, and she nodded, mouthing a silent word of comfort to herself.

She glanced at Borland's belly again and blushed. He knew he didn't have a chance with her so he let it hang out.

She smirked and shook her head, then squeezed the ice pack over her injury.

The young black man whirled out of the kitchen and deposited a rigatoni dinner in front of her.

"No meat!" he announced. "Only cheese."

"She can't eat chicken," Rough-trade said, for some reason, as the strange woman popped a few pieces of rigatoni into her mouth and chewed.

There was another pause. More tears?

She glanced a final time at Borland and then stood, left her meal and hurried across the dining room and out without a word.

Borland watched her go—a strange sensation—an instinct ignored rose in his gut again—but it flickered and disappeared when Rough-trade said: "She can't eat chicken."

CHAPTER 7

Turned out to be lunch after all. Borland blamed the small portions for the fact he managed supper two hours later. After entering the dining room a second time, he grabbed a chair at the closest table—a group of middle-aged men. Hockey Dad and Rough-trade waved from another table across the way.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

There was no sign of the strange woman.

Mind your business.

Rough-trade said: *She used to be a cop.*

So she can take care of herself.

Borland knew from his days on the Metro police force that the ranks were full of burnouts and nut-jobs. Couldn't hold a candle to the Variant Squads back in the day, but law enforcement took its toll on everyone, even the enforcers.

Thinking back, he decided that the squads inherited wild characters from *all* the services. Where else could you get drunk and hunt people?

Ssskin.

Strange idea coming from a captain. Borland kept his eyes on his lap.

He shouldn't have thought that. He was already a marked man if the truth got out and irresponsible thinking led to stupid actions. Internal investigations were usually close behind, and that was out of the question.

The inner debate kept him out of the table talk. He tried to appear withdrawn, possibly dangerous or crazy. He handled any niceties with a scowl.

Borland downed his meal and hurried out of the dining room. Tall windows opened onto the contemplation pond. Long orange bands of sunlight were growing but he had a couple of hours to kill.

The orientation meeting had described the evening for new arrivals. After dinner they were free to wander, but had to be in their rooms by eight-thirty where they would be given sleeping pills and sent to bed. Some would be showering that night and others with operations later in the day would shower in the morning.

Easy as pie.

Borland had to shower before bed.

Perfect.

As he hurried past chairs and a piano in another recreation area, he tapped the flask of whisky in his coat pocket. He planned to take a couple blasts, watch the setting sun and then toothbrush and shower away all evidence.

Borland rammed through a set of glass patio doors and stalked quickly across the flat stones around the contemplation pond. His shoes scraped on the asphalt path as he passed under pine trees.

He had to reach the acres of grass and trees where the grounds butted up against the rear of the Shomberg complex. He followed the path as it wound in and around groups of trees and manicured lawns that grew beside the buildings.

If he could find a bit of shadow, he could enjoy a drink.

His hand instinctively hovered over his flask but it dropped when a silhouette appeared against a golden sky where the path rose. Patients were wandering all over the

grounds some new, without a limp, others hunched and mysterious—most were in the dining room eating, but they'd finish soon, and start walking. What else was there to do?

Goddamn it.

He didn't have a lot of time.

There was a huge patio on the back of the complex—a thousand square yards of concrete surrounded by wrought iron. Borland gave it a grunt but pushed on past, followed the path where it crossed a staff parking area and then slipped between some tall billowy bushes.

His hand rose to the flask again, but fell when he realized three stories of windows leaned behind him. Could be anybody up there, watching.

Borland altered his course, set his broad shoulders toward the building and paced away. His guts hurt.

He needed a drink.

The path wound around thick tree trunks and bushes. It passed cedar benches ringed by stone and flowers.

But he kept running into patients.

So he walked toward the sun; off the path the fluorescing grass whipped his shoes.

Borland hurried toward a cedar bench that faced away from the complex, in the shadow of a large flowering bush.

Perfect.

He dropped onto the bench and slipped a hand into his coat, felt the cold metal and then...

"Hello." An old man walked out of a deep angled cut in the lawn that was hidden by the bush. A footpath wound out of the shadows and cut across in front of Borland.

Borland dropped his hand and looked up at the clouds.

Goddamn.

The old man folded his hands behind his back and limped away.

Borland studied the clouds and was immediately reminded of clouds. He didn't look up at them enough to be inspired to any other thought. His world was too close, and he had to look down to watch for traps—or it could have been the past, heavy with infection and outbreak pulling his attention to hell—full of loss, fury and the sounds of ripping skin.

Zombie, I had to do it.

And he couldn't really call it the past anymore, with it pressing against the insides of his eyes. The clouds were clouds. He was out of practice and his idleness was never contemplative. It was all about not thinking and avoiding the broader view. Anytime he got close to it, something would reach out and slap him. Real life was just a kick in the groin away. So keep your eyes peeled.

He needed a drink.

Bad.

Then he heard music. A young man limped into view and moved past, the sounds squealing around his ear-buds. He gave Borland a passing glance.

Sharp features. Early twenties.

Zombie's age...

Borland glared at the young man's back.

He needed a drink.

His sanity was peeling off as he sobered up.

He got to his feet.

Who's next? Spiko?

Borland lumbered toward the edge of the lawn where the trees grew thick. He'd seen the map on the brochure, where the path wound through a forest. There was a stream back there that ran along the property's edge.

The setting sun would be obscured; the shadows under the trees would darken.

If he was quick about it, he could get a couple blasts into him before the next patient appeared.

As he slipped into the woods the path began to meander and make turns and loops so patients kept popping up—his way grew increasingly unpredictable.

He was running out of time.

The damn Shomberg treatment boasted a fast recovery aided by promoting post-operative activity. *Swell*. The end result was a jack-in-the-box population that appeared every time Borland was poised to take a drink.

Can't screw this up again.

And Brass told Borland that he was out of chances. Soon his duties with the new Variant Squads would dominate his time. And why bother pulling strings for a drunk?

Especially one who knew too much.

But Borland needed a drink—just a touch, just a taste. He moved around the tree trunks, backtracking one moment and hurrying forward the next until he heard the distant babble of a stream.

That's more like it.

Trees grew thick along the water's stony edge.

Perfect.

He hurried off the path and ploughed through some bushes, then found the asphalt again as it wound back around and on through deepening shadows toward a bridge. The Shomberg brochure mentioned the stream and the bridge—patients were not to cross it.

Warnings are for the little people.

Trees overhung both ends of the structure. Metal uprights and railings held the span of planks over the stream, some 30 feet in a single arch.

Borland started up, the noise from the stream echoing all around. He slipped a hand into his jacket and pulled out the flask.

He got the cap off, licked his lips and froze.

A sound.

Under the bridge?

