



# **Jokers to the right**

**By Gary Devereaux**

## Chapter 1 – Morning was broken

Shuffling his way across the room, dragging his feet on the well-worn carpet, Dean Turner headed for tiny kitchen situated at the back of house. The kitchen was so small, one could almost believe that it had been an afterthought and put there when incompetent builders had realised they'd missed something. In every sense of the word, the kitchen was a 'bolt-on' and clearly didn't have multiple people in mind when it was thrown together, though the lack of consideration for multiple occupants wasn't a concern as Dean had been alone now for some time, which suited him quite nicely, especially in modern day New York.

He opened the cupboard, sighing as he did so, immediately closing the door without inspecting the contents, remembering that he hadn't washed up the cups from last few days and as he turned a handful of them were scattered over the paltry worktop and the rest were stacked in a hap-hazard mess in the sink.

Patiently he removed the cups and plates, stacking them neatly on the side before filling the sink with warm water and some 'Mary Liquid'. That brand name always made him chuckle, he'd known a Mary once, but that was a long time ago, perhaps even in a different life entirely. He wasn't sure any more, though he could recall the criticism and ridicule the product had received when it had launched. Yet another attempt to earn a quick buck by sounding like another established brand.

Bubbles, it was always in the bubbles. No matter how good the name was, your return on investment was measured by the bubbles. Sub-consciously Dean added more liquid into the running water for good measure.

Having washed and dried the plates et all, he boiled the kettle for the second time, distracted by the steam billowing out of the kettle and pooling on the underside of the wall mounted cupboards. The clicking of the kettle signalling it was ready, snapped him out of his day-dream. Reaching for his favourite mug, the one with a picture of the cast of Rainbow on it, he shovelled 3 decent measures of instant coffee, followed swiftly by 2 generous spoons of brown sugar. He contemplated adding milk for a change but after the milk appeared to have 'floaters' when he fetched it, he settled for black instead.

Ducking as he exited the kitchen to avoid the low hanging door frame, he shuffled back to the front of the house to sit at his desk, sat directly in front of the front window. The view wasn't anything grand to behold as he lived on a side street outside of the main city centre. So, his view, if you could call it that, was of a small brick wall surrounding a plethora of weeds that he didn't even know could grow that high. Across the street was a house like his, well used to be anyway. Now it was a crumbling mess, one half of it smashed apart a few years back when the street was embroiled in gang war. He smiled ruefully at the thought of the former occupant who was so thrilled with her semi-detached. Most of it was detached now and he wryly smiled and thought that it should probably be called a fully detached these days. The point was punctuated by a falling roof tile thudding into the scattered remnants of the home, shattering on impact and sending shards of ceramic skittering across the debris, slowed only slightly by the wet ground caused by the ceaseless drizzle that had overcome the city in the last few days.

For a few moments more, he sat, content, hugging his mug of steaming coffee with both hands, enjoying the aroma of warm caffeine drift into his senses. It was almost wistfully romantic and were it not routine and perhaps sitting over a stunning vista you might agree but no, this was just his typical daily start and he helped focus his mind, clearing away the residue of the night before. Pulling the mug close, he allowed the steaming coffee to clear his senses, lingering a moment before drawing a sip of the rich, black liquid. Of course, he burnt his mouth, too eager to consume the pick me up. Whistling quietly as the burn receded, he chided himself for his impatience.

He placed the cup down on the faded coaster. Fresh memories infiltrating his mind, he recalled the day the little girl had given it to him on her Birthday. He didn't know the girl but seemingly his performance that day had thrilled her and made her day complete. He could hear her voice, echo through his mind...

*"Thank-you Mr. Clown."* She drawled in a southern state accent. *"Mommy said I shouldn't, but I want you to have this. It's my favourite and I put my cocoa on it every night before bed."* He recalled taking the coaster and inspecting it. It had a picture of a little princess in a pink dress with a golden crown in a field of grass. He'd tried

not to accept it, thanking the little girl for her generosity, but she wouldn't be dissuaded, and he was asked to keep the gift. Reluctantly he'd smiled and accepted. *"Thank-you Mr. Clown. I'm gonna go play now with my friends. See you next year Mr. Clown."* She'd hugged him and ran off, her mother nervously looking on a few yards away, seemingly relieved that the exchange was over.

He'd not seen the girl again, which was usually the way. Kids grew up and wanted different things like bouncy castles, magicians or disco's. He regarded the faded coaster and wondered if that little girl had survived the carnage that had engulfed the world, before finally placing his cup down.

He reached down to his right and pressed the button on the computer tower and the machine flared into life, start-up text spilling down the screen as the ancient machine struggled to process the command. The fan roared in seeming incredulity that someone had dared to defy its slumber and demand it work. After what seemed like an age, the sign-in screen appeared, and Dean entered his credentials, hitting the enter key with a grim finality, as if striking the keyboard in response to the machine's petulance.

Pushing the chair back it made a horrid burning noise as it scraped across the well-worn carpet, he decided to occupy himself with other chores, rather than to face the frustratingly long sign-in process as the computer struggled with even the basic functions. He stretched as he stood, forcing his vest to rise-up over his growing paunch as he pushed his arms into the air and screamed a silent yawn at the heavens. Lowering one arm, he used his index finger to inquisitively search his belly button and was rewarded handsomely with a pea sized ball of blue fluff, which he played between his fingers, sniffed and then discarded onto the carpet.

*"Where did belly fluff come from?"* his mind asked itself as he padded his way to the fire place.

The house was always a bit cold in the morning, a bit like his knees it struggled to warm up after long periods in the cold. Most days during fall, winter and even the early stages of spring, he would light a small fire to add some warmth to ward off the creeping cold that would seep into the bones, leeching your spirit and vitality in equal measure. The fireplace was small, the product of an old house, built for different times where populations lived like rats on top of one another. Instinctively he grabbed the poker and flicked the debris of ash and half eaten timbers around to make sure it was truly dead, before reaching for the brush and pan held on the hooks to right of the chimney breast.

To avoid the fine dust, he meticulously swept the debris into one of the corners using the brush whilst holding his breath. When he was satisfied that the hearth was sufficiently clean, he used an old plastic dustpan looted from another shattered home like the one across the road. This item was among many in the home that if the origins were explained, could give people a glimpse of his character and personality traits. His mind started to wander again. For example, he'd just finished a job. A party, that had, well let's just say had gotten out of control in the latter stages. He'd barely got away with his life and as he scampered and wobbled his way down the back streets he'd stumbled across freshly deconstructed home, the Motes of Light from the most recent occupants were scattered through the two-storey building casually.

A Mote of Light was all that remained of a person deceased, it lingered in the exact position of a person's demise bobbing gently in the air. The motes weren't always the same, with many different colours and hues. People seem to widely accept that this was a person's soul and some scholars held theories that the colour of a Mote represented the emotion of the person at the time of death, citing that red Motes were people died whilst full of anger. Naturally as with most things there were counter theories where it was believed the colouration of a Mote represented a time frame as it had been proven now that people previously killed had returned to life at a later point.

