

STEVEN RAMIREZ



EVEN THE

DEAD

WILL
BLEED

Book Three of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD

EVEN THE DEAD WILL BLEED

Book Three of Tell Me When I'm Dead

STEVEN RAMIREZ



Glass Highway
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Contents

[Praise](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Steven Ramirez](#)

1. [Bad Boy](#)
2. [Maritza](#)
3. [The Russian Girl](#)
4. [The Korean](#)
5. [Roy Batty](#)

Praise

“Without a doubt, this series is the best conspiracy thriller I have ever read. The action is non-stop, the body count is sky-high, the horror will make the reader jolt and squirm, and best of all the hero is one of us, an ordinary guy thrust into an extraordinary situation.”

Simon Oneill, author of *Magic Is Murder*

“Death, despair, and the way things are.”

Danielle DeVor, author of *The Marker Chronicles*

“I can see this book trilogy as a great TV series, like *11/23/63* (the Stephen King book).”

Amazon Reviewer

“Absolutely brilliant, I literally couldn’t put it down!”

Amazon Reviewer



About the Author

Steven Ramirez is the author of the horror thriller series *TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD*. He has also published short stories as well as a children's book, and he wrote the screenplay for the horror thriller film *Killers*. Steven lives in Los Angeles with his wife and daughters.

Want to know about new releases? Sign up for the newsletter at [stevenramirez.com/newsletter](https://www.stevenramirez.com/newsletter).

[stevenramirez.com](https://www.stevenramirez.com)



Also by Steven Ramirez

Tell Me When I'm Dead (Book One of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD)—When a plague decimates the town of Tres Marias, recovering alcoholic Dave Pulaski, his wife, Holly, and a band of soldiers must kill the living and the dead to survive. “A hard-hitting splattergore zombie thriller, told by the ultimate antihero.” —Travis Luedke, author of *The Nightlife Series*

Dead Is All You Get (Book Two of TELL ME WHEN I'M DEAD)—Fighting to protect his wife, Holly, from the hordes of undead, Dave Pulaski discovers the truth behind the contagion—a revelation that will drive him past the limits of faith and reason. “A shoot first then shoot again horror thriller of the highest order.” —Simon Oneill, author of *Magic Is Murder*

Copyright © 2015 by Steven Ramirez.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact the publisher at stevenramirez.com/permission.

Glass Highway
Los Angeles, CA
stevenramirez.com

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Even The Dead Will Bleed / Book Three of Tell Me When I'm Dead / Steven Ramirez. — 1st ed.

Edited by Garrett Cook
Cover art by Kevin Asmus
Cover design by Deborah Bradseth

For David Latt and David Rimawi. Your kindness and generosity continue to inspire me.

I had had enough. The blood was pounding in my head so hard that I felt about to explode. I aimed my gun at Cathcart and shot him four times in the face.

— James Ellroy, *Brown's Requiem*

Bad Boy

THE ANGEL WOKE ME UP BEFORE DAWN. IT WAS ALWAYS THE SAME—AN electric tickle along my spine, then a whisper like wind through a tiny forest. It always happened in the midst of a thin, hard sleep. I'd open my eyes and she would already be there, standing close by. When I'd last seen her in the church she was filthy, her delicate frame covered in shorts and a bloody T-shirt with the words *Li'l Princess* splashed across it—identical to that little girl I'd put down in Mt. Shasta when I was new to the whole undead-killing thing.

I had guessed she was ten, with soft blonde hair and large, hurt green eyes. She'd been singing a hymn in the church. Now here she was again—clean, her luminous hair looking like it might smell good. She called herself Holly. I didn't know if God was trying to be cruel on purpose, since that was my late wife's name. But I came to accept it. She was Holly.

"What is it?" I said.

My arm still ached—I needed to change out the bloody bandage. I'd gotten into a fight in Quartzsite, Arizona, on my way to LA. This guy thought I'd stolen his limonite cubes. It happened on a day in the early morning. He was stumbling out of a bar called *The Lazy Eye* and noticed that his truck had been broken into. I'd been in the mini-mart next-door buying snacks and happened to be walking across the parking lot when

he saw me and jumped to conclusions.

“Ya dirty son of a bitch!” he said. “Where are they?”

This was typical for me—violence out of nowhere like a flash fire in a weed lot. I seemed to attract it. I set down my groceries and quickly took everything in. The bar was quiet. The clerk in the mini-mart was stocking beer—I could see him through the plate glass. No cars were coming and the lot was deserted, except for a mangy yellow dog growling and tearing at a black bag filled with trash. I couldn’t see any security cameras.

The soak didn’t have a gun, which was good—but he did carry a hunting knife. We decided to do it in the parking lot.

He made the first move, trying to carve a hole in my face. Huge mistake. I let him come at me and used his momentum to send him sailing past onto the dusty asphalt. It was a good plan, except the knife nicked my arm as he went by.

“Gimme back the cubes!” he said, spitting out bloody, broken teeth as he got to his feet. His nose and forehead were scraped raw and bleeding. He looked like he wanted to puke.

Ignoring my bleeding arm, I waited. “I didn’t take them.”

“Give ‘em back.”

This was useless. My first instinct was to kill him and be done with it. I’d seen so much violence these last weeks and months, one more body wouldn’t be a problem. Then I remembered—I wasn’t in Tres Marias anymore. And I was still human. This person was human. But he wasn’t going to let this go and I needed it to end. So I made a judgment call. As he came at me again, I shot him in the leg. His knee buckled. He howled in pain. I waited for him to go down, then kicking away the knife, I dragged his sorry ass behind an abandoned Shell station and sat him up against the wall where he pissed himself.

“Don’t kill me, mister!” he said, holding his bleeding leg. “You can have the limonite cubes—I don’t care.”

When I used to get drunk with my best friend Jim, back in the day, I

don't think I ever looked even half as bad as this idiot looked now. Like me he was in his twenties. Smelled like vinegar and urine. I wondered if he'd make it to thirty. I was pretty sure I wouldn't.

"You need to keep pressure on it," I said, grabbing his hand and pressing it against the wound. "And I didn't take your limonite cubes."

"Don't matter." He was blubbering now.

Thinking about next steps, I decided to throw away the cap and the jacket, in case someone had spotted me. They were new—whatever. I was pretty sure the security camera inside the mini-mart hadn't picked up my face. All they'd have to go on was the clothes. And my truck was parked on another street, so no one would be able to report a license plate. This was good practice for LA—staying anonymous.

I left the tool whimpering there, though I did promise to call 911—not that he deserved it. As I walked away, he told me to go to Hell. If only he knew.

I HADN'T SLEPT SOUNDLY in days since arriving in Los Angeles. I only ever seemed to doze off in the early morning hours. The good news—I had real money, thanks to my former employer, Black Dragon Security. After everything that had happened up north—including Holly being murdered—they paid out big. I didn't want anyone to know where I was, so instead of driving straight from Tres Marias to LA like I'd planned, I took that detour to Phoenix and withdrew all the cash there. Then I ditched the vehicle my friend, Guthrie Manson, had lent me, bought a used Dodge truck with cash and backtracked to LA.

As soon as I arrived, I stashed the weapons in a public storage facility and rented a cheap room by the week off First Street in Boyle Heights near the Evergreen Cemetery. Good thing. If I died on this mission, which was likely, I'd end up in potter's field. No name. No headstone. No one to pray for me.

You're wondering why I chose this life, I'll bet. It wasn't because I

didn't care about my friends. It was true, I didn't care about a lot of things—not anymore. But Griffin, Fabian and Warnick were everything to me, especially now that Holly was gone. Though not related to me, they were the only family I had. But after all the badness, I vowed to kill the people responsible for what had happened in Tres Marias. And I couldn't do that working for Black Dragon, deploying to Atlanta—or wherever the hell those other guys ended up. I needed to settle things here and now. And I would. I knew exactly what I was going to do. I'd thought of little else since leaving my former home.

Baseborn Identity Research.

The name was bizarre and nondescript. Like something out of Resident Evil. It was a small facility in an industrial park located in East Los Angeles near Monterey Park. When I Googled it, I didn't find much. I didn't even know what they did officially. Whatever it was, they were deeply connected to Robbin-Sear, the secretive government-backed company behind the outbreak that pretty much wiped out my town. How did I know? When Warnick, Springer and I joined the National Guard troops in raiding that hidden lab in Mt. Shasta, we found people in hazmat suits loading up big-rig trucks bearing the name Baseborn Identity Research with “patients,” presumably to be transferred to a new facility for further experimentation.

Apparently this was Phase Two of the grand experiment. Phase One had consisted of infecting a local populace with a virus derived from rabies and watching it spread—first killing, then transforming the victims into slow-moving, undead things we called “draggers.” These unholy creatures existed for one purpose—to eat the flesh of the living. Then something unexpected happened.

The virus mutated.

Some of those rotting, lumbering draggers we'd been fighting since summer “survived” the transformation, retaining their human qualities. And they got faster. No longer dead they could easily pass as people. Except for one thing—they still craved meat. And with the psychotic

calmness of a surgeon, they heartlessly carved their victims up and ate the warm, pulsing flesh, even as the person lay screaming. Can't get any fresher than that. It was enough to make you go vegan.

I call them cutters.

All these things I witnessed myself. And sooner or later the dark forces behind the experiment would turn these evolved animals loose onto an unsuspecting society like they'd done in Tres Marias. Then it would be too late.

"They're coming," the angel said.