A deep gasp followed by fragile keening, almost a pitiful shivery pause, and then a soulful wail wore down to silence. The process repeated.

A woman.

The far side of the stream.

Weeping.

Borland moaned, capping the flask. He pocketed it and pushed himself along the railing, sliding, keeping his head down, until he could part a tangle of branches that grew low over him.

There, kneeling on the small round stones by the stream, the strange woman from the dining room.

She can't eat chicken.

Her hair was wet and pasted over her face. Her skin had flushed the color of strawberries where her features melted into the open neck of her shirt. She leaned forward, rocking and weeping, her arms wrapped around her ice pack like it was a baby.

She used to be a cop.

Borland pursed his lips, started to form a word or whistle—he didn't know what, but he had to do something to attract the woman's attention.

Wasn't that what normal people did?

See if she needed help...

But at the last second, a sinking feeling pulled at the pit of Borland's stomach and he shook his head silently, watching the woman's lean body shudder with sorrow.

He stooped by the railing, winced at the mangle of pain in his gut, then he hurried back the way he had come; hiding himself in the trees to avoid the woman's troubles.

Normal people avoid trouble. He got past some low bushes and turned to peer back through their leaves.

She needs a psychologist not a Variant Squad Captain.

The woman's sadness followed him, as he hurried among the tree trunks, shaking off whatever hooks her tears had set in him.

She'll be okay.

He turned in the shadow of an old oak and glanced back at the bridge. There, standing center to the span was the strange woman, with legs wide spaced and both arms crossed, pressing the icepack against her belly. Overhanging leaves obscured her face but Borland was sure he could feel her eyes on him.

He clambered through branches until he found the path and started back to the clinic. If he saw Rough-trade again, Borland would decide then whether to tell her what he saw.

CHAPTER 8

A gorgeous Asian nurse shaved Borland's crotch and belly. Patients who were getting operations that day were told to stay in their rooms and await this preparation and others while the rest of the patients had breakfast.

The nurse spoke quickly, almost anxiously during the procedure. Her small hands were warm through the vinyl gloves as they pressed Borland's round and wrinkled flesh flat to run the blade over it. He stared at the woman. Forced her to keep her attention on the task, and embarrassed her enough that she refused to look him in the eye.

That way he wouldn't have to claim the old body she was working on.

Then his intimidating glare worked against him, unnerved the woman enough that she hurried to complete the shave, scraping at the furry mounds of skin with reckless swipes of the straight razor. Terror rode up Borland's spine, forced him to look away until she finished, packed up her gear and hurried out of the room.

I hope nothing's missing.

Then some sick voyeur in him pushed his belly down, peered over it at the naked areas.

He felt an immediate twinge of shame at how things looked down there—gray and lifeless butcher shop structures. A broken and battered opposite of erotic—like the carcass of some dinosaur, fossilized and frozen in the act of eating another.

Barely sexual—not even pornographic—an image from a *worst-case-scenario* journal of medicine and aging.

He quickly pulled his pajama pants back into place and tied them.

About thirty people were going to get their hernias fixed that day by four operating teams. He had to wait his turn.

At least you'll have painkillers.

He looked over at the empty bed beside his. Roommate number '1' was delayed and missed his place on the Shomberg assembly line. Borland would have a new roomie by the time he got back from his first operation.

Perfect.

They were going to start with the umbilical hernia. The left and right inguinal would follow with days off between procedures. It was a longer than average stay, but Borland wanted to get it over with in one shot. He had no interest in coming back. The dull old men who made up most of the Shomberg population made him want a drink, and his gun.

You can be old. Do you have to be boring?

The old duffers left him anxious for any kind of release. Even having his abdominal wall cut open and sutured shut sounded like fun.

At least it was evidence he was alive.

And there would be some high-yield pharmaceutical painkillers.

Who needed a drink when the medicine cabinet was open?

Sobriety was killing him. He still needed a drink, but seeing the strange woman by the bridge the night before had unsettled him, made him too jumpy to take an illicit swig with all the other patients moving about on their evening walks. The path had grown crowded with them, so he relented and returned to his room.

The sleeping pill was bliss.

Borland heard the Asian nurse knock on another door down the hall and warn “Mr. Arnold” that it was time for his shave.

Borland got up, walked to the bathroom and tried to empty his bladder. He didn’t want any accidents and he felt like he had to go. So he stood there almost five minutes with nothing happening. His nerves must have already been working on him because he couldn’t squeeze out a single drop.

Or it’s the prostate...

As he tied the strings on his hospital pants something on the tiles between his socks caught his eye. A centipede, crushed into a twist of gore and spray of wiry legs. He could see how the mop had shaped its mangled body, combined it in layers of wax and cleanser—a fossil record on a bathroom floor.

The Age of Infection.

He thought of signs and omens.

“Mr. Borland?” A voice at the door drew his attention away from the bug. “It is time.”

A pleasant-looking nurse in her fifties stood there. She gestured toward his bed and told him to sit. She was covered in sterile gear, the rustle of her nylon booties made him think of the bag-suits of his profession.

Which made him think of *Zombie*.

Sacrifice. Keep giving.

She read through a checklist on her e-reader in a thick German accent. The way she stamped on the hard consonants reminded Borland of World War Two downloads: swastikas, whips and barbed wire.

He had answered all the questions before, but they were just double-checking, making sure the cuts they were about to make matched up with the guts on the table. She handed him a pair of nylon booties to slip over his socks and complimented him for being in his hospital *blues* when she arrived.

She didn’t know that Borland didn’t need more enemies. She didn’t know how bored he was.

She didn’t know what a guilty conscience could do with all that time off.

She didn’t know about the centipede.

The nurse led him out of the room and along the chilly corridor and into a waiting elevator. She hit a button, and they began their descent.

Borland’s hospital *blues* consisted of a smock top that tied up the front and a pair of loose pants that tied at the waist. He had no doubt that the setup would provide a carnival atmosphere once he was medicated.

At least he’d be medicated.

Borland didn’t care about the weather—good or bad—but the nurse talked about it anyway. Hurricanes and tornados were nothing; they were fun compared to what was coming. The Variant Effect was on its way back.

Time for the painkillers.

Time to get cranked.

The elevator shuddered and doors opened in the wall opposite the one they entered. A puff of cool air drifted in. Dim light came from pot lamps paced at intervals along the ceiling. When they stepped out, the light barely penetrated the big dark room.

Then it hit him.

The smell of blood.

Thirty operations a day, five days a week, fifty weeks a year... The coppery smell was permeating the darkness. There was disinfectant and other medical odors, but the blood was unmistakable. They spilled a lot of it down there.

The nurse led Borland to the right, past several beds that held drugged old men. She stopped him at an unoccupied cot and helped him in. She said she'd get his painkillers and left.

It's about time.