Dean believed that both theories had merit given that without warning Motes vanished, whereas they had been present for weeks, months and even years. Perhaps it was the Soul of a person, given form, trapped by whatever means caused its very possibility. Whatever it was, nobody had proven anything to yet and he wasn't about become a theorist at his ripe old age of life.

At the time, one of the motes had caught his eye, it was purple, a colour he hadn't seen before, and it had beguiled and ensnared him, luring him closer. It was only the yelling and shouting from his pursuers outside that had snapped him out of it and instinctively he sat down, back against the wall out of site.

Dean's eyes had wildly regarded the Mote, which was now intermittently flashing a savage red and it dawned on him that he'd walked almost across the length of the room and not realised it. He was gripped by a crippling fear that paralyzed his body, his eyes the only thing that dared to move, flicking between the mote, the door and the window as the shouting grew louder at first, before eventually receding into the distance.

He had probably sat there for another thirty minutes, though he only considered this on reflection, in the moment, he had no idea of just how long he'd be sat rooted in place. The Mote had remained stationary, the angry red subsiding back into the deep purple though he found that it no longer locked his gaze. Instead, almost imperceptibly it blinked green, just the once, before folding in on itself and disappearing completely.

He had stood up and dust cascaded from the folds in his clothes inexplicably. He used his hands to brush what was clearly not dust, but fine ash. As he did so, he saw the faded white plastic dustpan by the fire, the handle looked all chewed, like a dog had gotten hold of it at some point. Dean picked it up, grinned and stuffed it into his party bag and set off into the night, making for home.

Kneeling at the fireplace, the memory subsided, and he loosely opened his hand, balancing the dustpan perfectly so that it didn't fall in the absence of a firm grip. The handle was smoother now, though still bore the hallmarks of the damage wrought in its previous life. He'd grown tired of the handle biting into his palm when he used it each time, so the next time he'd lit a fire he'd turned the handle in the flames, melting and re-moulding it with a smoother finish. A bit like him, repaired and functional but scarred and damaged.

Setting the full dustpan down, he reached into an old brass coal holder. It made a useful place to store plastic bags these days, so that he had an immediate means of disposal to hand, rather than cart the debris into the kitchen spilling fine dust as he went. This was a new addition and its practical use seriously outweighed the aesthetic downsides and Dean was ok with that.

Making sure he hadn't accidentally pulled out a plastic bag with those annoying small holes at the bottom, he filled the bag with the remnants of the fire, twisted the top and tied a knot. He gently placed the bag to his left, whilst at the same time scooping up a handful of newspapers, laying them out before him and opening them to their full size, preferring broadsheets against flimsy red top's and magazines, there was more to work with. Thumbing two to three sheets at a time, he scrunched them up in to a long strand, ruffling them a little bit so that they weren't flat. He then worked the strand so that it had a paper knot, or maybe two, in the middle of it and placed it in the fire. He continued to do this, just as his grandfather had taught him all those years ago, until he was satisfied he had enough.

Placing the unused newspapers back, he gathered a large handful of kindling and set about building a wood block tower in the middle of the fireplace. The trick to the tower was that it allowed the fire to breathe, meaning a quicker 'take', whereas a hap-hazard dumping of paper and wood, typically gave you a smoking squib.

As he was building his tower, his computer pinged abruptly. "*Email.*" He said, to himself. Pushing off the floor using his knuckles he slowly unfolded himself to stand albeit with a slight stoop as his ageing back caught up with the rest of his body and made his way back to the computer. In his haste he winced as he sat down too quickly, pausing to rearrange himself to relieve the momentary discomfort. Grateful that pain had subsided he gingerly reached for the mouse and opened his 'Lookout', another fine example of brand rejuvenation. His inbox appeared on the screen, completely empty save for the latest unopened mail, yet another reflection of his fastidious approach to order over anarchy.

He squinted suspiciously at the name of the sender. This one hadn't been in touch for a while. Repeat business was rare in the party industry, not that he was bad at what he did, quite the opposite in fact, he was excellent at what he did, which somewhat restricted the potential for a re-visit these days. The mouse hovered over the title of the email, which merely said: '**Party Time**' and Dean scowled at the term, letting go of the mouse and reaching for his, now considerably cooler mug of coffee. Sipping the bitter black liquid, he held the mug against his cheek as he double clicked the email, opening it.

He scanned through the email and he could feel his frown deepening as took the information in. It was all there of course, date, time and the type of performance required but this was quite a big gig, bigger than he

was used to if he was entirely honest, which had taken him by surprise initially. So much so that by the time he had reached the end of the email, he was almost immediately re-reading it just to make sure he had read it right in the first place. He got the end again and he leaned back in his ageing swivel chair, testing the limits of its ability to hold him upright without breaking. He whistled, well, more exhaled through gritted teeth. The gig was tonight and that made him nervous and questions flooded his mind. Why him? Why so late? Why the urgency?

A performance in front of such a big audience would require meticulous planning and he would need a water tight exit strategy if the show wasn't received according to plan. In his line of performance heckling was the least of his worries. No, you deliver the punch line and get out quick. That was the name of the game.

Not sure how to react, he put his hands on his head, running them firmly across his balding scalp, whilst his thumbs rubbed his temples. It was a tick of sorts, something he did when overwhelmed with possibilities and the sheer number associated with this, paralysed him for a moment as he stared unblinkingly at the flickering screen before him, his gaze held firm, ensnared by the complex web of permutations that cascaded out of this one single event.

*"Damn you. Damn you and the piece of shit horse you rode in on."*

The screen didn't reply, immune to accusation and uncaring of Dean's concerns or thoughts. *"Easy for you to say."* He muttered as he stood up sharply, regretting it almost instantly as his back almost gave out and he howled in frustration at his ageing spine.

He didn't stop to nurse his back, instead slouching his way across the living room floor, he reached the door leading to the stairs, yanking it open carelessly enough that it rebounded off the wall, ever so slightly increasing the depth of the hole in the wall where he had made the same mistake before. Grabbing the stair rail, he hauled himself upstairs, mindful enough though, despite his new-found temper, to let go of the rail near the top where the screws were clinging to dear life in what little remained of the brickwork.

The door to his room was open wide and he marched through the portal, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror in the hall as he went by. Perching himself on the end of his bed, he sat a moment, his head was swirling, and his mood had darkened beyond normal expectations. He turned to look over his shoulder longingly, she'd have known what to do. She always did.

*"I could refuse. Yes. I could, couldn't I?"* different thoughts churned in his mind. *"Yes, I'll just say I've got another gig, yes, yes, that will do. She won't know any different if I say that."* He got up and started walking back down the hall towards the stairs, this time the mirror spoke as he walked past it.

***"Who will you say you are working for, Dean?"*** Said the mirror, punctuating his name, like it was goading him. He stopped in his tracks, before slowly turning to stand before mirror, where his reflection looked back at him impassively.

