

"Robin Parrish is the kind of writer who understands how to entertain from the word go. His stories are sure to shape fiction for years to come."

— **TED DEKKER**, bestselling author of *Showdown* and *House*

RELENTLESS

A NOVEL



ROBIN PARRISH



RELENTLESS


THE DOMINION TRILOGY: BOOK 1

ROBIN PARRISH



BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS

Minneapolis, Minnesota



PROLOGUE

Somewhere in the world, an unbearable cry pierced the darkness.

It was the sound of pain.

The sound of birth.

And the sound of death.

It was a sound that would change *everything*. . . .

*Los Angeles, California
Thirty Years Later*

Collin Boyd stepped off the Metro bus on his way to work, and across the street he saw *himself* strolling down the sidewalk.

A stubborn but warm February rain was pouring hard across the concrete canyons of downtown. His foot had landed ankle-deep in a drainage puddle, and his half-broken umbrella wasn't extending as it should. But the umbrella, which had rarely seen use, quickly fell out of his hands and he no longer noticed the rain. His eyes were fixed, his head turning slowly to follow the other man down the opposite side of the street.

It wasn't until someone shouted from behind that he finally got his legs moving again.

The man he watched with rapt attention weaved his way casually through the crowd, headed in the direction of Collin's workplace. He wasn't a man who merely *resembled* Collin. He *was* him. The same face, the same body, the same walk. He wore the clothes and raincoat Collin had put on that morning. He carried Collin's briefcase.

It was only then that Collin noticed he no longer *had* his briefcase. When had he seen it last? On the bus? Before that? He'd been so groggy all morning, he couldn't place it.

And what was that on the man's wrist? Collin clenched a hand around his own wrist, feeling for what was missing.

He's wearing Granddad's bracelet . . .

That line of thought was gone once the other man began fussing

with the piece of unruly hair up front that Collin could never seem to keep in place.

This impostor wasn't a twin or duplicate. He was *him*, in every way. Every look, every gesture, every expression. And he was walking to work in the rain, under L.A.'s towering skyscrapers, brushing shoulders with countless citizens and tourists.

As if everything were exactly as it should be.

Without ever deciding to, Collin moved his legs. He crossed the bustling downtown street, just aware enough of the cars, buses, and bicycles zipping by to dodge them. But his eyes remained on the man who looked like him, who checked his watch—*No, that's my watch*, he reminded himself—and then picked up his pace, apparently realizing he was about to be late for work.

Late for my work, Collin stupidly thought again, his mind spinning.

This was a lie. It had to be a lie.

A twisted joke.

But then, who would play such a prank? He hadn't had any close friends since childhood, and even then he knew that his "friends" had been forced to play with him by the orphanage staff. He couldn't think of a single acquaintance he had now who had anything resembling a sense of humor.

Collin increased his own speed, tailing his doppelganger from about fifteen paces behind. The impossibility of the situation seemed like an absurd thing to think about right now as he spied on himself walking to work in the rain, yet nothing else entered his mind.

It couldn't be impossible if he was looking right at it.

What am I supposed to say if I catch up to him?

Maybe he's my clone. Are they cloning humans yet? Eh, I don't know.

He's living my life. He's walking in my shoes on his way to my job, living my life.

Did he steal my life?

Maybe I'm sitting somewhere in a padded room right now. "Careful there, honey," the kind nurse is saying to my slack-jawed, vacant expression. "You're drooling all over your straitjacket . . ."

Collin's adrenaline surged, and the confusion of the moment was overpowered by a rising agitation.

The other man approached a street corner, and even though the

light on the other side was blinking DON'T WALK, he crossed anyway, nearly jogging.

Collin broke into a run and hit the crosswalk full bore. He was half-way across, his eyes still following his quarry, when a blaring horn filled his ears, followed by the metallic screech of brakes. He barely managed to jump backward a few feet before a Metro bus filled the space where he'd just been standing. The angry driver shouted a few choice phrases in Collin's direction, followed by an emphatic hand gesture.

Collin gave a dazed wave. As the bus chugged slowly along, passing within inches of his face, his stunned reflection gazed back at him in the glass windows as they passed by.

He didn't recognize the man in the glass.

Time seemed to shudder. The sounds of vehicles, store owners, tourists, businesspeople, and even planes flying overhead all fell away, until he heard nothing but the rush of blood surging past his ears and pounding in his temples. There was nothing wrong with his eyes, but he couldn't seem to get them to focus. And he felt a sharp pain in his stomach, as if he might vomit.

Somehow he stumbled his way across the street and managed to hold on to his breakfast—*Did I have breakfast?*—and stopped to rest on the sidewalk, the chase erased from his thoughts.

The rain had stopped. He stood under the small canvas awning of a tiny high-end boutique with a floor-to-ceiling storefront window. He looked up, expecting to see mannequins on the other side of the glass, but instead, reflected back at him, was a man he'd never seen before.

Everything about his appearance was unfamiliar. He was taller, appeared to have a rather meaty, athletic build, and he wore high-end clothes much too rugged and in style for Collin's taste. Gone was the tiny, balding spot on top of his head, replaced now by thick brown locks trimmed neatly above his ears. He wasn't wearing his glasses—in fact, he didn't seem to need them. He had a few days' growth of facial hair. Even his flabby midsection was missing.

I've gone mad.

He stared at his reflection for minutes on end, unable to do anything else.

Who am I?

That other man—he's me. And I'm . . . not.

Did we switch?

A stranger looked through his eyes, taking him in.

And not just any stranger, it occurred to him. He was as close to a perfect specimen of manhood as Collin allowed might exist. An absence of creases around the eyes and a naturally pleasant expression indicated a calm, confident, well-adjusted individual. One who was clearly bogged out of his mind at the moment, but still.

Collin admired this man a minute more, unable to remove his eyes from the reflection, barely even remembering to breathe. He never noticed the slender, short brunette standing behind his shoulder, also taking in his reflection, until she whistled in appreciation.

“Well, *somebody* got the deluxe package.”

He turned at last to face the intruder. She was in her mid-to-late twenties. Wearing a no-muss T-shirt and jeans. She went without makeup, a rarity for L.A., and there was no jewelry either.

And she wore no shoes.

For a second he wondered if she might be homeless. Yet her clothes were too clean. She was pretty and casual, her long brown locks falling off her shoulders in untamed curls, but her expression was a flashing neon billboard that declared her to be sharp and confident. She nodded at the glass window, and he turned once more to peer at his image.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the jumble of thoughts pouring through his mind, a guttural “Huh?” was all he could get out.

My voice is different.

Deeper.

Why is this girl barefoot?

“Oh, I know,” she went on. “You have no idea what’s going on. Blah-blah-raving-hysteria-blah. I’m just saying . . . You took a shortcut to the top of the food chain, handsome.”

“What?”

She placed her hands on his neck, straightening the collar of his brown leather jacket and then examining his reflection once more. “This is the part where I’m probably supposed to say something about . . . ‘stepping through the looking glass.’ Isn’t it? I don’t know, maybe that’s wrong—I never dug sci-fi. But I *do* love that jacket,” she said, nodding at his coat.

"This . . . isn't science fiction," he choked, surprised to find he'd been holding his breath since she started talking.

"You're not wrong," she replied with a cocked eyebrow and a smirk. "Things are about to get *real* complicated and I have an elsewhere to be, so let me cut to the heavy exposition. Put your listening cap on, sport, 'cause I'm about to give you a cheat sheet.

"You've just been dropkicked into the middle of something *so big* you'd never buy it if I tried to explain it now. So here's the big reveal. Are you listening? 'Cause this is the one thing you absolutely *gotta* know: you're being watched, right now, this very minute. Several *groups* of people are keeping tabs on your every snap, crackle, and pop. *Everything you do* from this moment on will blip their radars. So be careful. Though you don't have to fear them *all*."

"Watching me? How? Why?" he stammered, trying and failing to keep up with the barefoot girl's barrage of information. His heart thudded madly in his chest, his breaths coming in sudden heaves.

She ignored him and continued. "One group is out to help you. They're not the worry. The other group'll kill you the first chance they get. Don't give 'em one."

"Kill me?" he asked, his eyes darting about aimlessly, searching for people watching him . . .

All he saw were bored pedestrians going about their business.

His stomach lurched, and he swallowed bile.

The girl nodded. She'd been toying with him at first, but suddenly she turned somber. "Don't bother looking. This particular less-than-philanthropic group has hired one of the best to do their dirty work, and he knows how to stay hidden. His name is Konrad. I'm sure he's watching you with his own two peepers as we speak."

"But . . . but . . . shouldn't I just go to—"

"The cops?" she finished for him, eyebrows raised. "*That* conversation would go well. 'Say, Officer, did you ever see *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?'"

He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

She knows.

"But what *is* all this? What's going on?" he nearly yelled after collecting himself. "Why is this happening to me? I'm no one! *Why me?*"

She was silent for a moment, studying him. Finally she spoke,

looking deep into his eyes. "It has to be you."

"But *why*?"

"Because you're a player now."

"A player?" he faltered. "We're playing? Playing what?"

She was shorter than Collin, yet somehow she managed to look down on him like a lost toddler in a department store. "Don't follow Collin—the old you."

Wait, his name wasn't Collin anymore? He was Collin Boyd. He knew that as certain as he knew he was standing here.

Which, given how nuts he seemed to have gone, wasn't all that reassuring.

But no, of course Collin wouldn't be his name anymore.

New body, new name.

His thoughts were coming too fast now, his eyes still looking into surrounding windows, buildings, cars, pedestrians walking by . . .

"*Listen to me,*" she said, grabbing him by the shoulders and forcing him to focus. "*Don't go near* who you used to be. Get out of town and *just keep going.* Don't slow down. Don't stop. Your life is in danger if you do. Every minute you stay in one place brings Konrad that much closer to you. So you should *go.* Right now."

Still he'd didn't move. Just stood there, eyes wide with fear and brow knitted in deep confusion. A small part of him bristled at being given orders by a stranger. None of this made sense and leaving was out of the question until it did.

The barefoot girl let out a deep breath with just a hint of annoyance. When she opened her mouth, she spoke slower, as if enunciating to someone hard of hearing. "I know this is confusing; it will get easier for you. It *will.* But you don't have time to be stubborn right now. And you're *so* not ready to know yet, anyway. *Just go. Now!*"

She stood there watching him, unblinking, unmoving, waiting for him to move. He thought he detected a trace of concern, or perhaps urgency, on her face. Mostly she appeared put out by his refusal to start running.