I looked deep into the green eyes I knew so well and must have shown my fear because she reached out a small, soft hand with perfect nails and touched my face. It was the first time she had touched me since that awful night inside St. Monica's when I knelt at the altar, Holly's body lying broken and bloody in front of me. I thought the angel's hand would be warm. It was cool like a shady patch under a willow in summer.

"Do not be afraid," she said.

She tried not to show her concern but she was worried about me. When I was little, I used to believe in guardian angels, thanks to my mother and Catholic school. Mine was named Maurice, after the third century Roman soldier who became a saint because he died for his faith. I never did see him, though. Not once. And he never kept me out of trouble—never fought off the bullies. Never stopped me from taking my first drink. Yeah, free will's a bitch. But this one—the blonde angel—she was different. She was looking out for me. But for how long?

"When?" I said.

"Soon."

Wearing only boxers, I climbed out of bed and stood in front of the window that faced west. The angel didn't seem to mind that I wasn't dressed. Cheap polyester curtains that were meant to look like cream-colored lace hung loosely over the grimy fourth floor window. I ignored the cockroach droppings on the sill and peered down at the street below.

Traffic was light. Somewhere I could hear a police siren. In the grey, still morning, small Latinas scurried up and down the sidewalks, late for something. Many pulled along young children in blue jeans and sweaters and wearing oversized backpacks. Their movements were furtive. Did they know something bad was coming?

The angel stood next to me, looking out the window too and held my hand. Thunder from nowhere rumbled in the distance. Raindrops hit the window and turned into rivulets that wept like Jesus at Gethsemane. For a moment I felt like I would have been lost forever to the evil in this old world if she'd let go.

"How will I know them?" I said.

She looked at me darkly. "By the bodies they leave behind." Then she pointed a rosy finger. "Look."

A black Escalade rumbled past, never even slowing down for pedestrians. It turned at the corner and disappeared. The agents in the grey suits didn't know where I lived—not yet—otherwise they would've stopped in front of my building. But they were close. There wasn't much time.

"Don't do it, Dave," she said.

Though her green eyes implored me, I refused to look into them. "I have to."

"But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them."

"Listen, these devils live in the darkness," I said. "I'm going to find them and kill them."

The rain became a steady patter—the sound of chattering faeries at a cocktail party. The angel's hand evaporated in mine and when I looked over, she was gone. Though she was mad at me, it didn't matter. At least she'd warned me. Something—or someone—bad was coming. I had the feeling it wasn't the grey-suits. It was something worse. I thought of the thousands of innocents who had died in Tres Marias and the hundreds of

nightmare-plagued survivors. And I knew that there would be more bloodshed, more suffering. What was I supposed to do, let it happen? The angel had warned me not to hate—but what else was there? Hate implied action.

I needed to get moving.

WHEN YOU'RE PARANOID, everything looks like a threat. I had picked this particular building because of its underground parking. I got lucky—the stall they assigned me was located way in the back. As I walked to my truck, I noticed movement in the shadows. I didn't live in the best of neighborhoods, and every once in a while a junkie or a gangbanger would sneak in just as the wrought iron gate lowered and would wait till someone was leaving for work. Then he'd pull a knife or a gun and rob the poor bastard. If the victim was a woman, he might do worse.

Though I had plenty of guns, the last thing I wanted was to draw attention to myself. So as I moved closer, I gripped my VIPERTEK stun gun tightly, ready to deliver nineteen million volts to some asswipe's head. Then I relaxed. It was only Cuco, the maintenance man. In a twist of bent logic only a Mexican would understand, that was the nickname his family had blessed him with. His actual name was Refugio—how in hell do you get "Cuco" from that?

He looked to be in his mid-fifties, lean and weathered with straight black-brown hair and a missing molar you only noticed when he laughed—which was often. He didn't talk much and was always working—whether it was fixing a leaky pipe, rewiring a light fixture or replacing a door that had been kicked in by the cops who liked to frequent the neighborhood. Today he was on his way to the dumpster, carrying two huge plastic bags filled with strips of wet Sheetrock.

I could see by the bulging arm muscles, knife scars and black teardrop tattooed under his right eye that he'd had an interesting life. But he was a good guy. Never questioned why a gringo had decided to move

into the place, and I never volunteered to tell him my story. Most of the other residents were Latino immigrants from Mexico or Central America. I was sure he knew by looking at me that I'd never done any hard time, but maybe he'd assumed that I was ex-military.

"¿Qué tal?" I said.

He grunted as he tossed the bags into the trash and slammed the lid shut. "Bien."

"Anything suspicious?"

I slipped Cuco twenty bucks now and again to keep an eye on my truck and to alert me if he noticed anyone unusual hanging around. He was happy to comply. God knows what he did with the money.

"Usual. Drug dealers. Putas. Jehovah's Witnesses."

Even though Cuco had given me the all-clear, I felt it necessary to make my own inspection. I could feel his crafty, sparkling brown eyes tracking me as I strode directly across to the opposite wall, peered out the small opening that led to the sidewalk. The rain was coming down pretty good. I turned, walked back across and did the same thing on the other side. So far, nothing out of the ordinary.

I walked to the front of the garage and stood at the closed gate, observing the street as sheets of rainwater slithered down the mottled driveway. Something moved in front of me and struck the gate, startling me and sending my right hand directly to the pocket where my stun gun was waiting. It was a blue-green bouncy ball. A second later, a kid in a short raincoat who looked to be around seven came after it. His exasperated mother called to him sharply in Spanish while standing on the street, sheltering an infant under an umbrella.

"She sounds mad," I said.

Shrugging, he grabbed the ball, smiled at me with a mouthful of missing teeth and scurried back up the driveway.

When I got to my truck, Cuco was grinning at me and scratching his cheek. "Want me to grab my machete and cut you a path?"

"Make sure to clean up the blood after," I said. He let go a belly-

laugh. "Hasta luego."

He gave me a quick wave as I jumped into my truck and headed out, while keeping a sharp lookout for black Escalades.

Maritza

TODAY WAS THE DAY. BUT FIRST I NEEDED COFFEE. I MADE MY WAY THROUGH the wet of an unusual LA rain to Holy Grounds for an Ojo Rojo—coffee with espresso—watching for grey-suits. Although their coffee was awesome, I made it a point not to go there every day. I varied my routine, mixing it up with Starbucks, Peets or whatever else I could find—in case I was being monitored. But Holy Grounds. It was hard to stay away.

Do I sound like a schiz? Maybe. Tres Marias had been like an island—cut off from the rest of the world because of the quarantine. Like Las Vegas, what we did there *stayed* there. But LA was different. I had to be extra careful. After everything I'd been through, I was keenly aware that a single mistake would mean I was dead. And dead is fine—*after* you've finished getting your revenge.

The place was not too far from where I lived. As I turned onto Alhambra Avenue I saw the flashing lights. Fire trucks, police cruisers and an ambulance were clustered around the entrance to an alley next to the coffee house. A crowd of gawking local Chinese and Latino residents hovered behind the yellow police tape. One middle-aged woman clung to a purple umbrella with flowers painted on it and looked like she was praying. Slowing down I turned at the corner and parked down on the street.

“What’s going on?” I said, approaching the crowd.

A local turned to me and shrugged. “*No se.*”

A young woman joined the conversation. “Somebody got attacked.”

She worked at Holy Grounds and had colorful floral tats up and down her arms, as well as a number of piercings. I think she went by the name Amparo. She was Latina—maybe Mexican—with cropped dark brown hair and eyes that resembled black pools. If you stared at them too long, you’d get sucked in. She couldn’t have been more than twenty.

“Cut up real bad,” said another man with gold teeth, acne scars and grease under his fingernails. “Prob’ly a hooker, homes.” This guy was straight out of a Cheech and Chong movie.

People like to make up stories when they don’t have all the facts. I wanted to investigate but made it a rule never to mix it up with cops. So I waited with the others.

An ABC7 Eye Witness News van screeched to a stop across the street from us, nearly plowing into a parked car in the rain. The cameraman driver hopped out and pulled open one of the side doors to grab his equipment. A young Latina wearing a black suit and carrying a small umbrella hopped out of the cab, brushed her long, dark hair away from her face and crossed the street, her black platform pumps clickety-clacking on the slick pavement. She looked to be in her early twenties—pretty with straight coffee-colored hair, hazel eyes and full, sensuous lips. I wondered if she would be as aggressive as my late reporter friend Evie Champagne had been—before someone shot her in the back of the head for asking too many questions.

“Mari Lopez!” some woman said.

Excitement spread quickly. Ignoring the attention, the serious-minded young woman marched up to the cop in charge and asked him something as her cameraman trailed behind her. Leering at her chest, he shook his head and pointed to the police tape. I got the impression that they’d done this Kabuki dance before. Rolling her eyes, she turned and joined us, choosing to stand next to me for some reason. I could smell her

lavender perfume that mixed with the rain.

“Can I have your autograph?” a young boy said.

The reporter glanced at him impatiently.

“Don’t forget where you come from,” an elderly woman said.

Smiling professionally the reporter grabbed a black Sharpie from her purse and signed the boy’s Dodgers cap, sending him over the moon.

As others began to pester the reporter, a stunned silence fell over the onlookers like a cloak of liquid darkness as two stone-faced EMTs raced a gurney towards the ambulance—one pushing the gurney and the other holding an IV bag. The police tightened their circle and waved people back. The reporter nudged her partner, who raised his camera and began recording. Others around him brought out their cell phones and did the same. There was no way this wasn’t ending up on YouTube.