*"I'll say it's for one of the others. Jack, Hannibal or maybe even Slayer. Yes, Slayer, he's as mad as a box of frogs that one and not shy of ambition neither. Yes, I'll just say I'm working for him."* Dean said with finality but as he turned away the mirror spoke again. ***"You don't even believe yourself, do you? How do you think SHE will believe it, if you don't?"***

Dean spun back again. *"Shut up. Just shut up. Why do you always have to have an opinion on everything I do? Huh, huh? That's right, not brave enough to say to my face, are you? Oh no, you just snipe from behind me. Well you can forget it, I know what we are doing."* Lingering a moment longer, as though daring the image before him to react, his eyes bored into his own and both faces snorted as Dean turned away again and muttered. *"Didn't think so."*

With new found vigour Dean skipped down the stairs and rushed to sit back at his seat, before gripping the desk with both hands and pulling himself and the chair tight to the desk. The screensaver had kicked in, which was quite the rarity these days, today was truly a day of the unexpected indeed. As nice as the screensaver was, the classic colourful juggling ball bouncing around the screen confined in a box. Forever unable to lose the

energy its momentum created, doomed to bounce for eternity. It took a bloody age for the computer to kick in and display the home screen. When it did, he circled over the mail icon and opened his mail box. To his trepidation, a second email had arrived from the sender and Dean frantically opened the message, hoping beyond hope that the job was off.

It wasn't.

And somehow, She knew. Dean read the message aloud.

*"Dearest Mr. Turner" it began, always so formal he thought.*

*It has come to my attention that you perhaps feel that this opportunity I have presented before you were somewhat optional. When I heard this, I immediately reviewed my previous communication and though I am loathed to do so, I am obliged to profoundly apologise to you, clearly, after re-reading my initial request I admit there is grain of ambiguity in my instruction.*

*So, to avoid any unfortunate misunderstandings, please let me be clear. You will be there at 7pm, sharp and you will do this, without question.*

*I wish you every success in this endeavour and you have my warmest thanks and gratitude in advance of this joyous undertaking.*

*Yours*

*L"*

This time. Dean didn't re-read the mail over and over. No, this time Dean did four things, one after the other.

Firstly (and involuntarily) he gulped. Secondly, he looked at the clock on the bottom right hand side of the screen, which read '13:22'. Thirdly in reaction to this, he swore. Many, many times. Before finally turning to run away from the computer as fast as his fat little legs would carry him.

He reached the mirror again, panting for breath. He was built for comfort, not for speed and gripping the sides of the mirror's frame in both hands Dean leaned in and through gritted teeth hissed at the reflection before him.

*"Why?"* The reflection stoically looked back on him unflinchingly. He repeated the question again. *"Why?"* More moments passed with no change. Frustration gnawed at Dean with each passing second of bitter silence, a monster was growing in his mind, thrashing and crashing about in his head, feeding on the fury and anger building with each passing moment. *"You will tell me!"* roared Dean as the monster broke free of its shackles and poured itself into his demand. The reflection didn't even flinch. Instead, almost imperceptibly it winked back at him, before breaking into a huge rictus grin. As quickly as it had arrived, the rage had dissipated, and Dean too had started to grin.

Releasing his grip on the mirror, it bounced off the wall twice before coming to a rest. Stepping back, Dean placed his hands and his hips and looked down at the floor. He began to laugh, before standing up right again and wagged a finger at the mirror before pointing at the person before him. *"You...."* He started. *"Oh you. You. You. You truly are wicked!"* He exclaimed in new found excitement. *"I hadn't thought about THAT! Why didn't you just say that from the start? It genius."* Dropping the pointing finger, instead he brought both hands up into a steeple shape, using the index fingers to slowly rub the tip of his nose in thought, before he lowered them and clasped one into a fist whilst the other caressed the top of his knuckles and the back of his hand in soothing circular motion. *"Oh yes. Yes indeed, that is really quite good. No, good won't do. No, it won't!"* He exclaimed. *"It's brilliant. Marvellous in fact... yes. Yes."* Dean started hopping from one foot to the other, bouncing from foot to foot as excitement crept in his mind. Before he knew it, he was clapping gleefully and hopping around like a maddened frog in the hallway.

In front of him, the man in the mirror took a step or two back before producing the most elaborate and sublimely delivered bow you might ever see, his face never taking its gaze away from Dean. Two roses, flew

from the right and landed at the feet of the man before him. As he rose from his low bow, he contemptuously stamped down on them, turning his foot on the heads, grinding them into a pulp before standing upright again. The figure raised his arm and using his gloved hand it beckoned Dean closer, curling his index finger in gesture like a caterpillar would crawl across a leaf. Dean approached, enraptured by this awesome display of showmanship and the man in the mirror whispered to him softly.

***“Come now, old friend. Breathe. We have work to do and as nice as it is to have you back, time is short. Go. You know what you must do....”***

Dean stepped back again and gazed once more upon his mirror image, both of which were now nodding in unison. Reverently, he took the mirror off the wall and tucked it under his arm. With his other, he fumbled at the back of his neck, reaching for the loose knot and pulling at the strings. It came undone easily and he pulled the mock necklace away from the front, pulling the two keys, which snagged before popping as they freed themselves from the top of his vest. Gliding down the hall towards his room, he turned just before to face the locked door. Pushing the key into the lock and twisting the key anti-clockwise, he was rewarded with a dull ‘clack’ as the door unlocked. Turning the handle, he pushed the door open and walked in, untucking the mirror from his arm and placing it carefully on the floor before turning back to the entrance.

Before pulling the door too, he smiled as he gazed over the tens of mirrors that looked back at him. Each reflection in unison started to clap, slow at first before building into thunderous applause and eventually subsiding into silence. A man, in a mirror to the immediate left of the one he had just placed down, theatrically cleared its throat before saying ***“You’ve got this Dean. Now, make us proud!”*** and one by one all of the images before him raised their hands to give him a crisp ‘thumbs up’. Dean repeated the gesture before closing the door, locking it once more.

Dean entered his room, stopping just past the threshold to gaze about his room. This was by far the messiest part of the house, primarily because of an ever-diminishing likelihood that anyone other than he would actually see it. The bed wasn’t made and was exactly as he left it this morning when he had woken up and he suspected that if he studied it enough, he could probably still make out the faint outline of where he had fallen asleep in immovable slumber. Despite his typical compulsive cleanliness this room never quite got any form of routine upkeep, in fact as he considered this the question of when he’d last changed the bed sheets ghosted across his consciousness. He couldn’t remember, which confirmed that it was likely quite some time ago. He made a mental note to sniff them if he made it home later and assess the necessity for change by his nose. After all, it was well known that he had a nose for things. Almost by some malign design, his gaze next fell upon a pile of clean linen sheets, the top one being a faded patchwork design with a miasma of brilliant colours that when new, they almost seared the retina they were so bright. It was like they were screaming in silence, accusingly, in apparent rejection.

Muttering *“oh shhh will ya”*, his attention was dragged away by the smashed remains of what was once his dutiful alarm clock. The LED screen lay bent and twisted and some unkind angle and a variety of plastic and metal parts were strewn in close proximity in a variety of states, ranging from obliterated to salvageable. Some of the pieces were missing, having embedded themselves in his bare feet on the infrequent occasion he ironically had gotten out of the right-hand side of the bed. Those pieces had been flung across the abyss that was his room, to a place that even the gods from hell couldn’t find, even with their far-reaching sight. He knew one bit; a metal screw, was downstairs in coal bin next to the fire. He’d had to dig that one right out of his foot, so far had it lodged itself that Dean had ended up using a kitchen knife to gouge it out. The claret was truly something to behold on that day.