On his back, his new vantage point showed a drop ceiling setup of white tiles.

Everything else was green—painted and glistening with a thick shiny lacquer. There were lamps overhead, sunk into the ceiling and dimmed to an infernal orange.

Let's do it.

The nurse returned with a tray of goodies on a rolling table: syringes, paper cups with pills—lots of little *cranking* toys.

The sight of this selection brought a broad smile to Borland's face that he quickly covered with the thin blanket. His eyes must have glittered with glee.

So he couldn't drink. *Big deal.*

The nurse lifted a needle off the tray and squirted a fine thread of clear liquid.

"Morphine," she said, pulling at Borland's hospital pants, indicating she wanted him rolled on his side, "and I'll give you Ativan pills for anxiety."

"Sure," he said and chuckled as the needle drove home. A pocket of heat grew molten in his left buttock.

Morphine...

CHAPTER 9

Borland laughed his way out of a haze.

A pair of doctors helped him from the bed, slung his arms over their shoulders. Their faces were hidden behind surgical masks.

One set of eyes was Asian; the other, well he couldn't see the other that was turned away. So he giggled and swayed as the two smaller men struggled to walk him to the operating room.

He chuckled as he passed along the line of beds. Men of all kinds sleeping, cranked and manic or looking worried, peeking out from their covers. Like the *seven dwarves*...

Borland laughed as they passed through a set of doors.

Then he smiled at nurses and at a group gathered around a tabled patient on his right. "Is that the buffet?" he said through gritted teeth.

The morphine was crawling around in his body, cleaning his joints and filling his muscles with delicious comfort and spectral strength.

Borland took a deep breath to clear his head and found his legs, steadied himself as he limped between the doctors through another set of doors and into a simple room with IV stand, table, a few machines and little more.

"*Sssk... Sss... Centipede*," he slurred the word and chortled. "My roommate needs medical attention." He laughed.

"Up on the table, Mr. Borland," the doctor with dark Asian eyes said in an incongruous Scottish brogue. "Then we'll talk."

"Well, my room-bug doesn't speak English so you have to translate." Borland's knees buckled as he laughed, and the doctors groaned under his weight. "*Room-bug...did you hear me?*"

A nurse hurried in and the three of them heaved Borland onto the operating table.

He felt like he was floating.

The nurse threw a sheet over Borland and tucked it tight, immobilizing him. She pulled his left arm out and positioned it, held it in place with a Velcro strap and wrapped a blood pressure cuff around the bicep. Then she dug for a vein in his left hand and slid an IV needle into place.

"Penicillin," she said, tapping the clear IV bag before setting up a small curtain across Borland's chest.

"I'd prefer a martini," Borland drawled, his mouth starting to feel gummy.

Gravity fastened him securely to the table. His mind was spinning, but clear, as he watched one doctor leave and the other with the Scottish accent remain.

"We have rather traditional methods here, Mr. Borland," the doctor said. "But not *that* traditional."

"I got you, I got you." Borland tried to make a *shushing* sound but it came out like a wet raspberry. "Mum's the word."

The doctor was already at work. Borland felt a minor pressure on his gut and then the nurse asked him...

"How are you feeling, Mr. Borland?" She read from a list on an e-reader. They'd quizzed him during admission and he told them lies he couldn't now remember.

"Pretty damn good, blue eyes," he growled, and then burst out laughing. "Where's my martini?"

“They’re a favorite of mine too, Mr. Borland,” the doctor said, glancing over at him as he worked. “Gin.”

“It’s *Captain*,” Borland corrected. “And once we made martinis out of photocopier fluid down at the stationhouse. But, we couldn’t drink it.”

“*Captain*?” the nurse said. “Are you in the military?”

“Variant Squad back in the day,” Borland explained, and then shifted a furtive look between his doctor and nurse. “Can you keep a secret? Because Variant’s coming back...but it’s a secret.”

He tried to make the *shushing* sound again, but the deep breath required to do it caused him to brown out.

Hello.

Zombie.

Centipede.

What?

His vision returned and his mouth was alive with taste. The nurse was dabbing his lips with a cotton swab soaked in lemon juice.

“That’s good,” he said, smiling lasciviously and then gestured with his head toward the doctor. “But won’t he get jealous?”

The doctor laughed and said: “We received a bulletin about the Variant Effect from Metro Law Enforcement.”

“What did I tell you? It’s coming back...” Borland said, suddenly aware of a hard pressure in his gut and a growing point of heat. He felt a tug, and then heard a mechanical *click*. “It’s still in the water and so here—PRESTO!”

He tried to clap but his arms were restrained. The table shook. The IV drip pulled at the back of his hand.

“You know,” he said, catching the doctor’s eye. “I feel fantastic.”

“It’s the morphine,” the doctor drawled. “A favorite of mine too.” He let Borland hang for a second. “But never on duty.”

“Oh.” Borland laughed. “That’s the perfect place for it.”

“*Captain* Borland?” the nurse mused, “I think I’ve heard that name.”

“Probably lady, I mean, well I don’t like to say but...” Borland mumbled, his lips tangling, and then: “I was pretty well-known back in the day.”

“What for?” The nurse looked puzzled.

“Oh, well.” Borland shifted his eyes away. “Good stuff *too*.”

Borland shrugged and then apologized.

“Tell me if I’m distracting you doctor.” He made a fist, and then chortled, his mind rolling away from the big lights overhead. Then he said: “You know we nailed Variant in Parkerville about a month ago.” He pursed his lips. “But it’s a new one.”

The doctor paused, his eyes thoughtful.

“Nurse, how are Captain Borland’s vitals?”

The nurse answered: “Pulse and respiration are fine. Blood pressure is high but close enough to pre-op to be considered normal.”

“What’s wrong?” Borland asked.

The doctor smiled with his eyes as he leaned over the cloth curtain.

“No worries,” he said. “It’s just that you seem very aware, Captain Borland. Are you feeling all right? We could give you something else, if you’re anxious at all.”

“I feel great!” Borland laughed, “But I’ve never been a cheap date. Especially after the old cranking days.” He smacked his lips as a wave of warm exhaustion splashed over his mind.

“*Uhn. Gahn,*” he mumbled, for a minute in a swoon. The nurse swabbed his lips with lemon juice again.

Things went dark and then...

Where the hell am I?

“There we go, Captain,” the nurse cooed. “Is that better?”

And Borland felt his mind kick awake again.

“So, Captain Borland, how bad is it?” the doctor asked, his muffled voice carrying real concern. “Are we headed back into *the day?*”

“What do you mean?” And then Borland had a sinking feeling. *What did you tell them?*

“You said the Variant Effect was coming back.” The doctor peered over the curtain. “How bad is it?”