He glanced over her shoulder in the direction of the office where he worked, and in the distance the old him, the other man—Collin Boyd—was nowhere, probably already inside. The new him had no idea whether or not to trust this strange woman, but there was an urgency

in her voice that was hard to ignore. Still, his frustration was palpable as he glanced back at her.

“I’m not ready to know?” he asked. “Know *what*?”

“What’s to come,” she said without hesitation.

He bored his eyes into hers, but she never blinked. He found it extremely annoying.

She frowned. “Well, I gotta jet. Keep standing here if you want, but don’t come crying to me when you’re dead.”

With that, she turned and flitted off into the busy throng. The rain had stopped just in time for her exit, which he also found annoying.

He started to call after her, but she was long gone. He didn’t know what to say anyway.

He didn’t even know her name.

With something she said still tugging at his mind, he reached inside his coat pocket in a mechanical, mindless way and pulled out a fine leather wallet he’d never seen before. Opened it.

Inside was a wad of crisp, clean hundred-dollar bills.

There was also a driver’s license bearing the name GRANT M. BORROWS. It was the first time he’d seen or heard the name. Whoever this Grant Borrows was, apparently that’s who he was now.

The gravity of the situation struck him all at once, and the world began spinning wildly beneath his feet. It was spiraling out of control, and his stomach churned once more.

He caught the eye of a woman who passed him by, entering the clothing store behind him, and as their eyes met, she . . . *smiled* at him.

That was new.

Another brushed his shoulder exiting the store and actually apologized with a sheepish, overly friendly “I’m so sorry!”

Grant began to hyperventilate. No one *ever* looked him in the eye. He’d spent most of his life cultivating the ability *not* to be noticed. Now it felt like everyone was looking him up and down.

Admiring what they saw.

An old Volkswagen van passed by the sidewalk where he stood, and it backfired loudly like a gunshot, snapping him back to the moment.

Somewhere out there—where he would never see—a man named Konrad was watching him. Possibly moving closer. Meaning to kill him. Perhaps he had a gun with Grant in its sights right now.

Grant Borrows ran.

Dr. Daniel Cossick had just arrived at his second-floor lab and placed his key into the lock when the door burst open from the inside and a breathless, red-faced brunette stood before him. He sighed. His assistant Lisa always arrived early, and she had a tendency to get excited over little things, so this was nothing new.

“Doctor Cossick! I just registered a spike of *three-point-seven*,” she said, eyes wide with excitement.

Every other thought in Daniel’s mind vanished into black. He forgot his keys, forgot his briefcase, forgot everything but the three words he’d just heard. *Three-point-seven*.

Three-point-seven!

He dropped everything and ran after her down the dilapidated hall. Lisa flew into the “lab”—a makeshift facility they’d built themselves in an abandoned building in the Warehouse District—with Daniel following and made for the middle of a modest white room overflowing with odd machinery. The atmosphere was alive with mechanical whirrs and beeps, pungent odors, and the occasional fizz of air or fire. Few visitors could stomach being in the room because the odors were so strong and the sounds so constant, but Daniel and Lisa had grown accustomed to it. They both practically lived here, conducting their search.

Always searching.

In the center of the room was the lab’s largest piece of equipment, a massive mechanism that looked like half a giant metal sphere had been mounted on top of a collection of circuitry, wires,

and semiconductors. It hummed quietly, almost vibrating, but nothing moved because stillness was crucial. It was approximately four feet in diameter and full of a thick, silver liquid that rose almost to the rim.

“My own potion of mercury mixed with a few other potent elements,” Daniel would explain to potential investors, though visitors to the lab were increasingly rare. The liquid itself was inconsequential; it was there to provide mass at the correct density that would measure what they were looking for. The mercury mixture usually remained at a flat calm. Daniel had built special dampeners into the undercarriage to prevent shaking of any kind. Even an earthquake could not jar it, unless the whole building was to topple.

But it would shake if there was a *shimmer*.

And a shimmer was what they were searching for.

If Lisa was correct, a three-point-seven would be the largest event Daniel had ever witnessed. By far.

She motioned to the computer station adjacent to the device and pointed at the screen, grinning from ear to ear.

“Look at that!” She chewed on a nail, watching his every move.

He pulled out his glasses and, hands shaking, slipped them on, his eyes never leaving the monitor. There it was. The device had recorded a three-point-seven spike roughly seven minutes ago. His heart fluttered.

“Location?” he asked, without looking up.

“Already on it,” she said, still smiling. “Take another ten or twenty minutes to triangulate.”

Daniel nodded, studying the dozens of numbers that appeared on the screen. He did some math in his head and then his entire body stiffened, alarmed.

“Close,” he said, still staring at the screen. “Less than three miles from here.”

He stood, his eyes out of focus, his mind elsewhere. “Downtown,” he mumbled to no one, wiping his hands against the sweater he wore.

He seemed to snap to attention, but still didn’t look at her. “Get me that location the moment you have it.” He began walking away, toward the other end of the hall, to the only other room they’d retrofitted into the building: his office.

“Dr. Cossick?” Lisa called.

He turned around distractedly. “Yes?”

“This is really it, isn’t it?” she asked, holding her breath. She was beaming, excited beyond words.

He forced a modest smile for her benefit, but then turned and continued walking.

“I hope not.”

Home turned out to be a different neighborhood than Grant had ever known. Instead of his utilitarian apartment, his cab ride steered him into the canyons of downtown amid the shadows of skyscrapers. The Wagner Building was a new high-rise on Wilshire, a few blocks from the famous old Library Tower and L.A.’s Central Library itself where he’d visited once or twice as a child. The key Grant found in his jacket pocket alongside the wallet unlocked the elevator up to the penthouse floor and then slid smoothly into the apartment’s front-door lock.

Before opening the door, a twinge of apprehension tingled in his mind, returning his thoughts to the strange barefoot girl he’d met on the street and her warning to get out of town. Which he had completely ignored. Grant *had* hailed a cab, but as soon as he saw the address on the wallet, all thoughts of fleeing were abandoned. He couldn’t resist finding out more about this person he’d somehow become.

And a small part of him did it just to spite the girl and her stupid bare feet.

He pushed open the door to the penthouse and saw a shadowy room ahead. His hand felt around on the inside wall until he found the light switch and flipped it on.

Spread out before him was a bachelor’s paradise. Black leather furnishings. Spacious surroundings. Giant flatscreen plasma TV. A desk at the far end of the room featured a sleek, stainless steel computer. Speakers from a massive stereo system were situated throughout the room. Chic floor lamps stood at corners like sentries. Modern art adorned the clean, white walls. To the immediate left of the front door was a fully outfitted kitchen with appliances that bore the stainless-steel sheen of restaurant-quality machinery. Beyond the kitchen was a fully-furnished dining room. Somewhere down the long hall beyond the living room was probably a bedroom, a bathroom, and who knew what else.

He stepped inside and continued to gape. But instincts he couldn't explain were telling him something was wrong. It was the middle of the day, and all of the drapes around the room were closed tight. The pillows on the sofa were perfectly arranged. Everything in the kitchen was exactly where it belonged. The apartment looked as if it had never been used. Not one thing was out of place.

Except for the doormat on which he stood, which was crooked by less than an inch.

He put it together a second too late.

The door slammed shut behind him just as someone grabbed his right arm and pressed it into the small of his back. He felt the tip of a knife against his throat.

Without thinking, Grant grabbed the arm holding the knife with his free hand, and twisted it hard. The knife fell to the floor and at the same time, Grant ducked and sent the attacker flying over his left shoulder, where he crashed on the floor in the living room over ten feet away.

Grant couldn't tell which of them was more surprised at what he'd just done—he or the other man, who slumped against the ground. Grant watched the other man fall, but could only stand there numbly, breath caught in his throat. It had all happened so fast.

He had no idea how he'd done it.

His assailant, a short stump of a man clad in a baggy black jumpsuit and shin-high black boots who had to be pushing fifty, lay there for a fraction of a second, stunned at Grant's quick reaction. He looked like he was made of solid brick and frowned in a way that looked as though the expression had been permanently etched into his face.

Konrad, Grant guessed.

What did I ever do to you?

But Konrad's pause lasted only a moment, and he rolled back to his feet and pulled a gun out of a shoulder holster in a simple, fluid motion.

"I wasn't told you could do that," Konrad said. His deep, abrasive voice sounded like a jackhammer pounding into pavement. "I'm a collector; lack of full disclosure means I get something extra. I'm thinking . . . *kneecap*." He lowered the gun and pointed it at Grant's leg.

Grant had launched into a dead sprint, instincts taking over. He

was outside the apartment door before the first shot was fired. He darted down the corridor, unsure where he was headed. He made it to the end of the hall, where he met a full-length window and a sprawling view of the L.A. skyline that should have been breathtaking. But a second shot shattered the glass, and Grant dove around the corner to his right.

A door marked “STAIRS” that he hadn’t noticed earlier waited before him. Grant’s heart leapt and he dashed through the door. He made it down the first flight before hearing the door slam open behind him, and he rounded to the next floor, just as Konrad fired again.

A pinching pain sliced through his left leg, and he staggered. But the adrenaline was surging now like nothing he’d felt before, and it kept him from stopping. Rounding the next staircase, he caught sight of the adjoining door, which read “ELEVEN.”

Come on, come on. Ten flights.

You can do this.

Down he ran, feet flying over each step. It seemed impossible. Just the other night he’d been talking with his landlady about how quiet and lonely and boring his life was. All he had was his job. She wondered if he brought it on himself but he told her that he’d never asked to be alone. Why bother questioning fate? Yet in the dark of the night it had come to him. How pointless it all seemed, this endless stupid pattern, winding around him tighter and tighter.

His job. Being around other people. His whole life.

It felt like a snake twisting around his neck, tightening its grip, and he’d woken many nights in a sweat, gasping for air.

Now *he* was the snake, winding dizzily around and around while breathing became harder and harder . . .

Another shot rang out, closer this time, and he instinctively ducked.

“Did you know that dismemberment isn’t always fatal?” Konrad said from above. He wasn’t shouting, he was growling, quietly. He was keeping up with Grant’s frantic pace, but his words had come as casually as if he were riding an elevator.

Halfway down the next flight, Grant grabbed the middle rail and flung himself over, dropping ten feet to the flight below. He landed solidly, but his leg flashed with a stabbing pain, and he kept going down, rolling to the bottom of the stairs. When he stopped, he noticed that his

left pant leg was crimson with blood.

But there was no time to think; he jumped to his feet and darted off again, down, down, down.

Come on! This is taking too long!

More shots clanged off of the center railing. Grant moved to the outside edge of the stairs, staying close to the wall. Another flight. Another. More shots.