Instinctively, I pulled my cap down low over my eyes and turned up my collar. I thought the event might be nothing more than a random shooting like hundreds that happened in cities around the country every year. That’s what I thought.

Then I saw the victim.

She was strapped to the gurney—an overweight girl with poofy hair, bad teeth and too much makeup—moaning and writhing feverishly. That other guy had been right—she *was* a hooker. A grey patient blanket covered most of her torso. I squeezed in to get a closer look.

Wailing, the woman, who looked to be in her mid-twenties, managed to free one of her arms. As she raised it towards her face, she shrieked. Then the crowd screamed. Someone on the other side of me passed out. Gasping, the old woman made the Sign of the Cross and covered the boy’s eyes. The gangbanger went white and vomited on his shoes as people moved away from him. All the while, the cameraman calmly recorded the scene, even though they would never be allowed to broadcast the horrific images.

The victim’s arm had been stripped clean of skin and flesh—the naked bone and blood vessels still intact. A bright orange tourniquet

stopped the blood from squirting everywhere. When I saw that, I knew what the angel was trying to tell me.

Cutters—they'd been here.

As I looked past the ambulance, a black Escalade slowly cruised by. One of the grey-suited agents in the back seat was shooting rapid-fire photos using a camera equipped with a telephoto lens. I noticed another man sitting next to him—gaunt with close-cropped silver hair and wearing a black suit. A long, shiny purplish scar ran from his temple, down past his eye to his jawline. That eye—it reminded me of the old man's "eye of a vulture" from Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." Pale blue, with a film over it. He looked like a deformed undertaker. When he turned to look at the crowd I almost lost my gorge as I struggled to slip farther back.

I had seen him before.

One of the EMTs grabbed the woman's arm and placed it back under the blanket. Then he and his partner loaded the gurney into the ambulance and they were off, siren blaring. The cop in charge signaled for the reporter to step forward, the way a maître d' summons a busboy.

She and her cameraman scooted under the police tape and approached him. They chatted amiably for a few seconds as the cameraman lined up the shot. Then the cop stepped out of the way and Los Angeles Police Chief Lawrence Hughes came forward. I recognized him from the news. He was in his fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and a professional tan. He wore a suit and, despite the rain, his appearance was elegant.

A bright light mounted on the camera came on and the reporter did her standup, minus the umbrella. Both she and the police chief had on their game faces. The interview went quickly, the chief refusing to commit himself to anything—especially the reporter's suggestion that the attack might have been the work of a serial killer. Following the standard playbook—looking directly into the camera and smiling through whitened teeth—he assured the public that this was a random act and

that the neighborhood was safe.

What a crock. This was only the beginning. The bloodbath had just begun. I listened carefully as the reporter peppered the cop with questions, trying to glean whether this type of crime had ever happened before. It was denial all the way—the same words repeated over and over. *Random act*. The cop might as well have blamed the incident on flying monkeys. There was nothing more to be learned till the evening news and tomorrow's newspapers.

After doing her wrap-up, the reporter returned to the van with her cameraman, and several of us entered the coffee house, some returning to drinks and food they'd already bought but were too upset to consume. Amparo slipped behind the counter and began taking new orders. I purchased my coffee and found a seat away from the windows.

Thoughts and images flew through my brain. The victim's face and arm. The black Escalade. The grey-suit taking pictures. And that hideous man in black. He worried me. I'd seen him in Mt. Shasta when we raided the secret Robbin-Sear lab. He'd been standing in the parking lot talking to Walt Freeman as I made my escape in a stolen Escalade. Who the hell was he?

And now the cutters were here. I recalled the first ones I'd encountered in Tres Marias. Ordinary Black Dragon soldiers with eyes that glowed purple, calmly chewing the raw flesh of a man they'd flayed using their bayonets. Whatever organization had been behind the massacre in my town had moved the show to LA. How far would the plague spread this time? And why had the police chief himself shown up if this was nothing more than a "random act"? The whole thing reeked.

I had come here to expose the evil that had killed Holly and destroyed my life. Maybe I was too late. Walt Freeman was the current face of that evil, and though killing him would have gone a long way towards sating the hatred and need for revenge I carried with me constantly, the act itself would do little to stop what was already underway. It was like pissing in the wind. Usually, you were the only

one who got wet. Nevertheless, ending Walt's life was what I was prepared to do.

A couple of minutes had gone by. I looked down to see that I hadn't touched my Ojo Rojo. I took a long swallow and noticed that the music track playing in the background was "When You Were Young" by The Killers. Though I was in my twenties I didn't feel young.

The reporter walked in alone and strode over to the counter. As she waited for Amparo to make her drink, she asked a lot of questions—presumably about the female victim. Amparo didn't know anything—or pretended not to. A minute later she said, "Cafe de Olla" and handed the reporter her coffee in a to-go cup. Sipping her drink, the polished young woman began scanning the room, probably looking for other rubes to interview.

I didn't look away fast enough and, her hazel eyes settling on me, she started towards my table. I would have gotten up and walked out, but that would have looked suspicious. Then a break. The guy with the gold teeth stepped into her path, his shirt covered in dried sick, babbling about how he'd known the victim and could tell the reporter "all kinds o' shit."

"Not now, Shorty," the reporter said as she tried to move past him.

"*Pues*, come on, Mari. Don't you want no tips?"

It looked to me like these two went way back. She rolled her eyes as he continued to regale her with bragging and lame half-truths and putting in a plug for the car repair shop where he worked, in case the camera was still rolling. Meanwhile, I slipped silently out the door.

IT WAS POURING as I headed back to my truck, my stomach aching. Though I'd been preparing myself for this day, I was scared—not of dying but of *failing*. My legs stiffened and I wanted to vomit. I hated that fear could get in the way of my determination to avenge my wife's death

and I forced myself to walk even faster.

I noticed that the news van was gone. The now familiar clickety-clacking of heels behind me made me stop and turn around. It was that damned reporter. She must have extricated herself from the Shorty show and followed me. Warily, I watched as she skittered towards me, her hair flat and dripping, her clothes drenched. All I wanted was to get to my truck and make my appointment, but it was hopeless. Better to let this play out. So I waited.

The sidewalk was slick with rain. She slipped and went down awkwardly on one knee. "Shit!"

It was hard not to laugh—she resembled a show dog who'd gotten caught in a car wash. Her knee was bleeding and she looked like she was about to lose it. Though I had sympathy for her, I had no intention of becoming part of her story. Still, she needed help.

Without speaking I walked over and offered her my hand. I noticed a small gold crucifix beaded with raindrops hanging around her neck—like the one I'd buried Holly in. I wondered if God was doing this on purpose. I almost laughed but stopped myself so this girl wouldn't think I was a lunatic.

Looking up at me, her mascara trickling down her face in black, wavy streaks—like Carrie—she took my hand and got to her feet, grunting.

"You should probably clean that," I said.

She stared at her knee, which was already starting to swell. "Son of a ..." Then she dug through her purse, pulled out a few tissues and pressed them to the wound. "Thanks for the advice," she said.

"So, you're Mari Lopez?"

"That's my on-camera name. My friends get to call me Maritza."

She was pretty—even without perfect makeup. Her eyes looked sincere. I told myself to be careful. She looked like she was waiting for me to tell her my name. I stood there, the rain coming down, keeping my expression neutral.

"Do you live around here?" she said.

“No. But I like the coffee.”

“Me too. I grew up in East Los not too far from here.”

“Yeah, I kind of gathered that. The old woman in the crowd. And Shorty.”

She laughed. “They watched me grow up. Guess they feel they know me.”

Though we were both getting drenched, the conversation moved naturally. I wanted to like her but the truth was, she was only there for the story. Better not to get involved. She was shorter than me—even in heels—and had to look up a lot. Now she was gazing into my eyes in a way that made me feel uncomfortable.

“What?” I said.

“Sorry. It’s a game I used to play with my sisters when we were little. My father told me, if you look hard enough into a person’s eyes, you can see their soul.”

“Does that ever work?”

“No. I knew it was a crock, but for some reason I still do it sometimes. Guess it reminds me of my dad. You have nice eyes, by the way.”

“Thanks. Is your father ...”

“He passed a few years ago. Cancer. He was a real hard-ass when we were growing up. Very protective of his girls. But he could really be sweet too. I miss him so much.”

“Seriously” I said. “You should clean that scrape or it’ll get infected. I’ll walk you back to the coffee house. Maybe they have a first aid kit.” She hesitated. “Shorty’s probably gone by now.”

She laughed and we started walking. When we were halfway there she said, “You never told me your name.”

I knew I’d regret it but I did it anyway. “Dave.”

“Nice to meet you, David,” she said, extending her hand.

“Just Dave.”

“You seem nice. For a white guy.” She laughed—accidentally snorting—and covered her mouth in embarrassment.

“Nice,” I said and opened the door for her.

“YOU OKAY?” I said as Amparo placed a large bandage on Maritza’s knee and closed the first aid kit.

We were sitting in the back room at a wobbly card table. The area was stacked with boxes of coffee beans, cups and other supplies. The back door was open and rain came down steadily. Though the pleasant aroma of coffee was strong, I was anxious to get out of there.

“Yeah,” she said.

“What happened to the van?”

“I sent Rick back to the station with the video.”

“There’s no way they’re broadcasting that, right?”

“It’ll be heavily edited.” She touched my hand. “Can you give me a ride?”