“What?” Borland’s mind raced. *What else did you tell him?* The pressure and heat were building in his abdomen. He tried to cover. “I meant before, like it was coming before. It was bad back then, is all,” Borland grumbled and laughed, looking up at the doctor. “No worries.”

He froze.

There was something up there behind the doctor, a shape, no a shadow.

A man? Someone watching.

Borland laughed as a wave of euphoria flooded him.

The centipede?

“Who’s that?” he said, squinting into the overhead lights.

“Pardon me?” the doctor asked, flinching, following Borland’s gaze up over his shoulder. He looked back to Borland like nothing was there.

But Borland could see a shape. Something dark and broad moved into the space over the doctor’s shoulder.

“Right *there,*” Borland said, gesturing with his chin and laughing. “Some ugly bastard.”

Borland’s vision cleared and the shape resolved into something big. It had a green, segmented body. And there were eyes—beady and shiny like its glistening shell—watching from under long fuzzy antennae while its serrated jaws dripped.

Borland laughed as it wrapped its barbed legs around the doctor’s shoulders like it was an old friend.

“A centipede,” Borland said, unable to feel any terror. He laughed. “Like the one in my room. But *way* bigger.”

The doctor looked over at the nurse and nodded.

“Don’t worry, Captain Borland,” he reassured. “Hallucinations are common with the mixture of drugs in your system.”

“A big green one,” Borland continued. “Can’t step on *him* though...”

The doctor looked at the nurse and chuckled, and Borland laughed.

Then something caught the nurse’s eye because she looked past the doctor and her hands came up. The doctor just started to turn when a solid *crunching* sound knocked him forward onto Borland. He rolled off and out of sight. The nurse barely got a scream out

before there was another *crunch*. Her body shook and she fell against Borland, her cheek striking his before she hit the floor.

Borland laughed.

The strange woman who couldn't eat chicken was leaning over him.

"Hey!" he shouted gleefully. "*You're* all better."

"Hurry," she said, yanking the IV out of his hand and pulling the sheets off him. The woman heaved Borland into a sitting position, and then removed a pair of clamps from flaps of skin around the wound in his belly.

He only felt a minor tug.

Borland kept smiling as she tied his pants and closed his top. The thin material was immediately saturated by a wave of blood. "We've got to get you out of here. NOW!"

She helped him off the table. He started laughing, one arm over her shoulder as strange sensations pulsed in his chest and stomach. He steadied himself against her.

She snatched a scalpel from a tray by the table, and led Borland out of the room.

"We can't let them do this!" Determination hardened her features. She *looked* like a cop.

Borland laughed and staggered along with her. He felt wet and cold on his legs, but that was all he could feel.

The morphine still warmed his soul.

CHAPTER 10

“This way!” the strange woman cried, pulling Borland by the arm. He was dizzy. His vision blurred as his arms and legs wobbled, felt like they might collapse.

But there was miraculous, drug-induced energy flowing through him as he sprang along after her, blithely medicated, and giggling about the coppery cold air that tickled his torso and thighs.

His mind reeled with vertigo, spun slowly forward like he would fall out of his head.

They pushed past another set of doors and ran to the elevator as its doors slid open on a nurse inside. She looked at Borland’s bloody clothing, shrieked and fell back, sliding against the far wall of the elevator as Borland’s ‘rescuer’ slashed and stabbed the air with her scalpel.

The terrified nurse hit a crowd of buttons on the far panel and the doors in that side of the compartment slid apart. She rolled ungracefully backwards into a white-lit hall full of shelves and supplies.

“Out!” the strange woman barked, launching a kick at the air behind the fleeing nurse who stumbled to her feet and fell into a shelf full of equipment. There was a crash of shattering glass.

“That’ll teach her!” Borland shouted.

Then the strange woman grabbed Borland’s arm and pulled him into the elevator. He lost his balance and slammed into the corner. His face rang off a thick stainless steel railing, smashed against fake veneer.

He struggled on his knees laughing as his rescuer punched the ‘close door’ button beside her, and both sides of the elevator slid shut.

Borland pressed against the tingling wet bulge under his smock as the woman slapped another button. The floor lurched and the elevator started to climb.

Borland was chortling wetly. He pushed off the wall with one hand while the other cradled his bloody gut. A deep throb cut through him but faded in a fog of painkiller.

“Hey! You’re pretty good,” he said and then chuckled. The morphine and Ativan were still coursing through his system, annihilating his pain and anxiety before it could reach his brain. “Is it the centipede?”

“What do you know about centipede?” she asked, eyes round with disbelief.

But Borland’s attention had shifted down to the blood that soaked the front of his smock. He opened one of the ties to investigate the damage beneath and his hands found the numb edges of a gaping five-inch incision.

“Oh,” he said, and chuckled. “That’s really, really bad, lady!” He looked at the woman as she stared at the lighted numbers over the door. “There must be some real trouble.”

“You don’t know how lucky you are.” She gave a serious half-smile and reached out, patting the back of his bloody hand where it covered his open wound.

“I got to you in time,” she said and then shifted the scalpel to her left hand as she reached behind her and pulled a gun from where it was wedged in the waistband of her pants.

Borland recognized the 9mm; it was made of ceramic. A serious piece of hardware—professionals used it: detectives, military police, even Variant Squad Lieutenants.

Take your pick lady, who are you?

The woman winced as she cocked the weapon, remembering that she had fresh injuries too, but was running without Borland's morphine.

He laughed thinking about it. Of course, he didn't have her sutures. He giggled.

We're screwed!

"What's the plan?" Borland asked, probing the bloody edges of his surgical opening with his fingers. Then his attention fell back to her gun.

And he asked: "Who do you work for?"

"Lots of people, and *nobody*," she growled and glanced fearfully left and right as the elevator shuddered.

"Oh, like black ops?" Borland said, comically calm. Blood was seeping down his chest, and he was starting to feel nauseous. "The army? The Feds?" Then he snapped his fingers. "*You're* with the police?"

She nodded solemnly. "I used to be..."

The elevator stopped and the woman leveled her gaze.

"Listen, I've got to get you somewhere safe, so they don't finish what they started." She frowned. "They cycle people through every four days, moving new patients sequentially through the procedures starting in the basement and ending on the third floor. It's a house of death."

"I'm on the third floor," Borland said and then coughed. A chill shook him and he chuckled. "My stuff's there, if we're running."

"Exactly! And none of the civilians will feel like giving us any trouble," she growled and stabbed a button to hold the door closed. "When we go out of here, we run to the right. Get as far down the hall as we can go. Once we get our bearings we'll grab your stuff."

"Sounds good," Borland snarled, balling up his bloody right fist. His left hand still pressed against the open slit over his navel. It was starting to feel heavy.

"Ready?" she said, raising the pistol in her right hand.

Borland nodded, and lifted his fist.