Keep moving. You can do this.

Maybe I should just stop, let him finish it. Wouldn't it be easier?

The thought of dying wasn't all that bad . . .

"The trick is sealing off the wound," Konrad's voice echoed in the stairwell. "A needle and string will do, but I find that cauterizing the wound works best. With the proper antibiotics, I can take a man apart one inch at a time. It can last for *weeks* before I even *get close* to the vital organs."

And . . . let's keep running, shall we?

The pain in his leg seared now, and he broke into a cold sweat. He may have been more in shape now than before, but he was still human. And his leg screamed in agony.

At last he made it to the door marked "ONE." He had the door open when another idea came to mind. He pushed the door open as far as it would go, so its hydraulic hinge would require several seconds to pull it closed. Then he hopped on one foot, so as to not leave another blood trail, in the direction of the last flight of stairs, which led to the building's mechanical room.

He stopped halfway down the steps and crouched, listening. Konrad's heavy footfalls faded away, and then he heard the open door above him click shut.

Grant wasted no time. Hurling himself down the remaining steps, he burst through the mechanical room's door. Frantic, he glanced around the warm, dark, dry room, looking for anything that might help. A broomstick he could use as a weapon, something to lodge against the door. But there was nothing. The small room held the building's massive furnace and myriad other equipment, but little else. Even light seemed to be swallowed up by the space.

He felt his way around the furnace to the right, thinking only of how Konrad wouldn't be thrown off the trail long. There on the right

side of the room, he came upon a small locked door. He thought about kicking it, but his leg hurt too deeply so he lowered his shoulder and crashed at it with as much force as he could manage.

To his astonishment, it worked, and he let out a triumphant grunt. A narrow flight of stairs beyond the open door led down. He threw himself down them, legs barely working anymore. At the bottom he slammed his body into a second door and dashed through.

Grant couldn't believe his luck. He was standing in the middle of an enormous subway station, bustling with activity. And not just any station—he knew this place, had been here before. It was the Metro Center Station, just across Figueroa Street from the Wagner Building. He remembered the movie-themed artwork adorning the walls. It felt more like a sterile airport than a subterranean tunnel. Its shiny steel fittings mirrored Grant's dilapidated appearance back at him everywhere he looked.

A Blue Line train bulletted by on the tracks nearest him, its engine piercing the roar of the vast crowd.

Grant looked back at the door he'd just passed through. On this side, it read "EMERGENCY EXIT."

He glanced around the subway, his mind racing. About a hundred feet down the corridor, beyond a swell of pedestrians waiting for the next train, he spotted an escalator that led up to sunlight beyond.

He set off again, forcing his way through the crowd, brushing shoulders and nearly shoving others. But once they got a look at his haggard features and bloodied clothes, most were only too happy to get out of his way. He was limping now, blood still dribbling from his leg onto the floor's brick-colored tiles.

He felt light-headed. *Probably from the blood loss*, some part of his mind registered the sensation.

Grant had just placed one foot on the bottom step when he heard another gunshot, followed by hundreds of screams. Konrad was descending the stairs directly above him, and fast.

Grant hobbled in the opposite direction, trying to run, but the other man jumped from near the bottom of the steps, tackling him from behind. The gun went off again as they grappled for it on the floor. A train pulled up and most of the crowd scrambled into it, many of them still screaming.

Grant threw a punch and was surprised to see it connect.

But Konrad stood up, unfazed, and hoisted Grant to his feet as well. Grant's senses were muddled, feeling more of the pain in his leg now. His newfound reflexes seemed to have slowed when the exhaustion had kicked in. His chest heaved and he couldn't catch his breath. He didn't realize what was happening until it was too late to stop it—the other man had shoved him up against the nearest wall and pinned a bulky arm across his chest.

"I still want my kneecap," he growled, his hot breath inches from Grant's face.

“You’re not going to kill me,” Grant announced, surprised at himself.

Konrad punched him in the face. Grant’s head thumped against the tiled wall behind him, and he winced at the pain from his nose and mouth.

“You could have shot me in the apartment,” he continued, panting, “but you snuck up behind me with a *knife*. On the stairs, you shot me in the *leg*, not the chest,” Grant concluded. “You *want* something.”

Konrad smiled the ugliest smile Grant had ever seen. He had perfect teeth, but there was a gruesome malevolence in the expression. “Not bad. But if killing you is the only way of getting what I’m here for . . . I’ve made my peace with it.” His hollow eyes slowly moved down Grant’s right arm and landed on his hand, which he looked at hungrily. Grant followed his gaze down to the same spot.

And gasped.

A large gold ring, wider on top than underneath, like the shape of a class ring, rested there on his middle finger. The gold was so smooth it might have been liquid. Not a single scratch could be seen. Inset in the widest part of the band was a dark red gemstone. Odd markings were cut as tiny holes into the sides of the band. Grant had never seen the ring before, but he could tell from the sensation that it had been on his finger for a while.

At least since the bus, he guessed.

“You can have it,” Grant said, holding out his hand. The chase had worn him out, strength all but gone, breath coming in shooting waves,

along with the pounding of his pulse that he could feel in the pain from his leg. His equilibrium was damaged by the blow to the head, and if Konrad hadn't been pinning him against the wall, he might have collapsed.

"Hold it!" a man screamed from twenty feet down the line, in Grant's line of sight and directly behind Konrad. He looked like some kind of Metro security . . .

Without hesitating or even looking, Konrad fired a shot over his shoulder and the security guard went down. The few remaining pedestrians in the station panicked and ran. Konrad holstered the gun and retrieved a knife from his belt—the same one he'd pressed against Grant's throat in the apartment. Letting go with his other arm, he slammed his fist into Grant's face once again. Something cracked this time, but Grant couldn't be sure if it was his head or the ceramic of the wall. He fought the rising bile in his throat as well as the blackness creeping into the edge of his vision.

Konrad clutched Grant's wrist with a powerful, vice-like grip. The blood drained out of it quickly, and soon Grant could no longer feel it. Konrad curled Grant's other fingers into a fist, until only the middle ring finger remained extended.

"Heh," Grant spat deliriously, eyes half-open. "I'm giving you the finger."

Konrad looked into his eyes. "No," he said, "I'm taking it."

His blade touched the side of Grant's finger, just below the ring, where his finger met his hand, and he started to slice.

Grant's head bucked violently and he clenched his eyes closed tight, gritting his teeth. A blinding pain ripped through his head, and his whole body seized.

No!

Grant heard Konrad gasp and then the whistle of something flying through the air. The man's grip relaxed and when Grant opened his eyes, Konrad was staring, neck craned, across the subway station where something glinted on the wall.

The pain faded as quickly as it had come, and Grant saw his one opportunity. He kned Konrad viciously in the groin with every bit of strength he had left. Konrad doubled over, coughing and wheezing, then collapsed.

Grant staggered away from the wall, towering over the man. Despite his pain, he felt an unmistakable rush of satisfaction.

“*That* was my kneecap!” Grant shouted in a blind rage. “How’d it feel?!”

His eyes shifted to the gun attached to Konrad’s belt and lingered there. He couldn’t seem to slow his breathing, giving in to a crazed fit of wrath that erupted from him, swelling through his entire being.

Konrad spoke in a wheeze, sensing Grant’s next action. “Think carefully . . .” he whispered, “about your next move.”

Grant returned his focus, completely incensed, to the man on the ground, who continued speaking while clutching his privates, his face beet red and tears in his eyes. “I know who you really are,” he wheezed with a slight bob in his eyebrows. “And if I can’t kill *you* . . . I’ll settle for those you care about most.”

Grant was a bomb ready to explode, his chest swelling equally from the exertion of standing and the outrage he felt. “There *isn’t* anyone I care about,” he seethed through gritted teeth.

He kicked Konrad across the face, as hard as he could, and the man on the ground was out cold.

Grant braced himself against the wall, winded and stunned that he’d just beaten this man—whom he could only assume was some sort of mercenary or assassin. Despite his pain and fatigue, the fight had felt quite natural, even intuitive. Most of the time, Grant found he hadn’t even known what he was doing until it was done.

How could that be?

A handful of people—those who hadn’t run at the sight of Konrad’s gun—still hovered, watching him. But his attention shifted away from them to a space across the tracks, where a larger group of people were huddled before a round pillar made of solid concrete. A man in a navy blazer shifted to one side, and Grant saw there, sticking out of the pillar, the hilt of his attacker’s knife. The blade was buried deep inside the column.

He hesitated, confused. He couldn’t recall how the knife had gotten all the way over there. He thought back to the fight . . . Grant had closed his eyes only for a second when the headache struck, and when he opened them, Konrad’s hand was empty, his attention drawn elsewhere.

A shot of blinding pain from his leg wrenched him back to the present.

The girl at the storefront—whoever she was . . . She had been right. He should have bolted when this all started.

Too late now.

He limped in the direction of the stairs leading up and out.

He had to get out of here, find safety.

If such a thing still existed.

“It looks like you’re within twenty meters of the convergence,” Lisa said into Daniel’s earpiece.

“Okay, I’ll take it from here,” he replied.

She immediately went radio silent. Thankfully.

He liked Lisa. Well, he *tolerated* her, anyway, as much as he tolerated anyone. But if she weren’t whip-smart and an astute lab tech, he never would have been able to abide her endless chatter. He hadn’t known her for very long before he realized that she lacked a filter between her brain and her mouth—she simply verbalized every thought that entered her mind.

She was good, though—really good. She often caught things that he was too impatient to notice, and she had a way of pushing their research along avenues of thought that he might not otherwise have considered.

But the constant conversation drove him batty, particularly in the mornings. He preferred the silence of his own thoughts.

Daniel stood on the downtown sidewalk under the midday sun, which had finally broken through the clouds, holding his small device in his hand. It was a simple instrument he’d built from pieces of a Pocket PC and some other materials. Its panel lit up whenever a shimmer—or the residual energy given off by a recent shimmer—was nearby. The closer he got, the brighter it glowed. Lisa said it was essentially a high-tech version of the “you’re getting warmer” game.

He marched forward another ten paces and glanced at the device. It was brighter here. He looked up. A bus stop faced him across the street.

It had happened right around here, he was sure of it.

But what was he expecting to find? It had taken much longer than

he'd hoped for the lab's past-generation systems to narrow down the shimmer's position. As his rumbling stomach reminded him, it was nearing lunchtime. Whatever event had taken place here, it was long over.

Daniel walked forward, crossing the street and nearing the bus stop, when a high-pitched squeal in his earpiece brought him up short.