Amusingly the next item he looked at was a wooden mallet. No prizes for guessing what had smashed the clock to pieces. *“What do you want me to say?”* He asked the mallet rhetorically. *“I didn’t want to get up that morning.... Though I do miss that clock...”* he trailed off almost sullenly.

Clothes were strewn across the floor haphazardly, some folded, others in organised piles or simply where he had left them. He was quite proud of his floordrobe, if anything because he knew that if he ever wanted anything, regardless of the apparent chaos, he would be able to seek it out immediately. The only drawback was that he was never really sure if any given item was clean or dirty. Once again, this was where the well-

honed 'sniff test' rewarded him time and time again. *"The gift that keeps on giving"* he chuckled. *"Almost like my farts"* he giggled girlishly.

There was a reason he was looking across his shambolic private quarters and eventually his gaze fell upon it, tucked away uncharacteristically beneath a huge white shirt that was large enough to be mistaken for a circus tent. Pulling the shirt away, the waistcoat was revealed, and he reverently lifted his prized possession up in front of his face, closely inspecting the garment for any signs of grime, dirt or other that might necessitate some form of cleanse. To his satisfaction there wasn't anything of note and he strode across the room to the wall directly opposite the doorway.

To the casual observer this area may have piqued curiosity, as it was the only area in the room to speak of that was bereft of debris or discarded apparel. Instead it was clear, a 2 meter by 2 meter area that was almost hygienic and Dean approached the wall with great care.

There was a single hook on the wall and slowly Dean lifted the waistcoat and placed it reverently on the hook, careful not to let it fall naturally, but taking the weight gently until it rested on the hook, the weight of the item taken without distress. Taking a step back, Dean drew in a deep lasting breath, his chest swelling, before slowly and deliberately exhaling before whispering: *"My purpose is my intention"*.

An unnatural light appeared suddenly in the form of a rectangle, creating an elongated frame for the waist coat, building in brilliance before rushing out and fleeing into nothingness leaving a scorched black outline where the silver had been before. Finally, the waist coat burst in a shower of ruby red sparks, consuming it entirely but replacing it with a five-pointed star and a word. A name, to be precise. Right there, smack bang in the middle of the rectangle. It sent a chill of anticipation the length of his spine, dissipating somewhere in the middle of his balding head.

'BOBO'

Dean extended his right hand and placed it palm down over the word and gently pushed. There was a gentle click and what had previously been a solid brick wall was now a heavy, yet fully functional door made entirely of brick and block, which with some effort swung open to reveal a very, very different room indeed. Dean didn't know how it worked, just that it did. What little he did know, you didn't have to be a genius to work out, it was made by those that were the masters of this world now and its secrets remained with them. Not for the likes of him or his kin, those of us underfoot or brought to heel. He mused the point before shaking the thought free, completing the action at the same time, as if by applying the physical representation it would be more likely to happen.

Having finished his thought exorcism, Dean simply stepped into the room, and carefully, almost reverently, drew in a long, lingering breath and let the multitudes of smells and aroma's assault his senses. Closing his eyes in rapture he savoured the moment, in the same way that a nicotine addict would tilt their head and follow the scent of passing smoker or how a recovering alcoholic would savour the sweet smell of warm liquor passing by on tray, using every fragment of strength they still possessed to resist the temptation to grab the glass and let the beautiful brown liquid crash across the palette and sting the throat making you ever so slightly gasp, radiating your throat and chest before settling into your stomach at the same time as contentment and satisfaction washed over your senses, just taking the edge off life and everything around you.

Ah but this was better, far better than cigarettes or liquor and he knew, as he'd fallen victim to both in the past. Oh no, this was different, much more personal. He picked out the scents as they bombarded his nostrils, assaulting his mind with memories and flashbacks to past events and deeds. The unique smell of Baftogrian and other paints grabbed at him, they were the strongest, but he could pick out the stale, yet sweet smell of sweat, of acrid oils and petroleum chemicals from the ill-fated Sono Gig. The ever so subtle, yet unmistakable aromas of cordite and nitro-glycerine danced across his brain, pirouetting and weaving their way through his consciousness, luring him with each flourish and sweep, intoxicating his brain with a calming serenity that made him smile in a state of absolute peace before suddenly the alpha scent bludgeoned its way to front of the pack, a rusty red titan forged from copper and iron, swimming with oils and unguents heaved raggedly before him as the rush of dried blood crashed into the mix, swirling with the others to form a heady brew that

thrashed and wailed at confines of his imagination before he finally exhaled and cacophony of senses raced away as if the very first demons where chasing their heels.

Almost as quickly as he'd exhaled he breathed in, deeper, pain flaring in his chest as pushed the limits of his lung capacity, straining for every last ounce of sensory indulgence, before repeating the motion time and time again until his nose had adapted to the riot of smells.

As the rush of addiction dimmed he staggered theatrically to the arm chair in front of the desk, sagging completely in its cold embrace as a panoply of emotions waged war in his soul. Death, fear, desperation, anxiety, fury, retribution, need, sadness, frustration and hope all tore and scratched at each other as the intoxicating aroma transformed and morphed into thoughts, recollections, achievement and regret as the full magnitude of his experience pressed down upon Dean gripping him completely in ways that gravity could only dream of.

He sat in this state for what felt like an age but in truth was the passing of minutes, panting, gasping for breath in ragged gulps as he slowly exerted his will against over-stimulation.

His victory was punctuated by a cough and a stifled splutter before he sat upright and composed himself once more. His breathing was slow and composed now and the carnal pull of intoxication had passed.

Gripping the end of each arm rest, he levered himself to his feet, as if pulling himself from a mire of depravation his heart leapt and bounded within his chest. He stood a moment, as if testing his legs for sturdiness and when appeared satisfied Dean clapped his hands together and with the sound still ricocheting around the room he exclaimed:

*"It's Party Time!"*

## Chapter 2 – Party Time

Dean raced around the room, opening chests and pulling open doors to reveal the contents of each storage container within the room. The room was about 14' square and with only his desk and arm chair on one side this left a great deal of wall space to occupy with wardrobes, chests of drawers and well, chests of varying size and shape. All these were flung open in a matter of moment and when nothing was obscured from view Dean stood in the middle of the room impassively, surveying and scrutinising every square inch of fabric arrayed before him.