I rubbed the back of my neck and, not looking directly at her, said, “I really need to be somewhere.”

“Hey, come on. You owe me.”

“How do you figure that?”

“I spilled blood for you,” she said, pointing at her knee. “We’re in a pact now.”

“Am I getting shanked here?”

Getting up, I turned to Amparo for help. She smiled wisely and said, “*Ni modo*,” which meant “whatever.” In other words, I should accept it.

We were both soaked as we walked back to my truck. At least the rain had let up. Once we were on the road Maritza gave me directions to the television studio in Hollywood. I kept wondering why she was so adamant about talking to me and waited to see what she would do.

Maritza was smart. Instead of interrogating me, she played the long game—worked on gaining my trust. Not that it would do her any good. I knew exactly what she was doing and let it happen. I had nothing to lose

—she didn't know anything about me. And there was a good chance that after today I would cease to exist. So maybe I'd leave her with a couple of nice memories.

"Why do you think the police chief showed up?" I said. We were driving west through Echo Park, passing the lake.

"Right?" she said. "That really surprised me. But then what happened to that woman surprised me too. It wasn't the first time, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"Two weeks ago they found another body in the LA River. It had been picked clean. All that was left was a skeleton with the head intact. The cops attributed it to a satanic cult."

"Or a random act," I said.

She laughed. "Oh, yeah. Random as it gets." She became serious. "I don't think these events were random. In fact, I believe they're connected." She was testing me.

"How?"

"Whoever did this, they took their time. There was a lot of precision."

"Serial killer?"

"Killers."

"You think there might be more than one?"

"They work fast and don't leave any evidence—other than the bodies. I've read the coroner's reports. The angle and variety of the cuts suggest more than one weapon."

"Maybe it's one guy and he's ambidextrous."

"I'm serious, David. My gut tells me there's more than one."

"Why did you come to me?" We'd passed through Silver Lake and were now in the hills, cruising through the residential streets overlooking Hollywood.

"Because I could tell you didn't belong."

"I don't get it."

"When I work a story, I try to eliminate the obvious and concentrate on the anomaly—the thing that *doesn't* fit. It pays off more than you'd

think.”

“You sound like you were born for this.”

“I can’t take credit,” she said, smiling shyly. “I had a mentor. Karen Rothberg. She never got the opportunity to work on camera but she was a helluva researcher. She taught me everything I know.”

“What, did she suffer from stage fright?”

“She has a withered hand, so the camera didn’t exactly love her.”

“What about Bob Dole?”

“The senator? His hand was paralyzed and he kept a pen in it. Karen was fine with her situation, though. She knew what her strengths were.”

“You’re pretty young to be doing this.”

“Well, Karen wasn’t just smart—she was influential. She convinced the execs to give me a shot. I owe her so much.”

“Sounds like a nice lady. Is she still around?”

“Retired. Moved to Santa Barbara.”

“So wait, you said I don’t fit.”

“No. And I think you know something about these attacks. Seeing that poor woman on the gurney did nothing to you. Yet you reacted when the black Escalade passed us.”

“You’re very observant, Maritza.”

“Hey, it’s my job.”

“And clumsy.”

“I fall down constantly,” she said, laughing. “It’s part of my Chicana charm. Pull in here.”

As I approached the guard shack I could hear Cake’s “Short Skirt/Long Jacket” coming from a portable radio. I wanted to tell the guy to turn it off. Maritza grabbed her ID from her purse and dangled it past my face. I could smell her lavender perfume faintly. It blended wonderfully with her body’s natural scent and for a moment made me wish I had a future. The guard waved us through and I headed towards the opposite end of the parking lot nearest the building complex and past a sea of gigantic satellite dishes.

She got out, smoothed her skirt and jacket and removed a business card from her purse. Using her Sharpie she wrote something on the back. Then she leaned into the cab and handed me the card. I tried mightily not to stare at her cleavage.

“In case you decide to come clean,” she said. “My cell is on the back. Call me anytime.”

“I really don’t know anything.”

“Yeah, you do. Thanks for the ride, David.”

“It’s Dave.”

“You see, the thing is, I’ve decided it’s David. Hope those men in the grey suits don’t catch you.”

“They won’t.”

She smiled in a way that got to me—a little girl trapped in a smokin’, grown-up body. If I could’ve wished for anything at that moment it would be to have those hazel eyes looking down at me as I lay dying. She closed the door and walked off without looking back. As I watched her I realized that I was smitten. Minutes had passed and I hadn’t even thought about Holly. Weird. None of it mattered, though. Things were in motion. I was already approaching the darkness.

The Russian Girl

MY PLAN WAS SIMPLE. CONFRONT THE EVIL AND LET EVERYTHING ELSE FALL into place. *Lame, huh?* It was obvious that I was walking into a deathtrap, but I didn't care. The hate I carried had eaten away everything soft and left behind a dry, cauterized shell drenched in a single purpose. The smart thing would have been to work with the cops—maybe even Maritza—to uncover the secret of Baseborn Identity Research and expose it to the world before it was too late. But no one had ever accused me of being smart.

I had left instructions with Cuco to wire my money to Guthrie in Mt. Shasta. I told him to sell the weapons and keep the cash for himself. He was a stand up guy and would do as I asked. These things would serve as my last will and testament.

I parked on a side street half a mile away from the industrial park. After locking the truck I walked to a nearby public park, found a seat on a bench next to a restroom and watched. The entire property consisted of low, drab buildings whose color echoed the grey, lifeless sky. Surprisingly, there were no walls or electrified fence—only ordinary, nondescript buildings with numbers.

I wiped the fog from my binoculars and scanned the complex. I'd been through this routine and had learned a lot. The operation was twenty-four seven. They had three shifts. The first started at midnight

and went till eight. The second went from eight till four. And the last from four till midnight. Trucks came and went at all hours—mostly during the first shift. Deliveries were rare except for food. Every morning a Sysco truck would pull in, presumably to deliver supplies to the pizza and sandwich shops that were intermingled with the office buildings.

Baseborn Identity Research or “Hellborn,” as I came to call it, stood in the middle of the complex in one gigantic rectangular structure. Few deliveries came directly to the main entrance. A private delivery truck brought the mail to the front door, but I never saw the driver enter the facility. Someone always came out to receive the mail. And neither FedEx nor UPS ever dropped anything off. As for the black Escalades, I never saw a single one.

The bench I was sitting on was wet from the rain. It was noon and I was hungry. The second shift had ended and people were pouring in and out of the building. I still didn’t know what they did in this place, but there were a lot of employees—mostly men in regular clothes. Every so often, though, I would see a military uniform. I suspected that inside, scientists dressed in lab coats and hazmat suits carried on their dark experiments as they had in Tres Marias and Mt. Shasta.

As I said, my plan was simple if misguided. I ran across the street and headed directly for a side parking lot where I noticed a well-dressed woman walking briskly towards a silver Honda. It was Becky, Walt Freeman’s assistant from Tres Marias. I recognized the reddish-brown hair, red lips and pudgy build. I couldn’t see her eyes—she was wearing designer sunglasses—but it was her. Fortunately, the shift change was over so there was no one else around. As she took her keys from her purse, I came up behind her and jammed my Glock into the small of her back. She froze.

“Don’t scream,” I said.

Grabbing her arm I turned her around sharply to face me, which terrified her.

“Dave?” she said, her voice warbling. “What are you—”

“Where’s Walt Freeman?”

“I ...”

I felt feverish as I thought of Holly falling onto that cold cave floor, dead from a bullet to the head. That single memory made hurting Becky easy. Though Walt hadn’t been the one to pull the trigger, he was ultimately responsible.

“Where?” I said.

“He’s in a meeting.” Her startled eyes darted from side to side behind her sunglasses.

“There’s no one else here,” I said. “Take me to him. *Now.*”

Becky was not cut out for this kind of work. She was an admin—nothing more. A voluptuous, sexy tool who liked to dress well and didn’t mind seducing the occasional city official when necessary. But she didn’t like getting her hands dirty.

“I can’t,” she said.

Something told me she wasn’t as weak as she pretended to be. Without hesitation I butt-stroked her on the jaw, which sent her glasses flying.

“I won’t ask you again.”

Tears of pain ran from her eyes, ruining her makeup. She was shaking now. She touched her jaw and looked in horror at the fresh blood on her fingertips. Then she backed away from her car and led me towards a secure side door.

“I need to use my card,” she said, barely able to get the words out.

Her hand jittering badly she reached into her purse, removed her ID and swiped it through the card reader. I opened the door and pushed her through. The long hallway was beige and devoid of interior design with a series of locked doors on either side. The walls had been recently painted. We walked slowly towards a set of double doors.

“He-he’s in a conference room, but I don’t think you’ll make it inside.”

“That’s my problem,” I said.

When we reached the doors, Becky hesitated. Then she raised her card key and was about to swipe it when a deafening alarm sounded, echoing through the hallway. My heart racing I looked around quickly.

“What happened?” I said.

“I didn’t do anything, I swear!”

Shoving her aside I peered through one of the small windows and watched as men and women in business casual clothes moved in an orderly fashion and lined up against the walls as armed security guards swept the area, searching under desks and between file cabinets.

“What are they doing?”

“Someone’s escaped,” she said.

As I continued observing, Walt Freeman emerged from a conference room along with that scarred, black-suited undertaker that I’d seen in the Escalade. Both joined the others along the wall. Walt looked exactly as I remembered him—fifties with thinning grey hair, a ruddy face with swollen jowls and a bulbous nose dotted with burst blood vessels. His gut was huge as ever under his suit jacket.