"Doct—! It hap—a—n!" Lisa was shouting.

He reached up and massaged his ear. "Say again? *Quietly?*"

"It happened again! Another shimmer! Just now!" she replied.

He froze. *Two in one day.*

One was unprecedented. Two was unimaginable.

"How big?" he shouted, not caring about the people on the street who stopped to stare.

"Hang on, it's processing now . . ."

An impossibly long minute passed, and the light changed. A bicyclist squeaked his horn, so Daniel ran out of the street and under the empty glass bus shelter.

"Well?" he asked impatiently.

"Doctor Cossick, . . ." she whispered, "it was a *seven-point-nine.*"

He plopped down on the shelter's plastic bench, aware of nothing around him save his heart pounding madly beneath his chest.

"Where was it?" he finally said.

"Can't tell yet," she mumbled. "It's still triangulating. But *two* of them! *Two shimmers!* Can you *believe* this?"

"Feed me the data," he replied, pulling out a touch-screen device smaller than a laptop. He tapped the screen and looked at the data Lisa was pouring into it by remote. He focused on the numbers and quickly did some preliminary math on the small computer.

When he was finished, he sat back, dropping the pad to his knees.

"I think it's near the Library," he said out loud.

He pulled the smaller device back out of his pocket and turned it on.

Even in the rising midday sun, it glowed ferociously.

Grant walked as far as he could before the pain in his leg grew unbearable. It needed dressing, and he had to find someplace safe to hide, get his bearings and consider his options. He'd crossed 110 on West 7th and guessed he was now a mile or so west of the Wagner Building. He'd never been in this part of the city before.

Konrad would wake up soon. Grant wondered if he should have done something more. Perhaps he should have tied Konrad up and thrown him onto one of the moving trains or something. But the people standing around, who'd witnessed the entire fight, had watched him carefully after it was over. Add that weird knife thing to the situation, and he just wanted to get out of there.

He wasn't equipped to deal with what was happening on his own, that much was clear. For that matter, he didn't even know who he was. He'd never heard of this "Grant Borrows." The most likely scenario, he decided, was that somehow, he and this Borrows person had exchanged . . . *lives*.

However impossible that sounded.

He hailed a passing cab and asked the driver—an elderly woman with thin, wiry hair and large horn-rimmed glasses that had lenses set to a high magnification—to take him to the closest drugstore. At the strip mall where she stopped, he handed her three of his crisp hundred-dollar bills, and asked her to please wait. She didn't reply, but her huge eyes got even bigger when he placed the currency into her hand, so he wasn't concerned.

Grant staggered into the store, trying hard not to pass out, and drew expressions from patrons and employees that ranged from puzzled to downright spooked. Most backed away at the sight of him.

Shuffling his way down various aisles, Grant's thoughts lingered bleakly on how he hoped to be waking up any minute now. He picked up a small, brown bottle of peroxide, a roll of gauze, a bottle of Tylenol, and a few snacks. He paid the clerk—whose fearful eyes seemed to silently call for a co-worker to come handle this situation—and asked if they had a restroom.

Once inside the tiny room at the back of the store, he locked the door and rolled his pant leg up to get his first look at the wound on his leg. Or rather, whoever's leg this was. It wasn't a limb he recognized.

It was worse than he'd thought. Much more than a graze. The bullet had torn through one side of his tan, muscular calf and exited straight out the other. He couldn't believe it. There were two holes in his leg. His rear end smacked the floor as he slid down the wall, then he leaned back, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

He stayed that way until his breathing slowed.

He eyed the ring on his finger, and timidly touched it with a finger on the other hand. The metal was smooth and warm, and while not exactly store window material, it looked quite old.

Suddenly he tugged at it, alarmed. It wouldn't come off.

He pulled harder.

It wouldn't budge.

At first he thought it was merely stuck, that his finger had swollen. But the ring didn't wiggle *at all*. It was affixed to his finger, as if bonded directly to the skin.

That's why he was going to use a knife, he thought, remembering his struggle in the subway. *Konrad couldn't take the ring off, so he was going to take my whole finger.*

He propped his injured leg up over the open toilet seat, and after a moment's hesitation, poured the peroxide over it. The pain was excruciating, acid bubbling up around the wound and pus pouring out. He turned his leg over and did the same to the other side. He repeated the process several times, until satisfied.

Finally, he stood and popped a few Tylenol in his mouth, then began winding gauze around his leg. Wrap after wrap after wrap.

His mind wandered again, watching the white wrap go round and round. It twisted like the snake in his mind. A pure white snake intent on strangling him . . .

When I woke up this morning, I was Collin Boyd.

Now I'm Grant Borrows.

"My name is Grant Borrows."

"Grant Borrows, nice to meet you."

The white snake spun around its victim again and again. Grant's eyes glazed over, watching it curl and fighting a growing shortness of breath.

I stepped off a bus, found out I was no longer myself, and now I'm cleaning a gunshot wound inside a drugstore bathroom, and there's a ring on my finger that won't come off.

How did I get here?

A few wraps of medical tape would hold the gauze securely in place. He limped painfully to the tiny sink and gazed wearily into the mirror above it.

The handsome man he'd first seen in the store window that morning was still there, looking back at him, but he was a horrible mess now. Bruises on his cheek. Dried blood beneath his nose. His bottom lip was split. Hair disheveled. Eyes dark like a raccoon's. He ran a hand around the back of his head and felt more dried blood, from where it had smacked the concrete wall.

No wonder the store clerk had been terrified. The sudden notion that she might have called the police increased the urgency of his movements.

He poured peroxide over his ring finger where it had been cut, and bandaged it as best he could. He put what remained of his meager supplies in his inside jacket pockets, then washed his hands and face, which provided only a minor improvement. His clothes were still a bloody mess, but he couldn't do anything about it now.

He had to keep moving. He'd stayed in one place too long already.

But where to go?

Grant thought again of the barefoot girl and her warning to keep moving. And he thought about Konrad and the last words he'd uttered.

"If I can't kill you . . . I'll settle for those you care about most."

He gasped, and for once, it wasn't from the pain.

Oh no.

He slammed open the door to the bathroom and ran back out to the cab as best he could, adrenaline surging through him once more as the sun waned on the horizon.

If he knows who I really am, then he knows . . .

About her!

“Where to, honey?” the cab driver’s squeaky voice intoned.

“UCLA campus,” he replied breathlessly, shoving two more hundred-dollar bills into her hands. “Take Wilshire and run every light you have to!”

Amid the panic it occurred to him that however scared he’d been before . . . it was *nothing* compared to what he was feeling now.

Every hair on Julie Saunders’ arms and neck stood on end. It was late as she stopped, all alone in the UCLA faculty offices, to lock her office door, the darkness closing in around her.

She had no idea how or why, but she *knew* she was being watched.

Julie made her way quickly down the hall, breathing fast, eyes darting all around. The only sound came from the keychain jangling in her hand.

The feeling was suffocating, as if the air were made of syrup. She trembled visibly as she exited the building and walked out onto the campus grounds. Once outside, she stopped for a moment and collected herself, taking several deep breaths.

The outside air brought some comfort. The lights in most of the dormitories were still on—but that was no indication of the time, considering how late college students stayed up. The outdoor lamps were also on and she could see the front end of her car peeking at her from its perch atop the adjacent parking garage. The little teal Saturn appeared to be all alone up there.

The sense that she was being watched had not gone away.

Just get me home safe, and I’ll never stay at work past sundown again, she thought, her heart pounding. But she knew she’d had little choice besides putting in the extra hours. Recent events had put her behind on everything, most especially grading mid-term papers.

Julie wound the stairs to the top of the garage. Beside her car, she fiddled awkwardly with her keys, hands trembling until she found the

right one. Once inside, she locked the doors. Starting the engine made her feel better.

As she quietly backed out of her parking space, her pulse began to calm.

Hundreds of feet away, high atop one of the twin bell towers of the campus's auditorium, Konrad lay on his stomach, cradling a sniper rifle that was propped on the brick ledge. His right eye squinted into the telescopic lens as Julie's car slowly shifted into drive and turned toward the downward exit.

The car turned left, and now the driver's side of the car was facing him. Konrad's mouth stretched into a tight smile. He was going to enjoy this just a little more than usual.

He zeroed in on Julie's head and tightened his grip, waiting patiently. He could make the shot while she was in motion, he knew, but the distance was further than he preferred. So he decided to wait. The hunt was the best part, no doubt. But it failed to provide the divine *thirst* that waiting brought.

A ramp led from the garage to the nearest street; she would have to stop there, before turning out onto the main road. And he would be ready.

Inside the car, Julie glanced at the dashboard clock as she spiraled down the exit ramps. 10:43 P.M.

She sighed. So late, and she still had a long drive ahead on the 405. She was going to need help staying awake that long.

Julie passed through the garage's gated entrance and tapped her brakes until she stopped at her exit onto the main road. She leaned into the passenger's side floorboard to find a CD in her purse. She was only halfway over when the glass in the driver's-side door shattered.

She screamed then unlocked her seatbelt and lay all the way over in the passenger's seat. She looked around, unsure of what to do, when another shot popped loudly, punching a hole in the dashboard just above her.

Still hunched flat in the car, she jammed her foot on the gas, unconcerned about any oncoming traffic she might be turning in to. Once the car had gone a full ninety degrees to the right, she sat up and pushed

the pedal as far down as it would go, racing along the college's back roads.

No pain. She glanced down to see if she was hurt. No blood stains. She felt her head and her face, which was moist, but she dabbed it with a finger and saw that the liquid was clear. Only then did she realize that she'd been crying since the first shot was fired.

Julie sped her way south along the campus grounds, wiping her face and dodging students. Her muscles were tensed and she was shivering all over.

She snatched her phone and dialed 911.

An hour later, Konrad was still watching.

Through his sniper scope, he could see the woman sitting in a chair. She was plainly worn out and hadn't regained her composure since his attack. He could see her hands shaking slightly as she accepted a cup of coffee from the duty officer.

She was inside the UCLA Police Department building, near the center of the campus. He watched from an office on the top floor of the Gonda Center, a genetic research building just across the street.

A street ran between the Center and the campus police headquarters, with cars passing between very infrequently. A few students could be seen here and there walking and talking, even at this ungodly hour. But Konrad had no fear that he might be discovered. The building was locked down and all the lights were out.

If anyone did somehow intrude on him, he'd simply shoot them in the head with the silenced pistol on his hip.