*"A dance like this."* He began. *"Requires... Maybe a touch of class, no. Panache. Yes. Panache. Or perhaps that is too much. Yes, too much. You can be cocky you know."* He said, almost chiding himself. *"But the audience will expect. These are, well, these are bloody aristocracy don't you know?"* as he fawned around mockingly bowed low whilst holding dazzling purple glitter tie with sun flowers emblazoned on it to his neck. He cast it aside, dashing it to the floor in disgust. *"How garish!"* He exclaimed. *"Purple. Pfft, how very regal indeed."* He scurried desperately across the floor, scrabbling amongst the growing pile of discarded clothes to snatch up the purple tie again and began to stroke it lovingly in his hand, as if it were a cat, whose tail he'd just accidentally trodden on in a hurry. *"It's ok, it's ok. Shhhh, shhhh, there, there."* He simpered. *"What's that?"* cocking his head as if listening intently to the tie. *"Dangerous. Oh no no, it won't be dangerous old friend. What on Earth would make you think that?"* He reassured, before a grin wider than the Atlantic Ocean creased his face. *"I lied! Ha-ha! You old fool, of course it will be dangerous..."*

*...No. Treacherous...*

*...No. Reckless...*

*Yes! Yes, Yes, Yes! Reckless, ah-ha-ha-ha... my finest work to be, you will see!"*

He gently sat upright, leg crossed and examined the tie before him, pausing to pull the end of the tie taught after spying an untidy thread. Before gently lifting it to his chin. He sat a moment like this in contemplation before he gently lowered himself onto his back and gazed distantly into the vast mirrors that covered the entire ceiling of the room.

He lay there for a moment all serene before snapping as anger crumpled his ageing features. *"Fine! Be done with you, coward!"* He pronounced, as the tie arced through the year, crashing against the wall and landing on a chest of drawers, before sliding off the edge and into a pile of discarded vests.

He watched the tie disappear into the pile, sullenly, with his legs crossed and his head in his hands as his elbows rested on his legs. It wasn't comfortable by any means, but it reflected his mood. The tie had rejected him, it was a bad sign. It had to be. It had never happened before, a tie, refusing to play. Not just any tie though. His first tie. His mind raced with uncertainty and he flopped forward in anguish and started to make his way towards his beloved tie as a voice cut across the room, ensnaring and rooting him in place.

***"Come now... surely you haven't forgotten about little old me, have you? I'd be terribly sad if you have. I mean, think of all the fun we've had together. Just you and me."***

Dean sat bolt up-right, his eyes wide as if the Gods themselves had appeared before them wearing the most resplendent red tie he had ever seen. Not just any tie. A bow-tie.

His gaze was drawn towards a sparkly beacon of hope, twinkling on the left-hand side of an open draw at the bottom of the great white wardrobe. It dazzled and shimmered in the light, as if a hundred rubies had been crushed and polished individually in the creation of this wondrously exquisite accoutrement. Coming to his feet he was ensnared by the beguiling aura of the bow-tie. *"Why....?"* He whispered, almost in trepidation. *"Why now....?"*

He thought he saw the tie shift on the spot, as if adjusting itself for its response. ***"It was always meant to be me, you know it as much as I do. Listen. Can you hear it, yes, yes you can...."*** Said the bow-tie. *"I... I can"* stammered Dean. *"It's there, no, no... it's here"* he said as he raised his hand to poke his index finger into his temple roughly, before nodding vigorously. He turned on the spot to look back at the crumpled form of the purple tie, almost ruefully. Sensing that Dean was conflicted, the bow-tie spoke once again... ***"Besides, I am red after all... am I not the perfect match for our guest's ultimate attire..."*** it said, trailing off.

Dean turned back once more, grinning. *"Oh you, you wicked little vixen, you! Yes, you are quite right. You know what they say, a man must be colour coordinated these days and let's just say, that it will set the right tone for the evening, shall we, red is the order of the day, after all..."* He giggled and squirmed before snatching up the bow-tie and kissing it passionately at the knot. As he disengaged, he was certain it winked at him as he strode back towards his desk...

Maybe it was just the light....

Dean grabbed the back of the chair, spinning the seat on one leg so that the back was facing the mirror and slowly straddled the seat, one hand gripping the back. He quickly realised that his flourish had meant he was too far away from the table, so like a dog wiping its backside on the carpet, he scooted along, thrusting with his upper legs to get closer. *"That's better."* He whispered.

The tie was clutched in his right hand, which he then drew alongside his left hand and cupped the chosen garment in both hands before reverently placing it upon the desk. One could almost mistake the tie for a piece of ancient text, that might crumble if handled too forcefully, such was the care and attention placed by Dean in the action. Having laid the tie down, he slid his hands palm down on the table towards the edge nearest him, slowly and deliberately as his gaze was locked onto the object.

The trance lasted maybe 15 seconds longer, like the passing of a day dream Dean eventually recovered some sense of purpose and instinctively flicked the switch on the right-hand side of the mirror, immediately a border of light bulbs, such as you might see in any movie stars dressing room, illuminated the desk and the surrounding area with bright and unrelenting light that would ensure no facet would be missed.

Painting one's face was an exercise in preparation. Dean very much compared the application of his face paint to that of an army soldier apply camouflaged paint when going to war. This was his very own war paint and its application was without doubt, a critical step within his process.

You might argue that it was a transformation or a metamorphosis, changing the parameters, drivers or demeanor of an individual from the person they were, to what they will become. The comparison to soldiers was almost complimentary, almost justifying his subsequent behaviour, albeit perhaps without being lawful. But then again, nothing much was lawful anymore. Not these days. No. The only preventative consideration was the likelihood of reprisal and the attached consequences, which when faced with a choice of jail vs. everlasting damnation as a plaything of uncaring demi-gods, it at the very least added some perspective for the purposes of decision making and ultimate performance.

Soldiers were 'normal' people. If you consider that society as it was, accepted mass murderers to walk amongst them freely, unimpeded or unobserved on the simple premise that it was their job and that most importantly it was lawful. And that by changing into fatigues and applying war paint allowed them to legally pick up a gun, over say a pen, like the rest of civilisation and use it to deadly effect was also considered and accepted in absolute. Especially when you consider that after their day, or their 'tour' had finished, they returned to family life to become upstanding citizens and raise the next generation of our planets tenants. So, when you consider his actions from a certain view point, it pretty much justified the fact that Dean could do that very same thing, merely substituting the dour camouflage with bright colours, almost made it more cheerful. So, much like the humble soldier, when Dean applied his very own camouflage, the patient and diligent recluse became something far more deadly and outgoing.

Though if he were honest. He still found it weird that in this new age, what he did for a living wasn't considered to be evil, unlawful or even unacceptable. In fact, it was almost expected, just not perhaps at the time or place he conducted his work. This, no matter how much he tried, he couldn't adjust to because fundamentally deep rooted within his psyche he knew it was wrong to kill another person, no matter how trivial the matter had become of late.

With that thought receding, he subconsciously reached for the tube marked 'CW-47 Clown White' and attempted to unscrew the lid but his hands were clammy, and Dean struggled for purchase. He stuffed his hand up his top and gripped the lid through the fabric this time, hunching over as he put his back into it and

was eventually rewarded with wrist wrenching success. Taking his hand out again, he gently unscrewed the remainder of the lid, inspecting the congealed excess that was clogging the thread, making a mental note to clean it later before placing the lid and the pot back onto the dressing table.

Leaning backwards slightly, he pulled the handle of the draw at the front of the dresser. It was quite an old dresser, they'd say it was shabby antique most likely, to him it was just old, uncared for and well, pretty much beat to crap. On this occasion however, the draw slid out easily, opposed to the typical frustration of arguing with an inanimate object over its seemingly wilful determination to prevent his access.