"Let's *roll!*" the woman shouted and slapped the button that opened the doors.

They slid aside to reveal the nurse with the German accent standing by a patient in hospital blues. The nurse raised her e-board like a shield.

Borland's rescuer bowled the woman over as he followed in her wake. The startled patient stepped back but not fast enough to avoid Borland's right cross. The man crumpled.

They ran past.

A trio of patients staggered out where the hall turned right. The woman kicked one in the groin and he went down howling. Borland blasted through the others like a tank.

A deep pain ran around from his chest to his back.

But the morphine dissolved it as he rumbled along after the strange woman.

Keep going.

He felt light-headed then and dropped to a knee. The jolt caused a spasm of pain to clench his belly and lower back. Then the morphine haze descended.

Not far.

This time, though, he had to grind his teeth against a shadow of the pain—the painkiller unable to handle it all. He dispelled his companion's concern with a nod as she looped a hand under his arm and heaved him to his feet.

He screamed as white-hot agony clenched his stomach muscles.

"I'm fine," he gasped, recovering quickly. "Keep going!"

They hurried along the corridor casting looks left and right.

"Up here!" she shouted, elbowing another patient into a wall. He crumpled crying out in pain.

Borland checked his chest for his nametag. They told him never to remove it. But it wasn't required during the operation. Another sharp stab of pain in his gut, and he tumbled against the wall, dizzy—leaving a great red smear.

"Don't know my room number," he said and coughed as she grabbed his arm and pulled him wheezing along with her.

"Bastards knew I was coming for you," she snarled and then pointed up the hall with her gun—the last door on the left. "That'll do for now."

She reached out and gripped Borland's shoulder; steadied him as another spasm of pain brought a sheet of sweat over his face.

Behind them, down the hall he could hear the shouting and clamber of pursuit. The noise echoed dully, distorted by a hollow ringing in his ears. His vision blurred, and another chill shook him.

The woman whipped through a door pulling a reeling Borland close on her heels.

Inside it was the exact duplicate of his room, except there was a man in the first bed. Some old chap was out cold, asleep with painkillers. He'd already had the operation.

But they finished his.

The strange woman shut the door and ran to the window in the far wall. Checked it, saw that it didn't open.

"We'll make a stand here!" she announced and then reached out to Borland, pulled him down by the bed beside the window.

He collapsed against the wall pressing the wound over his stomach. His lower back was aching now, and his testicles answered a shift of position with a blast of pain.

What's happening?

"Okay...good," he said, looking down at the big hole over his navel. He wadded up the lower half of his smock and pressed it against the opening. "I got to stop this bleeding."

"I know," she said, waddling forward on her knees to peer around the end of the bed. She grabbed a pillow and threw it to Borland. He hugged it against his wound.

The old man in the other bed snored.

"I still think I got you in time," she said bleakly and then held her own abdomen. Tears sprang into her eyes.

"All right, I'm Joe Borland," Borland said wincing. A spasm shook his gut; the contractions caused a hard knife of pain to strike deep. "What's your name?"

"Judy Martin," she said, glancing quickly to the door.

Voices were gathering outside. People were calling and shouting. There were loud *thuds* as other doors were forced open.

They're looking for us.

"Okay Judy," Borland said, looking down at his wound. Blood continued to seep out. It wasn't gushing but... "I'm going to need a doctor, *soon*, and painkillers." He nodded toward the door. A wave of dizziness passed and he slurred, "So, what's going on? What do they want?"

She sighted along the gun barrel, trained it on the door. "Same thing they took from *me*."

Sweat glazed Borland's forehead. Pain throbbed against his hand, pushed through the morphine.

"They got *mine*," Judy said, finally, allowing herself to rest against the wall, still aiming at the door. "But I won't let them take *your* baby."

CHAPTER 11

Borland lost track of time pretty quickly. All he had to mark it with was the growing pain in his guts, and the sporadic attempts at communication made by hospital staff *and* he assumed—the police.

At first a doctor started talking through the door.

He said that Judy wasn't going to be in any trouble.

He explained: the people she assaulted were shaken up but they were going to be fine.

And, he said, it was possible the whole thing was a reaction to the medication.

You're not in any trouble.

The doctor described going over her medical file and finding her antidepressant medication might have reacted with the anti-anxiety pills and painkillers she was given. In rare cases it could cause a psychotic break if she was taking both.

Not that you're psychotic, Ms. Martin.

Was she still taking her medication? Going cold turkey could have the same effect.

The doctor said there were two things she had to do to resolve the situation. She had to put the gun down and come out of the room.

Mr. Cumberland was all right. That was the old man who was still snoring off his post-op medication. So no harm, no foul.

And the other thing was: "Judy, we really have to get Mr. Borland back to the operating room."

At that point, they'd asked to talk to Borland, but Judy warned him before he could speak.

"Remember, they're after your baby," she said in a cautioning tone. "They're tricky so watch what you say."

Borland nodded and yelled, "I've lost a lot of blood! Not sure how bad things are inside." Then he nodded, pressing against his stomach. He pulled his hands away and looked at the blood, at the hole in his gut. A strained laugh escaped him. "I'm cut open. This is bad. And the morphine's wearing off."

A hard throb had started past the burning edge of the wound. The cut tissue scorched him, but he felt the beginnings of deeper injuries, bruising, displacement...

Agony.

He couldn't think about it.

Judy went quiet. The doctors tried to get her to talk.

Time passed.

Borland's mind drifted...

And then the doctor started on Judy again. His voice was muffled by the door: "You see Judy, Mr. Borland is injured. You can see that."

She looked over at Borland, saw that he was watching her, and winked.

"And when his morphine wears off, he's going to be in excruciating pain," the doctor explained.

"Pain..." Borland whispered, laughing on morphine vapors.

"Judy, Mr. Borland is in danger. You don't want to hurt him do you?" the voice shouted.

Judy startled Borland by firing a round at the door. There was a commotion outside as the negotiators fell back.

Mr. Cumberland snorted, but slept on.

“You’re not going to turn us against each other!” Judy yelled. “Like you did before.”

Like they did before?

Another time of pain and deafness followed.

Things were dark.

And then...

Borland was dizzy and had finally collapsed with his back against the wall and his legs straight out. He knew there was a good chance he could overpower Judy if he could get the drop on her, but the morphine and blood loss were making everything impossible.

What’s this?

From his vantage point he saw a bottle of Listerine protruding from a small gym bag under the bed.

He clawed the bottle out and wept in pain as he tried to get past the child safety cap. His hands fell to his sides and he gagged. He had to control some of the pain, make himself numb enough for something desperate.

He cried out as he pushed down on the cap, broke the plastic links that kept it safe.

In a single motion, he threw the cap away and upended the bottle.

It was fresh. A clean taste that burned all the way down.