All of this was part of Konrad's contingency plan, of course, made long before he'd shot holes into the woman's car, just as he'd known she would go straight to the police if he missed. He'd been given a complete file on this woman, which was almost as thick as the file for Borrows. She was a good citizen: she paid her taxes on time, she gave regularly to charities, she often worked late at her office.

She cared. She *loved*. She believed that doing right was what mattered.

Of course she would go straight to the police when someone took a shot at her. She'd be "safe" there.

He was unconcerned about his earlier failure to kill her, but it

gnawed at him that he hadn't been able to off Borrows yet. Still, setbacks were inevitable. He was a detail person, and this was a possibility he'd planned for. Besides, the woman's movements would prove even *more* predictable in this state.

Best of all, it prolonged the hunt.

And the hunt was all there was.

So he didn't mind waiting, sipping water from a bottle as he kept an eye on her through the rifle scope. She'd just been handed off to another policeman—a man in a suit sitting behind a desk, concern written all over his face—when a bulky, heavysset man in an overcoat—*Classic detective*, Konrad thought—strode into the office and began speaking to the desk officer with his arms crossed. He looked most displeased.

From what Konrad could tell, the police didn't seem keen on releasing the woman until they were convinced she was out of danger, though it looked like this new policeman might be shaking things up.

Whatever.

Improvising wasn't a problem. Neither was patience.

So he watched, and he waited.

Very patiently.

Julie had no idea who this guy in the trench coat was, and she couldn't bring herself to care.

All she could think about was how she should feel perfectly safe right now, and yet she didn't. As the two officers in this small room conferred quietly—some kind of jurisdictional dispute, from the sound of it—she was met with the growing sensation that all of the oxygen was very slowly being vacuumed from the room. It was growing steadily warmer, and her heart beat a little faster with each passing minute.

The young UCLA officer finally cleared his throat before smiling again at Julie, as both officers turned to face her. "This is Detective Drexel, and he's going to be taking care of you and looking into your case, Ms. Saunders."

Julie carefully got to her feet. "I just want this to be over. I still can't believe it. Can I go home?"

Drexel smiled at her reassuringly—though his smile looked an awful lot like the face other people make when they're in pain—as he hefted his considerable weight a step forward in her direction. "Very soon, I promise," he attempted to soothe, but his voice was surprisingly nasal and scratchy for such a barrel-chested man. "I need to get your statement on record at my office downtown, which is between here and your house. I won't delay you any longer than I have to."

Julie thought quietly to herself as Drexel ushered her from the room.

"Could it be gang-related?" she asked.

“I doubt it,” he replied casually, his hand steering her shoulder through the all-but-empty outer room and toward the front door. “Any of your students unhappy with their grades lately?”

She offered a halfhearted chuckle. “Students are *always* unhappy with their grades, Detective.”

“Stop!” Grant screamed from the back seat of the cab.

They’d reached the street outside of the UCLA Police Department. Standing there on the curb in front of the building was a girl. The girl without shoes.

“Wait right here!” Grant shouted, jumping from the cab.

“Honey, I can’t park in the middle of the—” the driver called after him, but he ignored her and ran toward the station house.

Grant had just limped through the building’s front door, following the shoeless girl inside, when he stopped cold. The young woman was nowhere to be seen, but Julie was right in front of him, being escorted straight toward him from a hallway on the right. She came closer, into the lobby, and their eyes met from ten feet away. She didn’t recognize him, of course, but she held his gaze nonetheless. Perhaps it was Grant’s bloodied and battered appearance—which was far worse than hers—but there was a peculiar expression on her face as she gazed at him.

Her long black hair was matted, disheveled, and her face gaunt and weary. Bags drooped under her eyes. If Grant hadn’t known who she was, he might not have recognized her. A big man in a blue trench coat had his hand on her shoulder, directing her, but now was shifting his attention to Grant, suspicion unmistakable in his features.

Julie didn’t look away as they drew closer together from opposite corners of the lobby. Time slid into slow motion for Grant as they came close enough to touch one another. He couldn’t bring himself to speak, couldn’t think of what to say, how to explain his situation, his appearance, his fear for her life. What *was* there to say? What could possibly escape from his lips that wouldn’t sound like the ramblings of a crazy person?

Grant took a step toward them. The cop yanked Julie out of concern, and at the same moment glass exploded from the window to Grant’s immediate right. Julie’s bulky escort fell sharply to the ground,

but Julie herself stopped cold exactly where she stood.

Grant's breath caught in his throat.

It was as if Julie had been frozen and bolted into place, in mid-stride, her eyes still trained on him. She simply . . . *paused* for a long moment, before her eyes rolled up and her entire body went limp. She collapsed to the floor.

Grant snapped out of his reverie and dove to shield her body with his.

The police department had erupted into chaos, officers screaming and shouting. More shots rang out and some fled for cover and others ran out onto the street. The first officer to attempt an exit had been gunned down, and now his body lay just outside the door.

For the hundredth time that day, Grant's thoughts returned to a single notion: *Why is this happening to me?*

The shooting paused, and Grant knew instinctively that the sniper—Konrad, no doubt—had stopped to reload. Depending on the model, there should be somewhere between five and twelve seconds before the shooting resumed.

Grant blinked.

How do I know that?

No time to figure it out now, Grant labored onto his haunches and threw Julie's limp, unconscious form over his shoulder. With his new body, she felt almost weightless. He took off down the hallway she'd just emerged from, a corridor without windows that paralleled the street outside.

The gunfire and chaos continued behind him, but it faded as he made a left, and then a right. He found himself at another entrance on the far right side of the building. Outside, he gently lay Julie on the grass and felt her pulse.

Alive. He scanned her for wounds, found none. Grant hoisted her up again and carried her toward the front corner of the building.

Peeking cautiously around the brick, he spotted a handful of black-suited officers illuminated by streetlamps aiming, pointing, yelling, running, barking into radios. One of them seemed to have spotted where the gunshots were coming from.

Grant's cab had vanished. He wanted to be angry, after all the money he'd given her, but what could he expect?

No transportation.

Cops everywhere.

And Konrad will start shooting again any second.

Now what?

Come on, you weird new reflexes! Kick in again and tell me what to do!

Grant ducked and pulled Julie farther away from the edge of the building as another shot was fired. He couldn't tell where Konrad had aimed this time, but he felt the need to be even farther away from the target area, all the same. It sounded like he had switched to a semi-automatic.

The policemen preparing to enter the Gondo Center were pinned down. Every time one of the men in black got close to the building, more shots would ring out, sometimes connecting with a leg or an abdomen. One fell and pulled himself to safety. Another fell and did not move. Only a pair of policemen remained able to fight, but they were taking cover behind vehicles.

Running out of time. . . !

Approaching the building was a red Jeep with no side doors and its canvas top missing. The Jeep had stopped at the sight of the drama playing out in front of the police station, and Grant seized the opportunity.

He climbed into the vehicle's passenger side, laid Julie across the backseat, and muttered a "sorry" to the stunned young man in the driver's seat as he kicked him out the other side. The boy rolled on the ground, but Grant didn't wait to see what happened next. He dropped into the driver's seat and gunned the engine.

He'd nearly made a clean getaway when the big cop in the blue trench coat burst through the front door and stopped in front of the car, his gun leveled at Grant's head.

"Let 'er go!" he shouted in a pinched voice, his free hand clutching his opposite shoulder, which was bleeding.

But Konrad chose that moment to start firing again, and the cop turned his attention to the faraway window and fired his pistol in that direction instead.

Grant swerved around the cop and immediately heard a shout of "Hold it!" from behind.

He didn't.

Julie moaned again. She was waking up.

Daniel Cossick had seen some strange things in his life—stranger than most could claim—but there were no words for what he was seeing at this moment.

Midnight had come and gone, and he'd just tracked down the source of the second shimmer at last.

Stepping across fresh yellow police tape, he tentatively touched the knife that was wedged into the subway station column. It had dug all the way into the cement, stopped only by its hilt from going in any further.

The subway was far from empty at this time of night, but no one seemed to care that he was taking a closer look.

He was surprised the police hadn't tried to remove the thing from the wall.

Or maybe they *had*, and couldn't.

"What is it? What do you see?" Lisa squawked eagerly in his ear, making him jump.

When he'd settled, he replied quietly, still examining the knife.

"Exactly what we're looking for. Something impossible."

Daniel took a step forward and leaned in close to the weapon, getting as close an impression of it as he could. It looked rather heavy. Probably at least nine inches in length, handle to razor-sharp tip. The hilt was solid and had a comfortable, form-fitted grip.

This was no pocket toy casually left behind. To whoever owned it, this was something of great value. It would not have been left here by choice.

Daniel knew there was little chance of removing it, but he couldn't resist trying. He gripped it with gloved hands, and after glancing around the station to make sure no one was looking, gave it his best King Arthur tug. It was a pointless exercise.

"What does *that* mean?" Lisa asked.

Daniel turned to see the other roped-off area on the opposite side of the tracks. Spots of dried blood were visible on the ground. He twisted

to face the pillar in front of him once more.

“It means the Threshold has been breached,” he answered somberly, stepping away from the column but never looking away from the knife. “And all bets are off.”

Grant drove. For hours, much of the time not realizing where he was going.

He had no destination in mind; he just wanted to get Julie away from danger. Eventually he took the 405 to Rosa Parks and then headed east back to the glow of downtown. Traffic buzzed even this late but never bogged down. He almost took the exit back to his penthouse but dismissed it. It was too dangerous.

The stolen Jeep finally came to a stop almost of its own volition at a small park called Hollenbeck Lake. Sunrise was still an hour or two away and Grant tucked the Jeep as far from streetlamps as possible. His mind should've been whirling, trying to decide what to say to Julie when she fully came to, but exhaustion overtook him and he fell into a fitful sleep.

He roused, chilled, when a glint of dawn peeked off to the east.

Julie made groggy noises from the backseat, and Grant carefully scooped her up into his arms, struggling under the weight on his bad leg. Her pocketbook still drooped over one shoulder. He glanced around frantically and spotted a park bench at the edge of the lake.

Even at daybreak he was unsurprised to find a small handful of runners already there, circling the water. Fitness always came first in L.A.

Grant placed Julie gently upon the bench, just as her eyes began to flutter open. He sat opposite her and steadied her, holding her upright.

She looks so tired . . .

Her eyes focused at last, and she screamed.

“Listen to me, Julie—” he started, letting go of her.

“Who are you! What—”

“Julie, listen! You *know* me! You know who I am!”

She was in danger of hyperventilating, but she said nothing, both terror-filled eyes trained on him, taking in his bloodstained, battered appearance. “I—I do?”