The draw revealed many objects and Dean plucked a pack of wet wipes from within, peeling back the plastic cover and pulling a few wipes free from their sealed packaging. With care, he draped the wipe over his right hand, as if it were some kind of glove, before bringing it to his face to firmly and methodically wipe the entire surface, along with his neck. He paid special attention to his nose, sure to wipe clear any natural oil from the recessed areas either side where it typically gathered.

It was so important, when applying face paint, especially good face paint, to ensure that the face was thoroughly cleansed before beginning. Typically, if you weren't, areas of the face could become patchy and the paint would run or even smear, which just ruined the look and he didn't want that.

When he was confident that he'd finished, he stood up and walked to the sink that was just behind to his left by the mottled glass window. There he worked some shaving soap into a dish before whipping the contents with a shaving brush to create a foamy texture. Dean wasn't a big fan of canned products, they didn't have the same feeling as traditional methods and sometimes the fragrance they contained would make his nose run if it were too strong. No, Dean stuck to what he knew, what his father had taught him at a young age and applied a relatively odourless white foam to his face quickly and diligently, covering the morning shadow before moving onto his eyebrows, where he spent slightly more care in the application of the soap, because by the love of all things unholy did this stuff sting if it got into the eyes.

He turned the hot tap on and using the brush, cleaned out the dish, making sure there was no residue before playing the brush between his finger and thumb under the tap to make ready for the next time. By the time he had done this, the hot water had begun to draw through and Dean grappled for the plug, wrestling into place, before finally scooping up a flannel and tossing it into the water to soak.

There was a cup on the windowsill, an old battered red mug that was missing its handle and had been given to him by a close relative many years ago and he withdrew the sheathed blade within. Flicking it open, he tested its sharpness on the top of his thumb and satisfied it wouldn't scuff and scrape at his face, he lifted the lid of a tall plastic tube containing an almost fluorescent blue liquid, before dashing the blade inside and dropping the lid. He hopped from one foot to the other for a moment or two, impatiently waiting for some unseen timer to go off in his head before he plucked the knife back out of the alcoholic sanitiser to fold the cover back over itself and began to shave his beard.

For this he worked by touch only, foregoing any mirror to glide the blade from the base of his neck up to the edge of his chin, flicking the blade away with a glorious flourish as in pronouncing that area as 'clear' before repeating the process again and again. After the first pass, he rubbed at the areas experience told him would have been missed and sure as sure, the areas immediately surrounding his Adams apple were still littered with some hairs that grew against the grain. Using two fingers to pull his sagging skin taught, he played his third finger over the missed area, gauging the direction of the hair before redirecting the blade to against the grain.

Once satisfied he turned his attention to his jawline and pulled the blade across his skin, taking care not to nick the mole that had materialised in his early thirties, sweeping the glinting blade from the cheeks and down under his mouth. He did this on both sides before pulling his top lip down, as if presenting an overly long sneer and gently removed the hair on his top lip, pinching his philtrum to push its centre out and catch those tricky little buggars contained within before turning his nose sideways to get any hairs that strayed to the corners. There truly was nothing worse than kramping up and finding a clutch of reeds at the corner of your nose and having to start all over again.

Finally, pushing his chin out, he pulled his bottom lip in, holding it in place with his top teeth to straighten out the ever so slight bumhole he had and dragged the knife up to the line where his skin met his lip, making sure to catch every, last, one.

He sloshed the blade around in the water, clearing the hair/soap mixture away before placing the blade in between the taps, then caressed his face with the palm of his hand continuously, side to side and around his neck to detect if any had been missed. He did this for a while, enjoying the sensation of freshness conjured by his tingling skin, lost in his own embrace if only for a moment or two.

This next bit was not second nature, so he picked the knife up again and returned to the mirror. He'd only started shaving his eyebrows in the last year or so and whilst he had done it a few times now, it was never with the frequency of his beard and although he wasn't unconfident, the sheer amount of claret that emitted from even the slightest of nicks was enough to deter any notion of doing it without a visual aid. He didn't have the bushiest eyebrows, which made it easier, they were quite wiry instead, meaning that they stood out a bit more, but this wasn't the sole reason for their removal, no, that was directly attributed to the fun he could have with 'painting in' permanent expressions which made him look that little bit creepier than normal. He particularly liked the 'permanently surprised' look, if only because it reminded him of an idiot from his high school, who, for some unfathomable reason had decided to employ that look for an entire year. Her name was Clare or was it Heather? It didn't matter.

In a matter of seconds, he'd sliced through his 'brows and shuffled back to the sink. He swished the knife in the sink before flipping the cover back over and dropped it back into the blue. There was a china tea cup on the shelf with a small round sponge in it, which he reached for and dipped into the water, just picking up enough to fill maybe a third or a quarter of the cup and placed it back down between the taps. Without thinking, Dean plunged his hand into the water to grab the flannel, where slowly over the course of a second or two he registered the scolding heat, just fractionally before his brain cottoned on and extracted his hand emitting a howl and a hiss, waving it around in the air to cool it off. Scowling, he reached for his toothbrush and fished the bristle head around in the water, snagging the flannel and dragging it clear of the thermonuclear water. He gave it a moment and then grabbed the faded pink wash cloth in his hand, putting the toothbrush back and in gripping it tightly he wrung the cooling flannel of excess water, picked up the tea cup and strode back to the dresser placing the cup down, before spinning the chair to face the front and plonking himself down. Leaning back, at a slight slouch so that this neck rested on the back of the chair, he placed the warm wash cloth over his entire face and sighed.

The sensation of warmth on freshly shaven skin was an absolute delight. A bit like those warm towels you sometimes get at a restaurant after the meal so that you can wipe the delicious debris from your chops after a damned good feed. He sat there a moment, contemplating. Nothing in particular, which in itself was odd given the task that lay ahead of him, actually he found that he was reflecting on a sudden sense of calm that had overwhelmed him. It was disconcerting, and it jolted him into action.

Sitting forward suddenly, he pulled the towel from his face and in one fluid motion tossed it over his shoulder, giving it a second, before turning suddenly in the hope of seeing the balled towel land in the sink.

It hadn't. Crestfallen, he turned back to the desk.

He rubbed his hand across his face habitually and, satisfied that he was ready he pushed his index and middle finger together and scooped a generous dollop of white paint up and wiped it into his left palm which would become his makeshift palette. Using the two fingers again he began to the process of 'whiting up', working his way from the inside of his face out, starting at the eyes and around his nose, taking the time to pause after spreading to be sure that no areas had been missed. He particularly liked this brand of paint, if anything because when he creased his features, the paint itself had a degree of elasticity and wouldn't crack. There was nothing more amateur than a clown with cracked paint!

Dean then reached into the tea cup, his fingers probing for the little sponge, which once he'd snagged it, he scrunched it into his palm, draining most but not all, of the water from it. Releasing it, it expanded back into shape and he swabbed it across the top of the white paint, coating the entire face of the sponge and wiping it across his face, going back over the entire surface area of his face and neck, re-moisturising the sponge and re-

applying paint as and when he felt it necessary. This process evened out the previous base coat, removing excess paint where it was applied too generously and transferring to areas that lacked enough paint. This process not only gave a more consistent application but the addition of just a small amount of water removed streaks but gave a smooth finish, completely free of blemish.