The blood was pounding in my head. There was no way I would be able to get to Walt now—not with all those guards around. So I grabbed Becky by the shoulders. When she tried screaming I pressed her against the wall and put the gun to her temple. With my free hand I grabbed her purse and dug through it, searching for her wallet. Then I found her driver’s license. The name read REBEKKAH LORING, home address near West Hollywood. Dropping the purse I pointed the gun at her forehead. Like a robot in maintenance mode she stared straight ahead.

“You tell Walt I’m back,” I said, “and that I’m coming for him. *Tell him!*”

As I backed away she collapsed into a sitting position, twirling her hair like a child. Then I turned and ran back down the hallway and out of the building.

Outside, the rain was coming down hard, the water rushing down the asphalt in oily sheets. A guard was sweeping the parking lot. I ducked

behind a row of parked cars and tried to slip quietly past, but he had spotted me.

“Freeze!” he said.

I scooted down another row and waited. I could hear the guard radioing for backup. Gripping my weapon, I waited. Then I got to my feet and, seeing the guard coming towards me, I opened fire. He wasn't wearing body armor and dropped like a dead bird, his torso bright with blood.

Something moved across the side mirror of one of the vehicles nearby. As I turned, a burst of excruciating pain buckled my knees and I lost my weapon under a car. Then a different guard came at me with a riot stick, his gun still in his holster. I rolled away and scrambled to my feet.

“You're not going anywhere, son,” he said.

He glared at me with tiny, bestial eyes and raised the riot stick threateningly. As he came at me I ducked and the stick struck the passenger window of the car behind me, shattering it and setting off the car alarm. Then his radio crackled and he took his eyes off me only for a second.

Seeing my chance I punched him in the throat, damaging his windpipe. Choking, he dropped to his knees and desperately grabbed at his neck as if a vise were closing it down. As he struggled for air I pushed him out of the way and retrieved my weapon. The door to the building burst open and at least a dozen more guards poured out, each with his weapon raised. Scrambling, I headed out of the parking lot.

“Halt!” one of the guards said and fired his weapon, the bullet missing me by inches. When I reached the street they stopped shooting. The wide road was dangerous with cars whizzing past in both directions. I glanced back at the approaching guards and ran into traffic. I was nearly halfway across when a semi bore down on me, nearly hitting me. As I continued past, the driver blared his horn and swore at me. Once I was across the street I looked back again. The guards were trying to

cross. One of them ran ahead and was struck by a fast-moving pickup truck, his body flying up and over the vehicle and landing in the street where he was crushed by other passing cars. I kept moving.

BY THE TIME I reached the park, I was out of breath. My knee ached where the guard had struck me with the riot stick. I needed to get back to my apartment and regroup. There was no way I could return to this place. I would have to think of something else.

My truck stood at the head of a line of cars parked along the road. As I approached it I noticed someone's head in the rain, bobbing and moving behind the cars on the side nearest the sidewalk, hesitating at each vehicle—till they came to mine. It was a young woman dressed only in a white hospital gown that was soaked, frantically yanking at the handle of my passenger door. I put away my weapon and, as I got closer, I could hear her muttering in a foreign language.

"Hey!" I said, hurrying towards her. Turning quickly she tried to run, but I was able to grab her arm. "I'm not going to hurt you." She continued to struggle. "What do you want with my truck?"

She didn't respond. Her cold, naked body was easily visible through the flimsy gown. Goosebumps had sprouted like bug bites up and down her arms and legs. There was something familiar about the gown she wore. It was printed with a field of lilacs. I'd seen that pattern—at the isolation facility in Tres Marias.

The girl was pretty with long, light brown hair and frightened blue-grey eyes that were almond-shaped—slightly Asian—and ringed with dark circles. Her full lips were pink and moist, her skin fair and blemish free. She couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty. I looked at the back of her hand and noticed a red needle mark—probably from an IV.

"Are you in danger?" I said.

Still nothing. I glanced left and right to see who might be watching. Then I released her arm and took a step back, my open hands away from my pockets. I thought she would bolt, but she stood there unsure, looking at her bare feet, which were dirty. Her shoulders jerked up and down and I realized that she was crying. I remembered what Becky had said when the alarm went off—*someone's escaped*.

I wasn't sure what to do. She must've broken out of Hellborn, and now they were looking for her. I didn't want to leave her there—not like this. She needed help. But I didn't want to get mixed up with a kid. Griffin, the girl Holly and I had rescued in Tres Marias, had turned out well—and I thanked God for her—but I needed to be alone to complete my mission.

"I'm Dave," I said. "What's your name?"

She looked at me steadily. I didn't know what new hell I was signing up for. It was pretty obvious that it would involve more than slipping her twenty bucks and wishing her good luck. When she spoke my blood went cold.

"Don't let them find me!" she said.

She waited for me to answer, but I didn't say anything. She had what sounded like a Russian accent. I could hear my heart racing, the blood pulsing rhythmically in my ears. *Someone's escaped*. Could she be part of the experiment? Infected with the virus?

Across the street, the guards were halfway across with cars swerving and horns blaring. When she saw them her eyes got huge and her lower lip quivered. Moving fast I unlocked the passenger door and waited for her to get in. She just stood there.

"We don't have much time," I said. "I promise I won't hurt you."

In a few seconds it would be too late and I'd have to start shooting. She looked at the approaching guards. One of them had slipped on the wet asphalt and was cursing as the others tried to hold back traffic. Chewing her lip she said, "*Da*," and climbed in.

We tore out of there before the guards could make it over to our side.

In the rearview mirror I saw them entering the park. I was pretty sure they hadn't spotted her. I didn't know where to go. What do you with a stranger dressed as a hospital patient? I decided to take it one step at a time.

"We need to get you into some dry clothes," I said. She didn't answer me. Instead she kept turning and looking out the back window. "We're not being followed."

Sighing, she scrunched down in the seat and stared emptily at the beating windshield wipers. "That was close," she said. Shivering, she closed her eyes, held herself and appeared to go to sleep. Maybe it was the first sleep she'd had in who-knew-how-long.

I decided to leave her be.

THE RAIN HAD ABATED. As I pulled into the parking lot of an Old Navy in Montebello, the Russian girl opened her eyes. Disoriented, she looked at me strangely like she didn't remember how she had ended up in my truck.

"It's okay," I said. "Just going to pick up a few things for you. You can't go around dressed like that."

I knew she didn't trust me yet—why would she? But I made it a point to stay calm. Maybe she had a family. I could get her some clothes—and something to eat—then take her to a relative's house. That would be best. Then I could return to my plan.

The store was located in a busy shopping center. It was a risk, but I could get in and out of there fast. I parked at the end of the parking lot well away from other cars.

"What size are you?" I said.

"*Nohl.*" When I continued staring she smiled self-consciously. Her teeth were straight, which told me she'd been looked after growing up. "Zero," she said.

“Great. And what about the shoes?”

“Eight.”

“I want you to lock yourself in the truck. Understand? Keep your head down. I’ll come back as fast as I can.”

She looked at me with searching eyes. She didn’t know me—I could be setting her up. But I didn’t know her either. Maybe without words we’d established a tenuous trust—enough to get us through the next few hours. I climbed out and could hear her locking the doors as I jogged towards Old Navy.

The store wasn’t crowded. On the sound system Jet’s “Are You Gonna Be My Girl” was playing. That was just wrong. I headed over to the women’s jeans section. As I began flipping through the stacks on the wall, a young woman with purple hair and various piercings strolled over.

“Help you find somethin’?”

“I’m looking for size zero women’s jeans.”

Dismissively, she waved me back and proceeded to pull out multiple pairs in various colors. “Girlfriend?” she said, not looking directly at me.

“Niece.”

She signaled for me to stick out my arms and dropped a stack of jeans on them and, smiling, said, “What about tops?”

I didn’t mind the treatment. She had seen that I was in a hurry and made the process as efficient as possible. Not long after I returned to the truck carrying two large plastic bags. The Russian girl was still inside. When she saw me she unlocked the driver side door. I pushed both bags in and she arranged them on her lap.

“Let’s find a restroom so you can change,” I said.

As we got back on the road I kept my eyes open for black Escalades. By now, Walt Freeman would have any number of people out looking for the Russian girl. And whatever it was they needed her for, they’d stop at nothing to acquire her.

The girl dug through one of the bags and pulled out a pair of black

lace-up boots and a grey sweater-knit pom-pom hat. Holding up the hat she looked at me curiously.

“I kind of went crazy in there, okay? I blame the aggressive salesperson.”

I found an independent gas station that didn't have a mini-mart attached to it, so no security cameras. I pulled around back by the restrooms and parked. Then I ran into the small office and got the key. I kept an eye out for strangers as the girl got out and, carrying the bags, let herself in the restroom.

“What the hell am I doing?” I said, putting my gun in the glove compartment.

Not an hour ago I had killed two security guards and pistol-whipped a woman. Now I was picking out prom dresses. Seriously, what the hell? I reminded myself why I'd come to LA in the first place and what I needed to do. But things had changed. The cutters were loose and they were killing people. And this girl—whoever she was—was part of it. I needed the angel to give me some answers. I remembered a prayer my mother had taught me when I was little. She used to say it with me every night before I went to sleep.