Grant was breathing rapidly, too, his thoughts coming faster than his tongue could handle. “I wish I could do this differently,” he spoke hurriedly. “But we don’t have time. We won’t be safe here for long.”

Still she looked at him. He forced himself to breathe more slowly as he gazed into her eyes—those eyes he knew so well, so deep, the skin around them creased by long years of tears and laughter. What a life she’d led . . .

He was suddenly overcome with emotion, sitting next to her for the first time in years. And she looked at him with such intense fear.

He took one last, slow, unsteady breath.

“Julie, I’m Collin. I’m *your brother*.”

She stood up from the bench, and began backing away from him. Anguish filled her eyes.

She started to say something, but nothing came out. Instead, she just shook her head, unblinking.

Grant stood. “It’s the truth. I know you don’t recognize me—I don’t even recognize me—but I *am* the man you knew as Collin Boyd.”

“I’m calling the police right now,” she said. She pulled a tiny phone out of her pocketbook. She started to dial and turned and walked away from him.

Grant stood and swallowed. If he couldn’t convince her now, then they had no chance. There was no time for this. Konrad would be coming. What could he say that she would believe? One obvious thing came to mind, but he’d been avoiding that conversation for twenty-some years . . .

She was still moving away, nearing the shoreline.

There was no choice.

“The day you left the orphanage,” he called out, “was the worst day of my life.”

Grant had never spoken aloud these thoughts that had tumbled

through his mind so many times. The gravity of the moment struck him just then, and his words came out slowly.

Julie stopped walking. Her fingers paused over the phone, but she didn't face him.

"You held me *so* tight before they took you," he gasped, his throat full. "I was *terrified* when you let go. I tried not to show it. For you. I didn't want to make it worse." A tear built up in one eye, and then tumbled down his face. "I knew you felt bad. Maybe worse than I did. But I was *petrified*, Julie."

She stared off into the increasingly bright sky, blinking back tears of her own.

"I never knew Mom. I barely remember Dad. You were the only family I had left."

"This is cruel," she said, shaking her head, still not looking at him. "You're lying, you *heard* this—!"

"You *begged* your new parents," he went on, barely able to choke back his own tears now. "*—pleaded* with them to take me—adopt me, too. But they live in Seattle and they could only take one of us."

She spun around, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't believe you," she shouted. "Collin lives in Glendale; he's probably there right now. You *can't* be him!"

His gaze fell, too pained to meet her eyes. "The next time I saw you, four months had passed. *Four months*, Julie. You said you'd tried to visit sooner, that you asked them about it every day." The tears were falling freely now. "But by then it was too late. You *forgot* about me."

"That's not true! I could *never*—!"

He sniffled and continued, "I know . . . now. I know. But I was lost without you." His breaths came in heaves, and he finally raised his eyes again. "When you left at the end of that first visit—you whispered into my ear. Do you remember what you said?"

She watched him warily, hopefully.

"You told me that when we dream, we go to a special place where anything is possible. You said we would make this our—"

"Our safe house," Julie whispered, finishing for him.

"Where we could meet and play together every single night," Grant concluded. "I went there every night in my sleep, or tried to . . . But even there you never came."

Julie's phone fell to the ground.

Crying openly, a hand over her mouth, she walked back to him, staring into his eyes. She stood only inches from him, watching him. Wanting to believe, but dazed and confused. At last her expression softened. "You were always there in *my* dreams," she said softly.

They both took choked breaths and then embraced hard, rocking back and forth, holding tight, as morning glowed gold and green all about them.

They never wanted to let go.

"So what do we do about all this?" Julie asked. After he didn't say anything, she prodded. "Collin?"

They were back in the Jeep, and downtown L.A., unusually glossy and clear, beckoned them from dead ahead.

"Grant."

"What?" she asked, distractedly.

"I'm still your brother, but I . . . I'm not Collin anymore. There's too much . . . I can't . . ." His voice, his entire manner had changed. He was focused and severe, but frustrated and tired, struggling for words. "My name is Grant."

"All right, whatever."

Over the last hour at the park, Grant had filled her in on everything that had happened during the last twenty-four hours. All it had done was open a door to questions he couldn't answer.

Creeping ahead in the morning traffic, Julie finally asked the big question. "How can this be possible?"

"Wish I knew."

"So whoever is after me . . . you think it's the same guy that tried to kill you?" Julie asked.

"Hope so."

"That's an odd thing to hope for."

He massaged his forehead. "It would mean I only have one enemy to worry about. On the other hand, maybe there are dozens of people out there hunting me down. I'm willing to bet that what they're after is *this*." He held up the ring. "Or maybe Konrad is just trying to drive me insane. And maybe it's working."

She took a deep breath and shook her head. None of this made

sense to her. How could it? None of it made sense to *him*.

"This guy . . . he's never going to give up, is he?" she asked, fearful. "He'll just keep coming, no matter what we do."

"He won't give up."

"Then . . . what do we do?"

"We have to force his hand."

"And just exactly how do we do that?"

"We go where he'll expect me to go next," he said. "And we *finish* this."

She looked at him, alarmed. He saw her shiver, slightly. "Are you *sure* you're my brother? You don't talk like him. Or *think* like him."

"We can't go back to the police," Grant explained as if it were obvious. "You're obviously not safe there, and they'd never believe my story. They think I kidnapped you."

"Which, technically, you did," she agreed.

"Look, I don't know *how* I'm suddenly able to strategize and make with the big plans, but I need you to trust me. Konrad has the advantage. He can pick us off from anywhere if we slow down long enough to give him the chance. So our only option is to engineer a situation where *we* have the advantage."

She studied him, nonplussed. "You're going to draw him out into the open by being *bait* yourself." It wasn't a question; it was disapproval.

"It'll be all right," said Grant, a deadly glint in his eye. "I'll take care of you. I promise."

"It's not me I'm worried about. And I'm not talking about what this Konrad person is capable of, either. You said *you* nearly killed *him* yesterday afternoon."

Grant made no response.

Julie proceeded with caution. "I know you've had . . . episodes . . . in the past, but you were doing better, weren't you?"

"I was," he said, exasperated. "It was just . . . it felt *natural*. I reacted without thinking. I just knew how to stop him. I knew exactly where and how to hit him to knock him unconscious. I don't know how . . . I just knew."

"And aside from this instinct stuff, you've had an hour of sleep in what, thirty-six hours now?"

“What do you want me to *say!*” shouted Grant. “Am I tired? Yes! Am I on edge? *Yes!* Am I a danger to myself? Maybe. To others? Probably! But this guy’s not going to stop to let me get some shut-eye, so unless you have a better idea . . .”

She looked away, out her side window. They inched forward in silence for a few minutes. The morning had already gotten hot and without the Jeep’s top, the sun beat down. Grant soon felt badly about his outburst, but anger and frustration were the only sources of energy he had left. He’d apologize later. For now . . .

“Will you kill him?” Julie spoke up in a small voice.

“What?”

She wouldn’t look at him; still she stared out her window, squinting into the brightness, though he thought he saw a tear falling down her cheek in her reflection. “Will you kill him?” she repeated. “Can you really do that?”

He didn’t answer.

Grant insisted they wait until nightfall before making another move. They hid the Jeep and spent the day taking cover in tiny Mestizo restaurants, dark bars, and even a library. Anything to stay out of sight. When night fell, they returned to the Jeep and headed to their destination, pulling up to an old brick apartment building in Glendale, where Grant—*Collin*—had lived for the last seven years. It looked exactly as it always had, though it seemed a little smaller to him now.

Grant stared straight ahead at the apartment, unmoving. The sun was a distant memory now, not to be seen again for hours, and the darkness outside echoed the fear creeping in around them.

“Scared?” Julie prompted.

He nodded, fatigue and anxiety contorting his eyes.

“Me too,” Julie admitted. She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“I, uh, . . . I need to know something,” he delicately announced.

“Okay,” she replied tentatively.

“Did you ever blame me for what happened to Mom?”

Julie shifted in her seat. “How can you even *ask* that? Of course not!”

A pause. “Then why didn’t you ever talk about her? To this day, I hardly know anything about Mom at all.”

Julie looked away, paused. “I guess it was too hard.”

“And Dad?”

She was silent.

“Did he blame me?”

“*Never*,” she answered, without hesitation.

The car became as still as the sleepy neighborhood outside. The question had eaten away at Grant in his waking hours for years. All alone in his most vulnerable moments, he would allow himself to think about it for brief snippets of time, before throwing the usual walls back up in front of his emotions.

Sometimes he even cried.

“Thanks,” he replied weakly.

“Dad once told me,” Julie said suddenly, thoughtfully, “that you were going to be . . . *different*. He said he thought you might grow up and do *important* things, things different from what most people do.”

Grant was taken aback. “Why would he say that?”

She thought for a moment, straining her memory. “I forget why, but he had your mental acuity tested—this was only a few months before he died.” Her voice sounded far away, as she thought. “I remember him saying that your test results were ‘off the charts.’”

“You’re kidding. But I was only three.”

“I know,” she affirmed.

His mind raced. “Thanks for telling me. I had no idea.” He took a deep, shuddering breath and blew it out.

“You can do this, Coll—um, Grant. *Whoever* you are, I know you better than anyone and you’re stronger than you think you are.”

“Sure,” he said, despondent.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her digging through her purse. She produced a tiny pocket knife attached to a keychain. Before Grant could stop her, she folded out the knife and cut a slash across her wrist.

“Julie!” he cried, grabbing her by the arm.

She used her free arm to take a similar swipe at his wrist. It was then he noticed that the cuts were too shallow to sever a vein; the “knife” was little more than a fingernail clipper attachment. The gashes produced just a tiny inkling of blood, surrounded by angry-looking pink swaths of skin, on both of their wrists.

He watched as she pressed her open wound against his. “There, now we’ve made a pact.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Whatever,” Julie replied, undeterred. “It’s a pact made in blood, so

you can't break it. I'm going to hold you to it."

Grant studied her. "And exactly what are we . . . pact-ing?"

"Never surrender to anger or despair, no matter what. Never give up; never give in."

Grant wanted to laugh at how absurd all of this was, but Julie wouldn't let go. "*Promise me,*" she said.

"Fine, okay," he said. "I promise."

At Grant's instructions, Julie was to park the Jeep three blocks down the street, turn off the engine, and wait for him there.

He took a deep breath and limped toward the building's front door. He no longer had the keys to his home, of course—like everything else, that other man, the new "Collin," now had them. So he veered to his left, around the side of the building, and looked in his ground-floor apartment window. One glance inside the darkened space told him that his double wasn't home.