The water also meant that this second step dried more swiftly than the first and Dean was able to move onto the 'setting' of the base. This is a critical step in the process, if you don't set the base properly the more creative aspects of your make up can melt or run into one another, taking away the crisp result you might want, replacing it with a melting effect. For this Dean reached once more to the side of the mirror for a small porcelain hexagonal pot. This was a pretty little trinket and he recalled that it had belonged to a great aunt or maybe a great grandmother at some point, having been passed down to his mother and when she had died, it had come to him as part of her remaining personal effects. It seemed only right given his vocation, that he put it to good use and kept it within the family. The little container comprised two half shells, with a hinge at the back and very delicate clasp at the front, which looked out of keeping from the rest. Most likely it had been replaced at some point along its journey to this moment. Flicking the clasp, the little container sprung open a few millimetres to allow a nail to get in and lever it open, within was a circular disc made of fabric with a little ribbon handle through the middle. It was a powder puff and Dean had recalled that the last time he had used it, he had consumed the last vestiges of powder and subconsciously he pulled a bottle of 'Super White' and fished around in the drawer for the little silver spoon which was once again a remnant of his past and had come in the box with the porcelain pot. The spoon was sterling silver, complete with a hall mark and at the end of the spoon, the handle if you might, there was a picture of what was clearly a queen of some sort from England or some daft country like that. He remembered thinking that the woman was clearly quite paunchy and her clothes here ridiculously boorish and frumpy, perhaps that was the done thing. He made a theatrical point of bowing before the royal spoon, giggling to himself as he did. He then thrust the royal cutlery into the 'Super White' dragging it up the inside of the bottle to be rewarded with a decent measure of powder which he deposited into what was now a porcelain powder receptacle. He dashed the silverware back into the drawer along with placing the 'Super White' back into its designated position.

Gently gripping the powder puff, he pushed and rubbed the powder in a circular motion around the small dish for a few moments, ensuring that the puff was loaded in powder before slowly patting the painted area of his face, taking care to hold his breath when doing the areas around his nose and mouth and closing his eyes for similarly sensible reasons.

Now it was time for the detail, which really defined the personality of the clown. You should remember that not all clowns are mean and evil, some are good and entertain small children at parties, well they used to anyway (though those times were long in the past now) but as a result the range of personalities that you could choose from was quite vast. You could be a sad clown, a happy clown - complete with super rouge cheeks or even a crazy clown that is just a little bit bonkers and well, just plain weird. Not that it mattered much, there wasn't really any decision to make in terms of personality on this occasion. It was pure shock and awe, so Dean's clown was going to be quite sinister looking, in fact, so much so that it would strike fear into his target audience.

So, it simply was case of designing just how evil he was going to look. Was he going to do the age-old classic, that notorious film where the clown hides under beds and in sewers. "Naaaah" he said aloud to nobody in particular. That was too bright, and he'd used it the last time, or was it the time before that? It didn't matter, he wasn't doing it, that idea was dead. But with that thought he stumbled onto something that could work.

In the bottom draw on the left of the dresser he kept A4 sheets of paper, each one with a face upon it. He grabbed a handful of these along with the pencil set and started sketching out some ideas. He did this quickly as he had a great idea in mind and whilst he discarded quite a few in the process of perfecting the look he wanted, he grabbed aspects he liked from each, eventually bringing them together onto one sheet of paper. Happy that he's achieved the look he wanted, he clipped it to the piece of string draped directly above the mirror so that he could refer to it as he painted it in.

The look he'd found was almost smiling and with minimal colour but the face itself was hollow and dead, just how he expected his audience to be after his performance.

He started with the nose, grabbing the small pots of black, blue, red, pink and white. Uncapping each of them in turn and placing them in a row. He also picked up a ceramic tile which he occasionally used to mix colours together or to add gloss to if he wanted a certain effect. He needed a medium brush for this kind of work, it wasn't going to be all fine detail, well he might need that later for the cracks but initially he needed a brush that would give him control and coverage at the same time. The brushes were kept in pristine condition, all of which had little plastic caps on the end to protect bristles and were contained within a bamboo case that rolled shut, tied together with ribbon to keep them secure. Selecting the appropriate tool, he removed the cap, licked the brush to moisten it and dipped it in to the red.

Removing excess on the palette he applied the red to the tip of his nose, making circular motions to cover the small area. This would be a homage of sorts to the typical red nose that clowns favoured but, on this occasion, he added some back and blue to the red and mixed into the area to make it almost like he'd dipped the end of his nose into blood. It had a congealed look, courtesy of the gloss he'd added to the mix, giving it a degree of viscosity. It achieved the effect he wanted.

Next, he went for the pure black, taking out a blob from the pot and depositing it onto the tile, he added a tiny bit of water, just to improve the flow as black paint could sometimes congeal, especially in warm environments and had been known to lift and pull the base white if not careful. He didn't have time for that, not today. Using the same brush, he closed his mouth, without pursing it, and slowly applied the black in a shape around his mouth that was like a lemon, making sure that the top most border captured the crease in his upper lip caused by the philtrum. Once the outline was complete and he was satisfied, he quickly coloured it in, inclusive of both of his lips.

Taking the thinnest brush, he delicately loaded the brush and from the corner of each side of his mouth, he drew a line up, following the curve of his mouth and face, accentuating it slightly to make it look like the smile was giving off a sensation of pleasure, stopping each line at the point between the outer corner of each eye and the top of his ears. He made a point of making each end slightly imperfect, not following the curve, as if the smile had been forced and the edges had ripped the skin.

After these lines were in, he extended the lemon shape he had created earlier and dragged each side into a point which then fed into the lines at the edges of the smile, before adding to the bottom of the newly shaped mouth, creating the effect that bottom lip had been torn and badly damaged, in fact Dean was trying to achieve the effect that the lips had been torn away completely and that there was nothing hiding the teeth any longer, creating a permanently vicious grin. He did this by drawing in three or four points, some bigger than others and then with the small brush creating small cracks or tears to give the effect that the smile was the product of torture or maiming of some sort. This he outlined completely with black, before returning the red mix he had created for the nose. Mixing in a little black, Dean applied to this where the bottom lip might have one been, making it look like raw unhealed flesh remained where the lip had been stripped away. Once the mix was on, he took some more red and slowly in layers applied greater volumes of this to certain areas, along with some gloss to give it the raw look. On the upper most edge of where the bottom lip would have once been, he painted in some white, with a gentle touch of pink mixed in in lines across the top, making it look even more glossy and distinct.

Leaving this to dry he closed one eye and set about painting the area of the socket completely black, which he repeated for both. The idea being that when he closed his eyes, it would give the effect of a completely empty socket. He took great care to paint this in a few times, simply to ensure that the black had the appropriate depth needed to carry it off. He had to be patient at this point and not open his eye too quickly as it might force undried paint into the recesses and congeal, causing problems later so this was probably the longest part of the face he was creating.