*Angel of God, my guardian dear,
to whom God's love commits me here,
ever this day be at my side
to light, to guard, to rule, and guide.
Amen.*

The angel didn't show. After a few minutes the Russian girl came out of the restroom fully dressed. I almost didn't recognize her. She was really damn cute in her pink sweater, grey jeans and fuzzy hat. A chic waif fresh out of a Russian winter. Smiling shyly she climbed into the truck with the bags and waited for me to return the restroom key. Then we were off.

“Thank you for remembering panties,” she said.

“No problem. Sorry, getting into the bra thing was too much for me.”

“Are you going to have sex with me now?”

I almost hit the brakes. My face burning I turned to her and saw that she was serious. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

“Oh. Are you ...”

“No!”

Though I was angry, I reminded myself that this girl didn’t know me from Ted Bundy. I was sure most men would have taken advantage of the situation and demanded a violent quickie under the freeway overpass. All I wanted was to safely deposit her with her family and get the hell out.

As we drove I gazed around me, noticing the businesses located there, the passing cars and the pedestrians. Far off, an Asian man in a cheap green suit and carrying a bright yellow umbrella was hurrying to catch a bus. A small mongrel dog behind a chain-link fence yapped at him viciously as he passed. Someone in the house cursed in Spanish and threw a shoe at the dog. Whimpering it trotted back towards the porch. This was the way it was supposed to be. Normal people doing normal things. No grey-suits, no cutters. Just people.

“You look like you could use a meal,” I said. “I’ll find us a taco truck. No surveillance cameras that way.”

“You avoid the cameras?”

“Always.”

“Are you ...”

“Look, I’m not a bad person, if that’s what you’re thinking. You?”

“No. I’m not a bad person. They—”

She made herself small against the seat. We rode the rest of the way in silence.

"WHEN'S the last time you ate?" I said, watching the Russian girl practically inhale the *tacos al pastor*.

"They fed us but never enough."

"Us'?"

"Me."

"Who fed you?"

"The bad men. I don't want to talk about it."

"Sure."

The rain had started again. We ate in the truck down the street near a park. When she'd finished she leaned back and sighed with satisfaction. Then she let out a belch that sounded like a fog horn. "*Izvinite*," she said. Then she laughed.

"That was quite a performance. Want me to get you some more?"

"No thank you."

I didn't want to ask too many questions—I knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end of an interrogation. But as if reading my mind she said, "It's Sasha."

"What?"

"My name. Sasha Dragomirova."

"Dra-go-mi ..."

"Sasha is fine."

"Deal."

We gathered up the trash and I hopped out of the truck and dumped it in a nearby receptacle. When I climbed back in, I found the glove compartment door open and Sasha holding my Glock. She looked at me without embarrassment as I leaned over, gently took the gun from her and put it away.

"Sorry," she said. "It's something I do. I wasn't going to steal it. Are you cop?"

"No. Listen, maybe we should go somewhere and talk. About you."

Her face clouded and she chewed her lip. "Thank you for the clothes and the food," she said, grabbing the door handle. "I should go. I will tell

no one about the gun.”

“I won’t stop you, Sasha. But you need help, right?”

Her voice became small—even more foreign. “No one can help me.”

“Well, like the cops on TV say, you’re free to go.”

Grabbing her bags she opened the door to get out and froze. Then quickly she jumped back inside, slammed the door and locked it.

“What is it?” I said.

“Drive!”

As I pulled into traffic and checked the rearview mirror, I saw it. Impossible! How she was mixed up with Walt Freeman and Hellborn I still didn’t know—I didn’t believe in Fate. There were only actions and consequences and God watching everything from a safe distance. I didn’t know what to think. I made sure not to drive too fast so as not to attract attention. But we had to get away—both of us. I prayed that they hadn’t seen us.

But they had.

The Korean

A BLACK ESCALADE ACCELERATED THROUGH THE DOWNPOUR, SWERVING around vehicles to get closer to us. I didn't know whether they were after Sasha or me. All I knew was that we had to get out of there.

"Buckle up," I said.

As the rain pelted my windshield, I glanced left and right, checked the rearview mirror and floored it, barely making it through a congested intersection. Behind me, I heard a collision. When I checked the rearview mirror again, I saw the Escalade tearing past the chaotic traffic and picking up speed. I couldn't be sure, but I thought I saw the undertaker riding in the back.

"Do you know those guys?" I said to Sasha.

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Devils."

As we approached the next intersection, another black Escalade turned sharply into traffic ahead of me. I'd already guessed how this would go down. The lead driver would slow to a crawl as the vehicle behind us accelerated. They would box us in. Then a third would appear and attempt a takeout, sending us spinning out of control. Finally they would kill me and take the Russian girl in plain view of everyone.

A break! As we shot past a convenience store, I noticed a cop pulling

out of the parking lot. Though the last thing I wanted was to be pulled over by the police, it was way better than getting shot by a couple of government stooges. I slowed down and turned to Sasha.

“I need you to listen carefully,” I said. “No questions. Open the glove compartment and remove the gun.”

As I kept my eyes on the road, maintaining a safe speed, I began walking Sasha through the steps of disassembling a Glock 19.

“Press that button behind the trigger guard and remove the magazine.” She did so and the magazine dropped into her lap. “Great. The mag holds—”

“Fifteen bullets, I know,” she said.

“Oh.”

As I was about to give her the next instruction, she took out the bullets and held them in her hand. “What do you want me to do with them?”

“Throw them out the window.” At first she looked at me like I was crazy, then did as I asked. “Now the magazine. Okay ...”

But she’d already retracted the slide and was inspecting the weapon for ammunition. I decided to remain silent as she squeezed the trigger, pressed the slide locks and removed the slide from the frame. She finished taking apart the gun and looked down at the pieces in her lap.

The lead Escalade had started to decelerate, as expected. Though it was hard to see in the rain, I checked the rearview mirror and made out the other Escalade, as well as the cop cruiser.

“Throw the pieces out the window,” I said. “One by one, waiting a few seconds in between.”

Soon, the entire gun had disappeared. Even if someone found one or more pieces, with the rain and the traffic, it would be difficult to recover everything and reassemble the weapon.

“How do you know about guns?” I said.

“My brother.”

“You have a brother? Why didn’t you—”

“We don’t talk.” She craned her neck behind her, then turned to me.
“What now?”

“We bring the cops in.”

“*Nyet*, I don’t want this.”

“We have no choice, Sasha.”

I noticed an old man to the right of us, driving a broken-down Nissan sedan. Waiting for the right moment, I hit the brakes and swerved in behind him, surprising both Escalade drivers. Checking my side mirrors and the rearview mirror, I accelerated, swerving past the geezer and blasting my horn. It took a moment, but eventually the cop caught on and took off in pursuit.

As soon as he hit his lights and siren, both Escalades disappeared down a side street. Carefully I decelerated, found an open spot on the busy street and pulled into a loading zone with the cop screeching to a stop directly behind us.

“I don’t like cops,” Sasha said, her words clipped.

“Neither do I—trust me. But at least we’re alive.”

I’d already rolled down my window, letting the rain in. When the cop approached my car, his hand on his weapon, I smiled pleasantly. “Can I help you, officer?”

Based on my recent experience with cops in Tres Marias, I assumed that the encounter would be tense. He surprised me, though, looking at me through yellow-tinted aviator sunglasses, peering past me at Sasha and smiled pleasantly. I could hear the police radio in his cruiser blaring over the noise of the traffic.

“License and registration,” he said.

“Sure.” I reached over and removed the registration from the glove compartment. Then I pulled out my wallet, removed the driver’s license and handed both over. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Wait here,” he said and walked back to the cruiser.

“He will use computer,” Sasha said. “Will he find bad stuff?”

I touched her hand. “You need to not look so suspicious. Try to

smile.”

She forced a hideous smile that made her look like a mental patient. As the cop returned to the truck, I grabbed Sasha’s side and began tickling her. Screaming, she burst into wild laughter.

“Mr. Callahan?” the cop said.

“Sorry, officer. I was just getting my sister back for tickling me while I was driving.”

He glanced at Sasha. “I’m going to give you a warning this time. You should be more careful.” Then to Sasha, “And no more distracting your brother, young lady.”

She nodded contritely. Then he handed me back my license and registration. “Have a nice day.”

One of the first things I did when I arrived in LA was to purchase several fake IDs from a guy on Alvarado Street whom Guthrie had recommended. Now that “Mr. Callahan” had had a run-in with the cops, I would have to lose that ID and employ a new one—especially since Walt Freeman probably had access to police records and could easily find me, based on this arrest. I’d have to ditch the truck too.

I checked the rearview mirror and spotted one of the black Escalades parked two blocks away with its headlights on. “Officer?” I said. “We were actually looking for City Hall. We adopted a rescue and I need to get a dog license. Can you point me in the right direction? I don’t really know the area.”

“It’s next to the police station. I’m going there now, if you want to follow me.”

“That would be awesome—thank you!”

“What kind of dog is it?”

“Mixed breed. Best I can tell, it’s somewhere between a German shepherd and a dachshund.”

“That must’ve been some date,” he said, laughing. “Wait for me to pull out.”

The driver of the Escalade was staring at the cop as he got into his

vehicle and pulled into traffic. The undertaker leaned forward and said something to him. Then he pulled out too. But as I swung out behind the cop and followed closely, the Escalade turned off at an intersection and vanished.

“Udachlivy,” Sasha said, shaking her head.

“Huh?”

“It means lucky. ‘Mr. Callahan.’”

“Dave is fine. Sorry about the tickling.”

“It’s okay. You’re pretty good liar, Dave.”