But Borland needed something, and he knew rummies drank the swill to relieve *their* pain. There was nothing else he could do. As the morphine peaked, flushed out of his system by the activity and excitement, he knew there’d be a struggle to stay conscious.

There was a lot of pain on the way.

He took another drink of Listerine and gagged.

Borland looked over at Judy where she crouched by the bed. He lifted a numb left hand and closed it in the air. The skin felt bloated, like he was wearing a mitten.

You can take her.

So his plan was to *crank* on Listerine, get ready to experience the full pain and panic of having his belly muscles cut open. Then do something violent and reckless that would likely get him shot.

Perfect.

His fellow veteran, Captain Hyde, would recognize the little Borland touches.

Bastard.

Borland’s vision was off too. The lights were bright, threw a hazy aura over everything. If he could reach her, he doubted he could aim and punch her without throwing up, or having his guts spill out on the floor.

He tried to think how long it would take for the morphine to wear off completely. What had he heard, some guy, some old man on the stairs with his belly all taped had said he slept after the operation for three hours? And then they started him on simple pain meds... something light; nothing as serious as morphine, but he was also sutured and stapled shut at the time.

His operation was complete.

Borland’s wasn’t.

They’d just cut all the necessary layers and then...

The running, and fighting—the damage might already be done.

Another stab of pain wracked him, brought him out of his stupor.

He coughed, and the incision over his navel bulged. A bag of bloody, pale tissue pushed against his hands.

And he almost vomited.

Clean. Fresh. God!

Gagging, to keep his mind off it, he talked.

“Listen to me...” Borland started, took a swig of Listerine. *You idiot!*

But he couldn’t do it with anger.

“Judy,” he said, wheezing. “They’re here to help you.”

“They want your baby,” she snarled. “Like they took mine. Don’t let them fool you.”

“Judy, I don’t have a...” Borland started and then clamped down on his anger. He grimaced around another pulse and nauseous twist of his guts. “They can’t take my baby. I’m a man.” He tried to grin reassuringly, but only managed to bare his teeth and groan. “I’m a man. You can see that! You god...” *Damn. Stupid... Temper. Easy.* “Judy, I’m badly hurt here. It’s nothing to do with a baby.”

“You’re in denial, sweetie.” Judy pursed her lips and let her eyes slide down over Borland’s belly, surveyed the bloody mess under his hands. “We’ll get you help.”

“No!” Borland shook his head and he took another drink of Listerine. A spasm of pain clenched his torso and he gasped. “I’m a cut open *man*, Judy! Look at me!”

He spread his bloody hands; the raw wound gaped. A sack of light pink flesh protruded slightly.

“Stay calm. Don’t get down on yourself.” Judy shook her head and smiled reassuringly. “I know what you’re going through. You don’t want to believe.”

There was another clamor out in the hall. Heavy thumping, the big bad SWAT team would be there soon. Borland closed his eyes against the pain and tried to think of their protocol.

If Judy weren’t armed, they’d just charge. With her gun they’d be left with Tasers or stun grenades. Would they use them knowing Borland’s condition and that there was another captive in the room? Not likely. The chance of the grenade landing on an injured civilian was too great. That could start a fire too.

What would they do?

He coughed again and shivered. His hands were wet, very wet. He was bleeding again.

Jesus! You don’t have time for this.

A new voice shouted through the door.

“Judy,” a woman called. “This is Dr. Lemington. Do you remember me?”

Judy looked over at Borland, her eyes wide with terror or fear or anger. His dying eyes were having a hard time with the subtler points of emotion.

“Who’s that?” he asked her, finally.

“She’s the one who took my baby!” Judy hissed, squeezing the pistol in her hand.

“Judy,” said Dr. Lemington, “I know you’re frightened.”

Judy glared at the door.

“And I know you’ve been confused,” Lemington said, “and I know you’ve been disappointed.” The voice quieted and then: “I know you’re depressed. That’s why you left the police force.”

“I left to find my baby!” Judy surged onto her knees, and fired three shots at the door before she screamed: “I’m a police officer. I won’t let you do it to anyone else.”

There was quiet for half a second, Mr. Cumberland snored, and then...

"No, Judy. You *lost* your baby," the doctor said nervously, moving back into position. "And they fixed your hernia here."

"Hernia!" Judy looked down at her own injured stomach, pressed her free hand there and fired another shot at the door. "You're a liar!"

Borland was trying to focus on her pistol, trying to think of the number of bullets in the clip, but his mind was foggy from blood loss and he was wracked with spasms of pain.

Confused.

He took a breath and every nerve in his abdomen fired pain.

Disappointed.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

Depressed.

"Judy," Borland said, cleared his throat. The action made him shudder in pain. "She said you lost your baby."

Judy glared at him. The barrel of the gun centered on his face. "Don't listen to them."

"See, I think you lost your baby," he said, "and the operation started something in your head. And now you're sick with sadness. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I didn't lose my baby," Judy said, tears shining in her eyes. "What kind of a person, what kind of a mother would do that? Lose something so precious. I'd go to hell for that!"

"You're only human," Borland wheezed and dragged a foot up. His guts bulged out of the wound and he grunted. More blood spilled.

He wasn't going to make it. A peaceful resolution to a hostage situation could take hours he didn't have...

...and a finesse he'd never learned.

"Look, unless..." His eyebrows formed a thoughtful line. "Wait a minute, go to *hell*?"

"That's what happens," Judy explained, "to bad mothers."

"It doesn't Judy," Borland gasped, the pain was breaking him. Tears rolled out of his eyes.

"Yes it does!" Judy insisted.

"You must belong to one of those nutty churches," Borland said, and a sob shook him. The muscles in his torso ground against each other. "That send people to hell for anything."

Don't do it...

"I'm Catholic..." Judy's eyes softened for a second.

"Even those bastards won't send you to hell for *losing* a baby," Borland chewed on his lip as a spasm of pain shook him. More tears fell. "Unless..."

"That's enough!" She glared at him and held the pistol at his face.

Oh God, don't do it.

"Judy, I thought it was postpartum depression, but now I think it's just depression," Borland said and shrugged painfully. He was getting dizzier. "Maybe it's the Variant Effect too, but I think it's mostly *guilt*."

"Quiet!" The gun shook in Judy's hand.

Do what you have to do.

"You didn't lose your baby, Judy," Borland growled.

“Shut up!” she screamed.

“You *aborted* it,” he snarled.

“Shut up!” Judy shouted and slipped another hand around the gun to steady it. “You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Just do it.

“I don’t care one way or another. But as a Catholic you’re damned and as a cop you’ll condemn yourself for being human.” Borland tried to sit forward but was overcome with nausea. His heart throbbed heavily. “I can’t see a way out for you.”