Eventually he deemed it was dry enough to carry on and repeating the process he had applied to the bottom lip, he took the small brush and drew vertical lines from the top and bottom of each eye to differing lengths and not with the same approach on each to once again give the effect that the skin had torn, which might have been a result from the forcible removal of the eyeballs. Where the cracks were small, he kept it predominantly black, however where the cracks were wider and more dominant he added the red mix once again, giving the effect of torn flesh which was showing beneath.

Leaving just the teeth to detail, he combined some white with the black, opening a pot of umber brown up, to add a small measure to the mix to give it a different hue, almost like a stain. He mixed up two variants of this, one much whiter than the other and using this lighter mix, he painted in different square/rectangular shapes which would become the teeth. This was quite tricky as he was actually painting this on his own lips and dragging the brush across them tickled insanely, testing his ability to maintain a straight face to absolute limits. There were a few that he was not happy with, which after much inspection and reflection, he corrected with the black, creating differing sized gaps in the teeth before returning with the white mix and correcting ones that hadn't looked right. Once this was done he drew in some cracks to the actual teeth themselves, not many as he didn't want to overdo it, but enough to achieve the desired result. Dean then watered down the second, darker mix he had created and started washing this over some of the teeth, specifically on the top teeth making them seem like they had encountered some form of explosion. He then took some more white and added it to the lighter mix before adding a few spots in places to give the effect of a gleaming area.

Before being entirely satisfied, he watered down the burnt umber to a very thin consistency and washed it over the teeth repeatedly, achieving an oily result that made them look a bit like blood had dried and stained them permanently.

Finally, he took out an older powder puff, one that had seen much better days and dappled into the 'Powder White' before wiping it through the black mix. He then proceeded to wipe the puff dry, almost in a dry bushing effect, before patting it in areas around his face, paying attention to the areas just above the eyelids, where his eyebrows had formally been, around one side of the nose, around the temples and in the angles of his jaw line. This he worked into the base white, trying to blend it in where possible so that it looked natural and as though the character had emerged from a pall of smoke and soot.

At this point, he pulled out his mobile phone. It was useless now a communication device, all mobiles were thanks to the angels taking out the communication towers and even being thorough enough to take out the satellites when it emerged some pockets were still able to communicate. Instead, Dean had kept it for the high-resolution camera, which served in moments like this, but particularly as a means to confirm task completion to his clients. Dean selected the camera function, holding it in front of him to take a picture of himself in the mirror, when he was satisfied, he closed his eyes and mouth and took the image.

Opening his eyes once more he inspected the picture, using his thumb and forefinger to zoom in and out to check the quality of the work. Overall, he was very happy with it, but something nagged away, meaning that it needed something else. But what? It had something to do with the mouth and it took him a few moments to pin point it but finally he twigged. *"There is a lot of red at the bottom, but none on top of the mouth"* he mused quietly. He thought to replicate the approach he had used at the bottom but as he was mixing up he came up with a better idea and started to water down the red/blue mix. He then 'splashed' this on, a bit more liberally to the area around the top of the mouth, even splashing a small amount on the cheek, which with each application, he stopped to use his thumb to gently rub or smear the paint he had just applied, which done the trick and gave the appearance that mouth had been bloodied, was raw and that it was his own blood that was smeared around his mouth giving that final 'je ne sais quoi'.

Pleased he was finished, he clipped the lids closed on the pots and returned them to the box before washing through the brushes thoroughly and re-applying the plastic lids and packing them away. The now ruined powder puff was discarded and he made a mental note to scavenge for another from the old abandoned mall on 32<sup>nd</sup> street when he was next passing. The rest of the items were packed away with studious efficiency whilst Dean hummed the imperial march as he did so.



*Party time with Bobo....*

With the most time-consuming part complete, Dean forced himself to look at the time, he had thirty minutes to finish up and depart. With that he swiftly got dressed, carefully pulling on his button up shirt over his head and fastening it, making especial care with the top bottom so as not to damage the paint on the neck. Stepping into his trousers he zipped up his fly and fixed the clasp at the front. Checking his pockets, he confirmed that one had a bundle of colourful flags tied together within and that other had a sealed pack of cards. Perfect.

He pulled the bracers off the open cupboard door and adjusted them slightly before clipping the back in places and stretching the front over his shoulders to fasten to the front. He fiddled with the leather divider that sat in between his shoulder blades, making sure it was snug and correctly positioned as that could be bloody irritating if not nestled in correctly.

Sitting on the cushioned stool, something else he had relieved from a shoe store from the mall on 32<sup>nd</sup>, he reached for his finest clown shoes. Not his oldest clown shoes, the second pair he had ever purchased, the ones with all the patches down the sides and at the back here his heel had eventually worn through. He slid them on effortlessly, as if they were a pair of smoking slippers and deftly tied the laces into bows and double knots to make sure they were securely fastened.

Snatching an emerald green jacket, resplendent with an arrangement of sparkling sequins he gripped his shirt cuff with his fingers and palm before pushing down into the first arm hole, before sweeping it around and plunging his other hand in and shuffled the coat up onto his shoulders before adjusting it slightly so that it hung nicely from his frame, rolling his upper arms and shoulders slightly to make it sit on the seams. He then brought his hands up, gripping the collar and ensuring it was not turned before bringing them down the front of the jackets to ensure it was crisp and correct.

Walking over to the desk he reached into the draw which held the paint brushes and pulled out a wonderful, ornately carved box whose history Dean knew nothing of on this occasion, it was something he had found in the house when he first moved in here and had decided to keep because of the masterful artistry that had gone into its creation. Opening the box, revealed some cufflinks that had been neatly arranged within and without too much fuss or ceremony Dean plucked the ruby red pair out and shut the box, returning it to the draw before fastening each cufflink to opposing wrist.

With reverence he stood before the desk, staring wildly at the bow tie that sat patiently before him, glinting and sparkly in the combined light of the room. The prospect of what the bow tie symbolised provoked a tick within him, which he only just managed to hold at bay, a swift lick of the lips in anticipation would have ruined all of his hard work and artistry. Instead he sucked breath in through his teeth, inhaling a great lungful of air before slowly and quite deliberately releasing it.

*“So, my love.”* He began, softly, almost longingly. *“I am ready. My war paint is applied, my soul at peace and my mind prepared for the forthcoming dance. Will you join me?”* He said, as he reached out his hand as if gesturing towards a waiting dancing partner.

***“Oh, my dear sweet love.”*** The bow tie crooned in reply. ***“I have waited too long for us to embrace once more, pick me up and tie me to your soul and I will guide our path towards revenge and your hand in retribution as we destroy those that would stand before us...”***

With that he whisked the bow tie up into his hand and clasped it to his neck, adjusting it ever so slightly so that it was level.

With this final accoutrement in place he turned and stood before the full-length mirror next to the sink and studied himself. As he did, the reflection shuffled slightly from foot to foot, building slowly in excitement before it was hoping madly and clapping wildly, he found that he was doing the same. Eventually he and the mirror image settled down before the reflection broke into a big, rictus grin and spoke four simple words that would signal the start of his latest and possibly greatest performance to date.

**“BOBO. It is time...”**