Grant took what was left of the gauze out of his pocket and rolled it around one hand and fingers, like a boxer wrapping his fist.

This will either be very butch, or very bloody.

With a quick snap, he punched straight through the bottom middle window pane. It broke loudly, the shards falling into a crinkled heap on the carpet inside. He waited, watching the building's other windows to see if any lights came on. Nothing.

He snaked a hand inside and unlocked the window, slowly pushing up on the frame. The old window groaned and creaked, resisting his efforts. His thoughts returned to all the times over the years he'd attempted to open this same window from the inside, to get some air, and he could never get it to budge. Now, with his newly muscular frame, he could manage it.

Grant hopped up and crawled into the tiny living room, and then pushed the window closed again. He didn't bother turning on the lights. As small and unremarkable as the apartment was, he knew it well, even in the dark. Once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he glanced around and noted that everything was exactly as it had been when he'd left for work yesterday morning.

Creeping down the hall past the door to the bedroom, he made sure his doppelganger wasn't asleep or hiding. No one there. He ventured

back into the hall and checked the bathroom. Nothing. The closet across from the front door still held his scarf on a hook, exactly as he'd left it yesterday. The kitchenette around the corner was also clear. Even his coffeepot still held the dregs from his last dose of caffeine.

Grant walked from one end of the apartment to the other, and wound up back in the small living room, where he'd entered. It looked like Collin—this new Collin—hadn't even been home yet.

But Grant's curiosity lasted only moments before he heard someone fumbling with keys outside the door.

The lock spun, the door opened, and Collin stepped inside.

He didn't notice Grant at all. He turned and walked in the opposite direction, into the bedroom. A lamp came on, its light shining into the hallway.

Carefully and quietly, Grant stood. He flinched as the pain in his leg returned with a sharp twinge. He stole down the hall, careful to avoid the places in the floor that creaked. Peering around the open bedroom door, he saw Collin frowning into a large, horizontal mirror that hung on the opposite wall.

Grant quietly walked up behind him and looked at him in the mirror. "How was *your* day?" he asked breezily.

The man tensed, but didn't turn. Instead, he gazed at Grant in the mirror. Grant had expected some kind of reaction, but "Collin" merely sighed and shook his head. He sat down on the edge of the bed, still watching the mirror.

Grant observed him for a moment, puzzled, and then the pain in his leg convinced him to have a seat, too.

It felt abnormal, and yet not, at the same time, as they sat there, side-by-side, watching one another in the mirror.

Grant broke the silence. "Do you want to start, or should I?"

They held eye contact.

"They didn't think you would come back here," Collin said. His voice sounded so odd; Grant wasn't used to hearing it from the outside.

"Sure," Grant replied, nodding slowly.

A pause. Neither of them blinked.

"But I knew you would. I said so. No one listens to me."

"I know the feeling," said Grant.

Another pause.

"Looks like you had difficulty getting here," Collin commented, sizing up Grant's bruises and bloodied leg.

"Yeah."

"Then it's a shame you'll be leaving empty-handed. I can't help you."

"Actually," Grant replied, "you've *already* helped me. Until now, I had no idea if you might be some kind of victim in this, just like me. Or if you were involved. Now I know. Things aren't looking especially good for you."

The thought of beating his former self to a bloody pulp sounded oddly appealing just now. Why not just finish himself off? Do the world a favor . . .

"I didn't do this to you," Collin said.

"Then who did?" Grant's voice gained strength.

The other man just stared at him.

"How did it happen? How can this be real?" Grant cried.

"It shouldn't be," Collin looked away. "But it is."

Grant stood, his pulse rising.

"Who are you?"

"No one."

Grant stepped an inch closer, his pulse rising.

"You're me. Just like that. Does that mean I'm *you*?"

Collin shook his head. "That's not how this works. I'm . . . just a . . . volunteer," Collin replied, and then looked up at Grant. "I'm no one important. You're different."

Grant swallowed. "Someone today told me I was a 'player,'" he paused, brow furrowed, studying the other man's reactions. "What are we playing? Am I a pawn in someone's twisted game?"

"I don't know. Please, Grant, for both our sakes, you've got to leave here and never come back."

Grant snapped.

"*What is this?*" he roared. He felt like putting the man's head through the mirror. "What is going on?!"

"I don't have any answers for you," Collin replied, speaking slow and calm. "I don't know the extent of your role."

Grant's head sagged. He rubbed his eyes.

"But if I were to guess," Collin suddenly added, and Grant's head

popped up, "I'd say you're much more than a pawn. A knight, maybe. Maybe more."

Grant was breathing fast, thoughts and questions shifting through his brain. Tears formed in his eyes, but he angrily fought them back.

"I want my life back!" he said.

Collin rolled his eyes. "Sure you do . . ."

Collin's head whipped violently to the side and Grant was surprised to see that he'd just delivered a brutal backhand across Collin's face. He'd never consciously decided to hit the man; it just came out, along with a primal scream of rage.

"Switch us back!" he shouted.

Collin stood, anger rising in his voice. "Look at this place! You live a solitary life in a tiny apartment. No friends. No family. No connections of any kind. You make less money than you deserve. Your entire *existence* is miserable, and *you know it!* I've had it for less than two days, and I'm ready to *let* you finish me off. Why on earth would you want to come back to *this?*"

Grant was stunned.

Only one answer came to mind. "It's who I am."

Collin was unmoved. "Are you sure?" He paused. "Think about it. You've been given a second chance. It's a blank slate. Do you know how many people would *kill* for what's been handed to you? Grant, this is your chance to live the life you *should* have had."

The notion that this could be a desirable situation had never entered Grant's mind. It barely registered now. "I want to know who did this to me. You *must* know."

Collin nodded. "I'm sure you'll run into them, when the time is right."

"Are 'they' the same ones who hired this man to kill me?"

"No, but I heard about him." He cast another glance at Grant's bloodied pant leg. "Konrad is a contract killer. A single-minded mercenary. I don't know who sent him, but his interest in you doesn't extend beyond his payment. And believe me when I say, he *always* gets paid."

Grant held up his hand, and his eyes fell down upon the ring. "Would his payment include this?"

Collin eyed the ring and smiled a humorless smile.

"Just tell me what it is," Grant said imploringly. "*Please.*"

Collin cocked his head to one side and gazed at him carefully, as if seeing him for the first time.

“It’s the answer—”

Something burst through the bedroom window. It flew straight into the mirror, shattering it into hundreds of shards that flew everywhere.

Collin grabbed Grant and pulled him down to the floor.

Coming to a rest next to them both was a broken liquor bottle with a rag sticking out of its hole. The rag was soaked and on fire. Some part of his brain registered that the crude weapon was called a Molotov cocktail. It was an old but effective and inexpensive trick.

The bottle’s contents spilled onto the floor, and with a soft *whoosh* the carpet was ablaze. Before they could react, another bottle sailed through the open window and hit the bed. It too was soon covered with flames.

Grant and Collin ran from the room, more bottles raining in after them. As one, they darted for the apartment door. Collin grabbed his cell phone on the way out and dialed 911, shouting into the phone as they ran through the outer hallway.

At the building’s front entrance, Collin burst through the main door first, looking back over his shoulder at Grant.

“It’s *him*, come on—!”

They both jumped at the sound of gunfire.

Grant instinctively flung himself down on the floor, just inside the door, covering his head with his hands, as more shots were fired from outside. Collin flew back into the doorway and thudded onto the ground. Grant peered over at him. Collin was lying across the threshold, his chest and arms inside and his legs outside. He made no movement, but his weight kept the old steel door from shutting itself.

Blood pooled beneath him.

The gunshots stopped. Grant peeked carefully outside. Konrad stood below the front steps, his gun trained and leveled, waiting for Grant to appear in the open doorway.

It was a silent challenge.

Instead of accepting, Grant pulled on Collin's hands, dragging him out of the doorway. Once Collin's body had cleared the entrance, the door shut itself. It was self-locking.

Grant stood and looked down at Collin's body.

His body.

The blood that had once run through his veins was quietly spilling out onto the floor. It had streaked across the threshold, making a trail where Grant had dragged him.

It should have been me, he thought.

Maybe it is me.

Death had come for him, but it hadn't recognized him.

Grant jumped when the man lying on the ground moaned.

"Grant," he whispered. Grant dropped to his knees and put his ear next to Collin's face. "The ring . . ." he wheezed. "The ring is the answer . . ."

"To what? To my questions?" Grant asked desperately.

Collin shook his head resignedly. "To *the* questions. The only *real* questions that have ever *mattered*."

Konrad resumed his gunfire from outside. There were no holes in

the big steel door. But Konrad was undeterred. He began pounding on the door with something heavy.

Grant estimated that he had only a few minutes. Maybe seconds. The man outside was terribly strong. Focused. Determined.

And probably not too happy about that whole subway station thing.

“Grant,” Collin whispered.

Grant looked back down at him, as the hammering continued.

“Take this. You should keep something . . . from your life . . .” he said, gesturing vaguely with his wrist. It took Grant a moment to realize that he was talking about the bracelet. The one his grandfather had worn and then passed to Grant’s father. Grant inherited it after his father’s death. It was handmade, roughly cut from a brass shell casing fired during World War II.

Collin slowly removed the bracelet and dropped it into Grant’s inside jacket pocket. Grant felt the weight of it drop into his coat, but made no attempt to put it on.

Not now.

The front door was dented. Grant turned to the hallway leading back to his old apartment and saw the orange glow of flames dancing among shadows. The entire building would soon be burning; he was out of time.

He allowed himself one last glimpse of Collin. The man’s chest was no longer rising and falling.

Tears formed behind Grant’s eyes again, but he wiped his face furiously. *No no no!* Whoever this man had been, he’d just given his life trying to save Grant’s. Blinding anger welled up within him.

He stood to watch the door. The pounding had stopped.

“You can’t stay in there, and you know it!” Konrad shouted through the door. From the sound of it, only the steel and a handful of inches separated the two of them. “You’ll be burned alive if you do!”

He’s not wrong, Grant thought. But what was he supposed to do?

“Come out,” Konrad lowered his voice, “and I’ll finish it quick.”

Grant’s face burned red. He was breathing fast now, his mind at full speed.

“Or if you want,” the man said, “just open the door, and we can do this where it’s *warm.*” Konrad chuckled.

Grant leaned down to Collin one last time, and grabbed the cell

phone from his hand, which was still clutching it. He put it in his outer jacket pocket and then faced the door, standing tall.

“Then come!” he called.

He turned and walked away, down the burning hallway.

The pounding resumed.

“Wake up!” came a shout in Lisa’s cheerful voice.