“Judy?” Dr. Lemington called through the door.

Judy looked over, and then back at Borland.

“See,” she said. “They turned you against me.”

“Jesus!” he yelled, eyes full of tears. “Judy put me out of my misery, murder Mr. Cumberland or do what you have to do!” He winced rolling to his knees. “You know there’s only one person in the room that’s got this coming!”

Judy aimed the gun and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 12

That was then. This is now.

Borland sat on his couch sipping whisky and watching the blue screen. Zombie's comic book lay crumpled on the couch beside him.

Judy...

It was easy for Brass's scientists to biopsy her brain. She'd conveniently opened her skull for them. They found the Variant molecule there, but in quantities that suggested it should be dormant. And there was no sign of the new thirteenth hybrid molecule they'd found in Parkerville.

She was a kinderkid but had never presented. A worrier, a bit of a nail-biter, but nothing you could put your finger on. Nothing outside the norm or dangerous.

Unlikely Variant, so it was guilt that presented, that drove her to extremes.

Judy was a uniformed Metro cop for eight years with the dream of finding a nice fellow, settling down and becoming a mother.

Her dream came true.

But not for her ambitious boyfriend, another uniformed Metro cop. He had his eyes set on promotions and so he declared their love-child a little premature—maybe later after the wedding. They could try again.

Pressure was applied—ultimatums issued. And dreams collided.

Judy should never have agreed to the abortion.

The guilt caused her to fight and ruined her relationship before the marriage. That sent her into a tailspin that ended with her on indefinite leave from the force riding a psychiatrist's couch.

In and out of mental hospitals, some time in there she developed an inguinal hernia.

Then, something went right. She got the right mix of meds. Maybe she met a fellow, but things were on the upswing—she decided to fix the hernia so she could get back to the gym, lose some weight and feel better about herself. Maybe grow a new dream.

But something went wrong at the Shomberg Clinic. Her antidepressant mixed with shame and painkillers, and she took a guilt trip that almost killed Borland.

When she shot herself, Borland started calling to the SWAT team. They rammed the lock off the door and entered with guns on Borland and Mr. Cumberland.

The old bugger finally woke up when they knocked.

He asked for a drink of water. Cumberland had his operation while Borland was waiting for his turn downstairs. The old man's pain meds had kept him asleep through Judy's assault on reality.

That said a lot for Borland. His doctors were impressed, said it was remarkable that he'd been able to stay conscious through all that pain, medication and blood loss.

He was weeping like a little girl when they did come in, but the SWAT guys cut him some slack because he looked like something that had escaped from a slaughterhouse.

Borland was given transfusions and stabilized, and at his request; they completed the hernia procedures over the next couple of days. Another request he made was to Brass who pulled those strings again and managed to have an armed guard of baggies stay on site to accompany Borland through the operations.

The hernias ruled his life for the next three weeks. During their reign he managed to stay drunk from late morning until midnight. He knew he'd put most of the weight back

on, but his experience with Judy had reminded him that he wasn't going to be around forever.

And he'd been a really good boy.

Well, except for what he'd said to Judy. What he'd made her do...

Probably the best way to resolve the situation. It was the only justice she was going to get from herself. Society wouldn't give a damn about it.

Good excuse.

He pondered again whether he would have waited for the situation to resolve itself if he were the leader of the SWAT team. The doctors must have told them there was time, that Borland's condition; his wound wasn't going to be *instantly* fatal. He would suffer like hell, but...

They were willing to wait, to make a wager that Borland would have to pay.

He was never like that in the squads, and he tried to instill the attitude in new recruits: Gamble with your own life if you want.

But don't gamble with mine!

The television remote controller rang, snapping Borland from his reverie. He slashed and slapped out at the coffee table, finally managed to catch the multi-function device. He picked it up, pressed the 'talk' button and held it to his ear.

"Yeah," he said, in a voice that was thick with emotion.

"Captain Borland?" A woman's voice chirped.

"Who's asking?" Borland set his glass down and refilled it.

"I am Natasha Drummond, secretary to David White, president of GreenMourning Environmental," she said. "Are you familiar with our work?"

"Who isn't?" Borland grunted.

"Mr. White would like to talk to you," she said and went quiet.

"No," Borland grumbled. "Mr. White knows that's a conflict of interest for me or anyone in my place of employment. GreenMourning and the Variant Squads don't exactly see eye to eye."

"It doesn't have to be that way," she said.

Borland scowled at the blue screen.

"Mr. White appreciates the sensitivity of the situation and that is why he wants to meet with you in his car." The secretary went quiet again. "Discreetly. Downstairs. We're parked out front."

"What's this about?" Borland felt a surge of anger. *More mysteries*. He kicked his legs, stormed up onto his feet. He moved to the window, glared out...and started zipping up his jumper.

Three stories down, a woman's hand waved to him from the rear window of a long black sedan.

"You come highly recommended by a friend of Mr. White's." There was silence before: "The late Robert Spiko sent him *your* palm-com." Borland imagined her smiling, and then... "Mr. Spiko recorded a message on it for you."

"I'll be right down," Borland growled, staring blankly at the glass, catching his own vague reflection there.

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The story continues in
THE VARIANT EFFECT: GREENMOURNING
by G. Wells Taylor

DAWN OF THE DAY

Pinocchio had always dreamed of being a real boy.

But what a waste of time that turned out to be. Dreams teased him all night long, convincing him that things were the way he wanted them to be—then *poof*, the dreams were gone when the alarm clock rang. Or they'd taunt him, hanging out there just beyond his reach, only to disappear the moment he touched them.

Dreams left empty shapes in his mind, and desires and needs—and nothing more. They were illusions. They weren't real. They were nothing and that made him furious because Pinocchio wasn't *nothing*.

He was something: something *more*.

So Pinocchio gave up on dreams. They were as useless as childish wishes and the blue fairies that didn't grant them.

He tried to be practical. Pinocchio went to school and learned and studied and hoped that the day would come when science and technology would evolve enough to make such a transformation possible. Some genetic fix or pill or procedure would be discovered that would make him into a real boy. Make it true. Make it real.

But that turned out to be another dream. Another wish in need of a fairy.

So Pinocchio took things into his own hands.

Well, not *his* hands. He was still looking for those. He hadn't quite found the right pair.

So he had to use inferior, stubby fingered hands to place his new feet into the large plastic cooler. Pinocchio pushed the severed and bagged extremities down into the ice with a plunging action that made a roaring noise—and he froze as goose bumps prickled. *Careful now. Don't want them to hear.*

He closed the lid with a quiet *thump*, and slipped its hard plastic lock into place with a *click*. Then he nudged the cooler with the toe of his slipper and slid it across the carpet until it rested beside his backpack by the front door.