“You have no idea.”

“WHERE ARE WE GOING NOW?” Sasha said.

I’d followed the cop to city hall and parked and had even gone inside with the Russian girl. After ten minutes, we were on the road again. I checked my mirrors to see if we were being followed. So far, we were good.

“We have to get rid of this truck,” I said. “Then we need to find your brother.”

“No!”

“Why not? Isn’t he worried about you?”

“I can’t go back to him, that’s all.”

“We’ll discuss this later. I need to get you somewhere safe.”

“Can’t I stay with you?”

And there it was. I knew it the moment I saw her. It’s true that God puts things in your path. And you can choose to step around them or you can face them. He had done that with Holly—I was sure of it. I had been on a bad road, getting drunk pretty much every day with my friend. God had put Holly right in front of me in order to save me. Then He took her away.

When I looked at Sasha I saw a frightened girl who needed my help. I

didn't know how she was mixed up with Hellborn but I was sure that if it had anything to do with Walt Freeman, she was in mortal danger. Would I choose to step around her? I had made plans—plans that were certain to get me killed. Even the angel had warned me. But as usual, God had other plans.

"I'm not the safest guy to be around right now," I said.

"Do you want to kill me?" She was looking at me intently, absently pulling at the sleeve of her sweater.

"No, of course not."

"Then I will like to stay with you."

The sky was threatening as we made our way to an industrial section of LA near the 6th Street Bridge. Though I'd never been here before, I recognized the famous location from movies like *To Live and Die in LA*.

I had memorized an address Guthrie had given me in Mt. Shasta. When I found it, I pulled slowly up to what looked like a junk yard surrounded by a high chain-link fence with concertina wire that ran along the top. Security lights on tall metal poles surrounded the property. The gate was closed and, as Sasha and I climbed out of the truck, butt-ugly pit bulls with huge yellow teeth attacked the fence, barking and snapping at us.

Sasha kept behind me, terrified of the dogs. I squeezed her cold hand as we waited in front of the gate. A heavysset Korean man wearing blue overalls and tan work boots stepped out of a small office and walked purposefully across the muddy lot towards us, holding a handgun at his side. He was chewing—we'd interrupted his dinner.

"Ggeo-jeo!" he said to the dogs. Immediately they swung around and trotted away. "What do you want?" he said to me.

"Are you Jeong?" He tightened his grip on the weapon. Though this guy intimidated the hell out of me, I tried not to show my fear and continued to maintain eye contact. "Guthrie Manson sent me."

He relaxed. "I am Jeong."

"I need a vehicle."

Grunting, he gave the Russian girl a once over, unlocked the padlock securing the heavy chain on the gate and let us through. Scratching his testicles with one hand, he held out his other. For a second I didn't know what he wanted, then realized he was waiting for my keys. I handed them over and he proceeded to check out the truck.

It took him ten minutes to examine everything—engine, suspension, bed and interior. Crawling out from underneath the truck, he pulled the papers from the glove compartment. Shaking his head in disgust he walked back over, grabbed my hand and inverted it. Then with grease-stained fingers, he dropped a small, dark object into it.

It was a 9mm bullet.

“Need to be more careful, Mr. Callahan.”

I was embarrassed. I had taken every precaution since leaving Northern California. If that cop in Montebello had searched my truck and found the bullet, he might have arrested us.

“Do you have any trucks?” I said.

“No trucks today. I can put you in a Lexus. Black with entertainment package. Very nice.”

“Too fancy. What else?”

“Go into the office and wait. There's coffee.”

He followed us in, changed into clean overalls, jumped into the truck and drove it inside the yard. The office was surprisingly neat, furnished in Ikea. A large salt water tank stood in a corner. A generic laptop sat on the desk, next to cartons of Korean takeout and an open can of Coca-Cola. Along one wall stood a row of file cabinets and a large, expensive-looking color printer. Next to that sat a large, colorful gift basket filled with cans of Spam individually wrapped in cellophane.

“Sure you trust this guy?” Sasha said to me.

“I trust him as much as you trust me.”

Sasha watched the colorful fish in the tank. I picked up one of the cans of Spam, trying to figure out what the joke was. Some minutes later, I heard a vehicle approaching. I turned to find a late-model black Chevy

Tahoe parked outside. Climbing out of the SUV, Jeong waved us over.

“Best I can do today,” he said, handing me the keys.

I walked around the vehicle. It was clean—not even a scratch. Though there wasn’t a lot of room in the back, it wasn’t a bad choice.

“What do you think?” I said to Sasha.

“Sweet ride.”

I turned to her, smiling. “Where did you hear that?”

“*Napoleon Dynamite*. I like that movie.”

“I’ll take it,” I said to Jeong. “How do we do this?”

“You good friend of Guthrie?”

“Yes.”

He looked up and to the side, adding up numbers in his head. “Even trade.”

“You sure?”

“Guthrie is like a brother.” Then for the first time the Korean smiled.

“Okay.” I said. “What about the registration?”

“You tell me the name and address and I make it. Also, I left an extra set of license plates in the spare tire well.”

I had memorized all the fake names, Social Security Numbers and addresses for the IDs I owned. I gave him the next one on the list. He went to work on the computer. After several minutes the printer came on. Jeong handed me documents—including a valid low cost auto insurance policy—and the garage remote control I had forgotten in the other truck.

“Here you go, Mr. Wales,” he said.

“What about Mr. Callahan?”

“Didn’t you hear? He’s dead.”

We shook hands outside, then Sasha and I got into the Tahoe and drove off. The late afternoon sun had broken through the dark, heavy clouds, revealing a thin, paper strip of blue sky. I thought it might be a good sign.

Roy Batty

WE SAT IN SILENCE IN THE UNDERGROUND PARKING STRUCTURE, LOOKING PAST the other vehicles to the street outside. I'd turned off the engine and it was cold inside the Tahoe. I hadn't wanted to bring Sasha back to my apartment but I couldn't just dump her somewhere. Whatever connection she had with Hellborn, she was keeping it to herself.

"You can stay with me for now," I said. "But we *are* having that talk."

"Okay, 'Mr. Wales.'"

We got out, Sasha carrying her Old Navy bags. Seeing the strange SUV, Cuco walked over, holding a wide brush and a gallon of outdoor paint. After our last conversation, he was understandably surprised to see me.

"So, you're not dead?" he said.

"I got sidetracked. Cuco, this is Sasha. Sasha, my bodyguard."

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, taking the time to pronounce each word correctly.

He squinted at her—starting with the combat boots and working his way up to the skinny jeans and a sweater that betrayed the coldness of the garage. Then he looked at me with a Mexican leer.

I shook my head. "Don't even think it. She's like my sister."

"Sure."

"There's nothing going on."

“Whatever you say.”

“Then we’re good.”

We headed towards the elevator. “The grey-suits are getting closer,” he said.

“I know.” I didn’t bother looking back.

“I overheard them asking *mucho* questions at the liquor store on the corner.” He got into the elevator with us and rode up.

“Thanks for the warning,” I said. “Listen, I might need to leave this place.”

“Mm ... You can come out to Highland Park with me.”

“Do you have a family?”

“In Mexico.” He pronounced it *MEH-hee-ko*.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know.” I tried to slip him some cash, but he refused.

My apartment was located on the fourth floor. As Sasha and I left the elevator and walked down the hallway, I could smell all kinds of cooking and could hear TV shows blaring over babies squalling and parents fighting.

It felt good to be here among the living. I had spent so much time in a dying town cut off from the rest of the world, fighting the undead. It was nice to be normal for a while. But I worried that my staying here might present a danger to these innocent people. I needed to find another place.

When we arrived at my apartment, I dug out my key. But first I tried the door to see if it had been compromised. So far, so good.

“You are worse than my brother,” Sasha said.

I gave her the stink-eye and unlocked the door. As we entered, I flicked on the lights and found everything in order. Out of habit, I crossed over to the living room window and peeked out. A mild drizzle was coming down, the fog bathing the streetlights in a receding line of gentle, yellow halos. Satisfied that there weren’t any black Escalades, I closed the curtains.

“I’ll get us some food,” I said. “There’s a place around the corner that

sells chicken. Make yourself comfortable. Take a shower, if you want—I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

"You know what's good with chicken?" she said, removing her hat and flinging it. "Vodka." But she didn't actually say "vodka"—it came out as *wodka*.

"You're too young and I don't drink."

"What kind of man doesn't drink?"

"The kind who doesn't know how to stop."

"In Russia, there are no stop signs."

Though she was joking, it was obvious that there was some truth to what she said. I took her hand and could feel her tense up. Then I walked her over to the worn Ikea sofa with the shot springs.

"Take a seat," I said and sat beside her. "I want you to tell me what happened to you."

I'd surprised her with the question, but it was part of the plan. She was a strange girl with a big secret and I needed to know what I was dealing with.

She looked away, pretending to be interested in the cheesy yard sale décor. Then she ran her hand along the arm of the sofa, smoothing the rough fabric, and in a small voice she said, "They take me off street."

"'They'?"

"You call them grey-suits."

"When?"

"Three months?"

Three months ago, I was up to my neck in draggers in Tres Marias with Holly and my friends at my side. We hadn't yet seen evidence that the virus had mutated. There were no cutters. What had these grey-suited devils been prepping her for?

Reluctantly, she described her life on the streets. She told me she'd been living with her older brother, Vladimir, in a crowded apartment on the west side with another Russian family. They were from Moscow originally and had lost both their parents in an automobile accident

when Sasha was five. Though she didn't say specifically, I got the sense that her father had been drunk behind the wheel. When she spoke of him, it was with anger.