Daniel started, then rose slowly. He’d been slumped over his desk, asleep. Papers stuck to his arms and face, and he carefully peeled them off.

“Lisa,” he said groggily, “I pay you for research, not,” he yawned, “arrhythmia.”

It was dark and quiet outside. The digital clock on his desk read 5:08 A.M.

“You said you wanted to know when I had the results on the knife tests,” she said, with raised eyebrows.

He sat up straight, alert, adjusting his glasses. “Right. What did you find?”

“Come look,” she said with an air of mystique.

He stood and followed her down the hall to the large laboratory that housed all of their experiments. She followed the right-side wall until she came to a small device hooked up to a tiny television monitor, which was showing wavy, green lines moving rapidly across its black screen.

“When I input the readings you took of the knife,” she said, stopping at the monitor, “this is what I got. I would have told you sooner, but I wanted to make sure it wasn’t an equipment malfunction.”

Daniel focused on the monitor, brow tightened. He glanced at her and then back at the screen.

“What am I looking at?”

“The knife,” she replied matter-of-factly.

He frowned, silent. Then he shook his head.

“I expected matter readings,” he said with the air of a college professor, “which look nothing like this. This seems more like—”

“Waves of energy,” she finished. “Yeah.” She merely stared at him, unflinching.

He was silent a moment.

“You’re telling me the knife is *radiating* energy?”

“Not quite. Whether it still is or simply was last night when you took the readings, I couldn’t say,” she replied, followed by a deep breath. “But these readings were not emanating *from* the knife. They *are* the knife.”

He stared at her. “That can’t be right.”

She nodded slowly, smiling again, eyebrows raised. “I know.”

Grant waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but they never did. There was nothing to adjust *to*. Everywhere he looked was black.

The loud pounding against the door continued in the distance, but then suddenly stopped with a crash.

He’s in.

Grant listened carefully for the sound of footsteps, for any sound at all. But there was nothing. The stench of smoke filled his nose, and he fought the urge to cough.

He craned his head closer to the door, listening carefully, so carefully. He held his breath so he could hear.

The floor creaked nearby. His muscles stiffened.

But then there was nothing except the soft, distant sounds of flames. He relaxed and took a thick, smoke-filled breath.

The door to the tiny broom closet burst open, and Konrad stood on the other side. His gun was inches from Grant’s chest.

Konrad’s forefinger wrapped around the trigger and tensed. “It’s time I got paid,” he said, smirking.

A loud gurgling sound came from around the corner, in the kitchen. Konrad turned, startled for a fraction of a second by the bubbling coffee pot. Which was exactly what Grant was waiting for.

He flung his hand straight into Konrad’s face, splashing what remained of the peroxide from the drugstore into the mercenary’s eyes. Konrad screamed in pain, both hands covering his eyes, and Grant slugged him as hard as he could in the stomach with his other fist. The short man doubled over, down on his knees, roaring in agony and clawing at his face.

Grant dropped the small brown bottle from his hand and kicked Konrad once more in the gut for good measure. Then he ran.

But he only took a step or two before Konrad’s powerful hand

wrapped around his ankle—the ankle attached to his wounded leg. Grant yelped in pain and went down face-first onto the floor.

He recovered quickly, kicking backward at the other man with his free leg. But Konrad was crazed, unflinching. His eyes were a mess, and he was bearing down, transferring all of his pain to the powerful grip he had on Grant's leg.

Grant wiggled and kicked with his whole body, but it was like being held in stone. Grant twisted and looked in front of him on the floor. The carpet was in flames, a bonfire only inches from his face.

There was nowhere to go.

Grant looked back at the fire on the floor in front of him again.

Konrad's grip tightened further.

A scream escaped his lips, as if it would help. The apartment door to his left flew open with a wooden *crack*, seemingly of its own accord. How Grant longed to run through it, he was only a few feet away . . .

But it was no good. The liquid fueling the flames rolled closer and the fire came with it, close enough for the heat to burn Grant's face and hair.

The liquid!

Grant snapped his head to the right and saw an unbroken bottle that Konrad had flung through the windows.

Intense heat burning his skin was all he could feel as he strained hard to wrap his fingers around the bottle's neck.

And then he had it. He twisted around sharp and fast, and with all of his remaining strength, he brought the bottle down from over his head to crash against Konrad's skull. Blood and liquid fire snaked down through the unconscious man's dark hair and across his face.

The last thing Grant saw of him was Konrad's blistered, broken scalp in flames. Forcing himself to his feet, he coughed through the smoke as he surveyed the place. There was nothing more to be done here. The flames had spread everywhere. Out in the hall, into the other apartments. Everything that he had ever owned was going up in flames.

He couldn't seem to care.

In the distance, he heard sirens, bringing questions that he had no answers for.

He made his way out of the apartment, delirious and unsteady on

his feet, but still careful to avoid the flames. They spread faster now, out into the hall, and then out the building's front door and into the night. Julie brought the Jeep to a screeching halt a few feet away and he fell into the back, utterly spent.

"What happened?" she shouted. "Are you okay?"

"If I ever . . . get my hands on . . . the person who did this to me," he panted, on the brink of unconsciousness, "*I'll kill 'em.*"

Two days later, across town at Grandview Cemetery, a closed-casket funeral was held for Collin Boyd—for this man who had become the man Grant once was. It was an outdoor service on a brisk, windy day, with just a handful of white folding chairs containing occupants. Julie attended, tears quietly streaming down her face throughout the entire event, but Grant told her he "just couldn't do it." Watching *himself* be buried . . . It was too much, he said, after everything he'd been through the last few days.

But despite his insistence that he would sit this one out, he'd found his way here anyway. He watched the ceremony from a distance, amid a stand of trees on the east side of the cemetery.

The reverend presiding over the funeral had delivered an unusual message. Grant couldn't quite make it all out—something about "a life that's wasted."

Long after everyone had gone and night had fallen, Grant still stood in his spot by the trees, watching the casket sink into the ground. The loud clacking of the coffin mechanically lowering was the only audible sound in the graveyard.

But he could barely make out the wooden box through his red, bleary eyes.

He was consumed with emotions, thoughts, and regrets. This wasn't just his body that was descending into the ground. It was everything he had been, the life he had known. It was gone, all of it. Forever.

He had always coveted his private life. Being by himself was the only time he found peace. But it was also the source of his greatest turmoil.

He was grateful to have his sister as a part of his life again. But even with her there, even though he was used to relative solitude . . . For the first time since childhood, he felt utterly, terrifyingly *alone*.

Collin Boyd was gone. Dead and buried. Grant Borrows was who he was now.

There was no going back.

Everything he thought he understood about life had changed, in less than an instant. The rules of science and nature and human existence were broken. He couldn't be Collin Boyd anymore, but he had no desire to be Grant Borrows, either.

All he really had to call his own were the questions.

So many questions.

Am I living someone else's life? he thought uselessly. *What right do I have to live a life that isn't my own?*

Shouldn't that be me going into the ground?

He studied the coffin as it went lower, lower, lower, until it was beyond his ability to see.

Standing alone in the silent darkness, Grant could keep his feelings in check no longer, and he was tired of trying. He broke down, his battered body collapsing into a shuddering heap on the ground, his shoulders shaking violently.

The sound of his sobs filled the graveyard.

But there was something . . .

What was that?

A faint glow caught his attention between haggard breaths. The ring on his finger had become radiant. It was diffuse, like a light shining deep underwater.

It was shimmering.

Miles away, far outside of town, a middle-aged woman with a serene presence and silver hair stood alone in a darkened room.

All of her attention was focused on the ancient object lying on a table in front of her. She studied it with tremendous mental focus, memorizing its every groove, crevice, and pattern. Her finger ran gently over it, rubbing the scarred, craggy surface.

Something in the room began to glow softly. Her eyes shifted to the source of the light as a smile spread across her features.

"At last," she proclaimed, standing upright, "the Bringer has come."

INTERREGNUM

“PHASE ONE COMPLETE,” said a voice hiding behind a pair of slumped shoulders that slouched before a bright computer monitor. The computer and its user were accompanied by dozens of others just like them, lining the outer walls of the shadowy room.

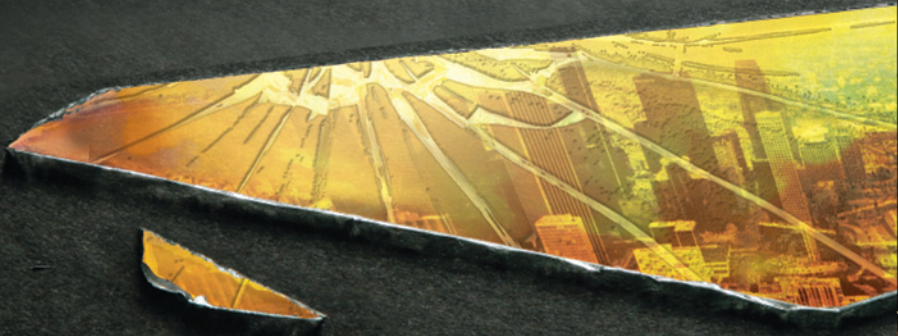
A single reply came from a voice somewhere near the center of the vast room. It was a deep, booming voice, punctuated with unmistakable authority.

“Activate Phase Two.”

“Yes sir,” the computer technician replied without taking his eyes from the screen. “Making the call now.”

"I finished *Relentless* with nothing less than sheer admiration....
[Parrish] stands without question among the greatest writers of our generation."

— **JAMES BYRON HUGGINS**, author of *The Scam* and *The Sorcerer*



**IN THE SPACE OF A BREATH, WHAT HE
THOUGHT WAS HIS LIFE... SHATTERED.**

Grant Borrows has been Shifted— in the silence between heartbeats, his whole life fundamentally altered. There's another man in the world wearing his face and living his life. What's more, the man staring back from his mirror is a stranger.

But the changes don't stop at skin-level. Inexplicably, he has new instincts and abilities he struggles to harness. And as he soon learns, he's become the central figure in a vast web of intrigue that stretches from an underground global conspiracy to a prophecy dating back over seven thousand years. Enemies and allies find him at every turn, but one thing they learn all too soon is that you don't want to push Grant Borrows too far...

CAN DESTINY BE UNDONE?

THE PLAYERS ARE READY. THE GAME IS IN MOTION.

AND THE PACE IS: *RELENTLESS.*


BETHANYHOUSE

US \$13.99

FICT Fiction/Suspense

ISBN 10: 0-7642-0345-2

ISBN 978-0-7642-0345-9



5 1399



9 780764 203459

www.bethanyhouse.com