He unfolded a six-by-six vinyl sheet and set it in place under the window where a dark green garbage bag waited to be filled. The blinds were drawn. No one would see.

Pinocchio turned to look at the man on the bed. He just stood there a minute, looking.

The man on the bed was looking back at him over the bloodstained gag; his breath was coming in desperate, rapid-fire whistles. His eyes were wide and white with pain and terror. His face was sweaty and pale with blood loss and shock. He grunted weakly, promising the world.

The man wouldn't last long, which was good. That annoying whistle was getting on Pinocchio's nerves.

The man on the bed wasn't going anywhere. The ropes that fastened his wrists to the headboard had held him in place while Pinocchio worked. Same as those that bound his legs with a series of tight loops just over the knees and in around the bed frame. *Those* knots had served a double purpose. They'd both secured the man *and* acted as tourniquets, had kept him alive during the procedures.

At first Pinocchio had contemplated taking all of the legs. It would have been faster and easier to take them off at the hips or knees, but the large limbs would have been unwieldy to transport. And he had to be careful—he got so excited when he found new parts. He had to be cautious, and a little extra work would keep him safe.

So he had decided that it would be worth the effort to strip out the muscle, veins and nerves that belonged to the feet. And in all truth, he did not like the man's knobby knees and hairy thighs. They had surprised Pinocchio. Their awkward and ugly design did not go with the feet.

The man's feet were incredible.

Pinocchio had gotten his first look at them earlier on that heat wave day when the man on the bed had taken off his shoes and socks to wade in a Metro park fountain. Pinocchio had been sitting on a bench nearby, alone, unhappy—trapped in a body that wasn't his. He had been contemplating a quiet death—just ending it for once and all, when he saw the feet flash across the grass and leap into the spangled water.

Their beauty, their movement, caught hold of his spirit and lifted it up. A voice, his conscience perhaps, said: *You can still be a real boy. You must never give up!*

The feet were perfect: the toes were short but not stubby, the arches flexible bridges from powerful heel to forefoot, and the skin was smooth ivory. They were just the way Pinocchio had imagined they would be. And there they were, marking a pathway back to optimism, back to life and to his calling. *He could be a real boy.*

But he'd have to be patient. His urgency was understandable, but dangerous too. So he reined in his emotions and sat on the bench in the shade to watch the man play with *his* feet in the water.

An hour passed and Pinocchio followed the man on foot through the shimmering heat of the day, curious about his destination, keeping his rising excitement in check—until he found out where the man was going...

And then a surprise.

Home was a room at a rundown motor inn. Pinocchio knew the type, a bachelor apartment rented by week or month and sparsely furnished, accessed by an open stairway running up over the parking lot. There you only had to pass the neighboring units and knock. The location was puzzling. The man was fit and healthy. His hair was cut and clean. He didn't fit the surroundings. Perhaps a student's life kept him in such pathetic accommodations.

But the important points were: No security entrance. No buzzer.

So Pinocchio had retrieved his van from the park, gone home to get his equipment and had returned some hours later when the sun had set and the shadows were black.

He had knocked and the man had answered. The fellow took one look at Pinocchio, at the goggles and filter-mask, and he smiled. *Is this a joke?*

Pinocchio gave him a long blast of pepper spray in the eyes and nostrils. The man tried to speak but choked. Pinocchio pushed him back into the room and shut the door behind them. Blind and gasping, the man swung a fist in the air, lost his balance and fell on his face.

Pinocchio leapt on top and trapped the man's wrists behind his back. The fellow chewed on Pinocchio's leather glove as a recycling bag was pulled over his head and the plastic pressed to his nose and mouth.

He was unconscious in minutes, and then...

Vivisection was time-consuming, but time well spent, and it was difficult to pass when the opportunity presented itself. One learned so much when the stakes were high. True, he could have quickly hacked the man's lower legs off, but that lacked finesse, it was messy, and messy was dangerous. Pinocchio had already caused himself trouble with that kind of reckless behavior.

His mission depended upon calm, deliberate actions.

Obviously, he wouldn't have to cut corners when he had the subject in a secure location, but there were great challenges to performing the procedures where the man lived—*in situ* as it were. He didn't know the fellow's life or social network. Someone with a key could enter at any moment.

But Pinocchio had learned patience.

Some sound did escape the fellow. Behind muffling strips of duct tape, he chewed the ball-gag to bits before passing out halfway through the procedure and Pinocchio only discovered the trouble when the fellow woke up and started choking noisily on the pieces.

He cut the tape away to help, but had to smother him again when he screamed. All that excitement despite the calming ebb of blood seeping around the tight ropes closing the fellow's severed calves.

Severed.

Pinocchio realized he had been watching the man too long. It was time to go.

The man sensed it. He knew, because he summoned the energy to tense his entire body, pull at his bound wrists and shake the bed as Pinocchio approached.

He hissed past new strips of duct tape as Pinocchio loosened the ropes that bound his legs—and then he bled.

Blood pumped out, poured off the sodden mattress and pooled on the carpet. The man gasped, kicked his mangled stumps in the air. Scarlet spattered the ceiling and floor. He shivered in one rigid spasm, gave a long sigh and died.

Pinocchio watched the bleeding slow to a trickle and stop.

He moved to the vinyl sheet by the window and removed his bloody clothing: gloves, surgical gown, pants and slippers. He dumped them in the center of the sheet, as he always did. Before changing back into his street clothes he'd bundle up the mess and bag it. He'd take it home to his apartment building to incinerate.

Pinocchio stood there a moment naked—listening.

His Variant-enhanced senses kept him safe, kept him focused on the noises outside the room and in the street. Variant protected him and gave him the strength to make his dream come true.

But he had to be careful. The authorities in Metro knew about him. He had already collected a few new parts—had been at it for some time. Recently, he had discovered a tongue and taken it too hastily, and from another source he'd harvested a pair of eyes that were to die for. In his excitement Pinocchio had left a mess; and in the mess something remained that connected other donors.

These authorities called him Pinocchio in the news-feeds, as though that would insult him. But the name was perfect. They must have guessed what he was doing, because they were right. All he ever wanted was to be a real boy.

They were looking for him, so he had to be careful. He had to be patient.

It was just a matter of time. If things went the way they did back in the day, Pinocchio would soon be free to act. The authorities would have their hands full with the Variant Effect loose in the public again. They wouldn't waste time looking for him when the skin eaters formed their first hunting packs.

It was good luck that his application to join the new Variant Squads had already been accepted. Pinocchio would hide inside the panic.

End of this eBook sample.

The story continues in

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G. WELLS TAYLOR was born in Oakville, Ontario, Canada in 1962, but spent most of his early life north of there in Owen Sound where he went on to study Design Arts at a local college. He later traveled to North Bay, Ontario to complete Canadore College's Journalism program before receiving a 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.