Vladimir, or *Vlad*, was ex-military and knew people in the government. He had been able to get them both visas to the US. Upon arriving in LA, they were taken in by Russian friends. They helped Vlad get a job as a limo driver, working for another Russian who also sold illegal weapons on the side. It wasn't long before Vlad had saved enough money to start his own limo business.

From the way she described it, Sasha was a handful and difficult to control. Bored and lonely she liked to go out and she was always falling in with the wrong people—Vlad's words. The last time she saw her brother, they'd had a huge argument over her staying out with "friends" till all hours, and he had kicked her out.

She wandered the streets for days, begging for money to buy food. Then she met a woman who offered to help. She said her name was Rebekkah.

My stomach did a somersault. I thought of the trashy, ineffectual assistant I had met in Tres Marias and had seen again at Hellborn. I should have killed her when I had the chance.

Rebekkah had told Sasha that she worked for a charitable organization focused on getting young women off the street and that she could buy Sasha a meal. They went to a coffee shop.

"What did she offer you?" I said.

"She give me money and say that, if I want, I can have a place to stay."

"She didn't try to force you?"

"No. But she ask lots of questions. Where am I from? Do I have family? I tell her my parents are dead. Then I lie and say there is no one else."

"Did she believe you?"

"I don't know. She was happy that I was alone. After I finish my food,

she ask if I want to come to the safe house. I didn't know what to do. But I didn't want to be on the street no more. So I say yes and I follow her to her car."

"Then the grey-suits took you?"

She looked away, as if the memory were fresh in her mind. "Behind restaurant. They throw me into black car like one that chase us today."

"What about Rebekkah?"

"She watch them take me. I tried to scream, but they cover my mouth. Then they ... How do you say?" She curled her fingers and pressed her thumb down on an imaginary plunger.

"They injected you."

"*Da*. When I wake up, I am in strange place with no windows."

"How did you escape?" I said.

"I hid in the, ah, *laundry cart*. The man who does this, he take a long time. But when he finish, he go outside to truck. Then I run."

"*Udachlivy*," I said.

"Yes."

"After everything that's happened, you don't think Vlad will forgive you?"

"No. He is too proud."

"But he's your brother."

"He won't, that's all."

Her tone told me that she'd had enough, so I didn't ask any more questions. Instead I got up to leave.

"What about Highland Park?" she said.

"That's my deal."

She looked at me, her eyes searching for something in mine. Then getting to her feet. She removed her sweater. Her breasts were small and firm, her pale skin flawless.

"Let me stay and I give you whatever you want," she said.

"Stop!"

"*Anything*, Dave."

She came at me, rubbing herself against me and trying to undo my belt. I pulled her hands away, filled with an overpowering sexual urge flavored with loneliness and regret. There was no question that she was an attractive girl with a lithe body, milky skin and killer legs. If I'd been anyone else, I would have screwed her five ways from Sunday. I could've lost myself in the Russian girl—her hair, her skin, her hot breath. But I couldn't. It hurt me deeply to see her offering herself to me in this way.

I kept my voice quiet but firm, even as I fought the urge to take her there on the sofa. "Put your sweater on," I said. Then I bent down, picked it up and handed to her. She stood there staring at me with haunted eyes.

"Please don't send me away," she said, pressing the sweater to her breasts.

"You don't need to do anything for me, except be truthful."

Chastened and burning with embarrassment, she pulled the sweater down over her head and sank back onto the sofa. I tried to imagine Vlad dealing with this kid on a daily basis and, though we'd never met, I felt sorry for him. He had neither the tools nor the training. Neither did I.

I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. When I came back through the door, Sasha was standing there, looking at me contritely. "*Izvinite*," she said.

She'd used that word twice. It probably meant *sorry*. "Forget it. Look, Sasha, I know you've ... done things you aren't proud of. I have too. But don't ever offer yourself up like that again. To me or anyone. You're better than that. Promise me."

It must have been hard for her to promise anything. So many people had let her down—her father, her brother. Becky. And though I hadn't harmed her in any way, I was a stranger with potential.

"I promise," she said. Then she began straightening up the room—I had no idea why. "Why aren't you like those others?"

"It's the pain. Keeps me focused."

“I know pain too.”

A single silent tear rolled down her cheeks. Not knowing what else to do, I embraced her and stroked her hair. She was thin like a wisp of smoke made flesh. Tilting her head up and staring into my eyes, she tried to kiss me. I held her tear-streaked face in my hands and kissed her on the forehead. Then I let her go.

“You can stay with me on one condition,” I said. “I need to speak with your brother.”

“No, he—”

“You don’t have to see him. Just tell me how to get in touch. I won’t let him know where you are—I promise.”

Wiping her eyes, she nodded. “I will tell you.”

“Who knows, he might surprise you. I’d better get the food. We can talk more later.” She followed me to the door. “Stay here and don’t go near the windows.”

Smiling naturally had always been hard for me, since the drinking. But I gave it a try—I hoped it wasn’t too *American Psycho*—and went out. I heard a soft snick as Sasha locked the door after me.

THE RAIN HAD TURNED to a thick mist as I hurried towards the takeout place, watching for grey-suits. The sky was black with clouds and the streetlights strained to light the path for the heavy traffic that moved past. Midway past the park, I heard a clicking noise, followed by what sounded like a dog yelping. The cry was short and piercing. I stopped to listen. Faintly, I could hear what sounded like whimpering.

Turning towards the shelter of the trees and the play equipment, I tried to see what was causing the noise. I could just make out movement in the distance—a dark circle of figures, their bodies weaving lazily like candle flames.

“No!” a voice said.

I didn't have a real weapon—only my stun gun. Better not to get involved—I could always call 911 from the safety of the street. But when I turned, a stranger stood facing me. He was a slender, muscular man wearing only jeans, with spiky white-blond hair that reminded me of Rutger Hauer's Roy Batty character in *Blade Runner*. Grinning like Satan, his eyes glowing an iridescent purple, he mesmerized me. Licking fresh blood from his lips, he showed me his balisong knife.

Pivoting, I ran towards the trees and directly into a band of men—also naked except for their jeans—standing in a circle. Though I couldn't see what they were doing, a strong feeling of revulsion swept over me. From the center of the circle, an arm shot straight up in a power salute, skinless and bloody, and I knew.

Cutters were hunting out in the open again.

If only I'd had a gun, I could try to dispatch them and save the victim. Instead I grabbed the stun gun from my jacket pocket and came at them. But a hand grabbed my wrist from behind and spun me around, sending the weapon flying. Once again, I was face-to-face with the blond cutter.

Holding my wrist in a death grip that made me cry out, he studied my face calmly, his head cocked to one side like a curious puppy. Though I was terrified, I couldn't help but marvel at the monster who had trapped me. Despite the cold, his touch was warm and he smelled faintly of man-sweat. Though his eyes glowed purple, he appeared normal in every other way.

As he came at me with the knife, a large dog—a German shepherd—growled viciously and tore at his leg. When I looked up, the owner—a middle-aged man with glasses and a paunch—was running towards us.

"Cindy, stop!" he said.

But the dog wouldn't quit. She reminded me so much of Greta, the dog we'd kept to protect us from the undead in Tres Marias. Hissing, the cutter stared at the dog, gripped the knife and started to bring it straight down. With one hand, I blocked his arm. Then I swung my other fist hard, knocking him down. By now, the owner had gotten hold of his

dog's collar and pulled her back.

Getting up off the wet grass, the blond cutter glared at the growling dog, turned and ran barefoot into the night.

"I'm so sorry," the owner said, patting the whimpering animal. "She's a retired police dog."

"Good thing. She saved my life," I said. "You'd better get out of here."

"But—"

"Go! I'll take care of this."

As the man disappeared with his dog, I ran to where my stun gun lay and picked it up. The other cutters were weaving hypnotically, seemingly unaware of their surroundings. I used this to my advantage and zapped the one nearest me. He fell, shivering in a St. Vitus dance of retching and clawing. I did the same to the others, clearing a path to the victim. When I was able to push my way through, I saw a boy—maybe thirteen or fourteen—lying dead on the wet grass, his chest hollowed out.

I ran as fast as I could towards the street. A car almost hit me as I skidded and ran to the opposite side and into a small grocery store. Seeing me, the clerk became suspicious and reached under the counter.

"Call 911!" I said.

As if this were the most normal thing in the world, he grabbed the phone and dialed. Then he handed me the receiver. I ignored the call script and told the emergency dispatch operator what I'd seen. I refused to identify myself, giving only my current location. Then I hung up.

"They're on their way," I said.

"Not again."

Food was the last thing on my mind, but I had promised Sasha. I went up and down the aisles and grabbed what I could. When I got back to the register, my hands still shaking, I pulled out my wallet. Maritza's card fell onto the counter. I paid for the food and stepped outside. Then I walked next door to an electronics store and purchased a burner—

something I'd been meaning to do.

"Is it charged?" I said to the disinterested clerk.

"Should be."

Outside on the wet street, I did the one thing I never thought I would do—not in a million years. I called Maritza. I ended up in her voicemail.

"It's Dave," I said. "Something's happened." Then I gave her the location of the murder and hung up.

I wasn't about to hang around for the police and the news crew. As I returned to my apartment, I thought of Roy Batty and the rest of those shirtless cutters. How many more innocent people would die before I could put an end to this?