

# Begin Reading

I WAKE UP on a pile of smoldering garbage and leaves in the old Hollywood Forever cemetery behind the Paramount Studio lot on Melrose, though these last details don't come to me until later. Right now all I know is that I'm back in the world and I'm on fire. My mind hasn't quite kicked in yet, but my body knows enough to roll off the burning trash and to keep rolling until I can't feel the heat anymore.

When I'm sure I'm out, I struggle to my feet and shrug off my leather jacket. I run my hands over my lower back and legs. There's no real pain and all I feel are a couple of blisters behind my right knee and calf. My jeans are a little crispy, but the heavy leather of my jacket protected my back. I'm not really burned, just singed and in shock.

I probably hadn't been on the fire too long. But I'm lucky that way. Always have been. Otherwise, I might have crawled back into this world and ended up a charcoal briquette in my first five minutes home. And wouldn't those black-hearted bastards down under have laughed when I ended up right back in Hell after slipping so sweetly out the back door? Fuck 'em for now. I'm home and I'm alive, if a little torn up by the trip. No one said birth was easy, and rebirth would have to be twice as hard as that first journey into the light.

The light.

My body isn't burning anymore, but my eyes are cooking in their sockets. How long has it been since I've seen sunlight? Down in the asshole of creation, it was a dim, perpetual crimson-and-magenta twilight. I can't even tell you the colors of the cemetery where I'm standing because my vision goes into an agonizing whiteout every time I open my eyes.

Squinting like a mole, I run to the shade of a columbarium and crouch there with my forehead on the cool marble walls and my hands over my face. I give it a good five or ten minutes then lower my hands to let my eyes get used to the bloody-red light that seeps through my lids. Little by little, over the next twenty or so minutes, I open my eyes, letting in minute amounts of glaring L.A. sun. I mentally cross my fingers and hope that no one sees me hunkered down against the wall. They'd probably think I was crazy and call a cop, and there wouldn't be a damned thing I could do about it.

The muscles in my knees and legs ache before I can open my eyes all the way and keep them open. I sit down against the cool building to take some of the strain off. Though I can sort of see now, there's no way I'm marching off into full daylight for a while. Instead, I stay in the shade and take stock of things.

My clothes are burned, but wearable, if you ignore the burning garbage smell. I have on an ancient Germs T-shirt that my girlfriend lifted from a West Hollywood vintage shop for me, worn black jeans with holes in the knees, a pair of ancient engineer boots, and a battered leather motorcycle jacket, strategic points of which are held together with black gaffer's tape. The heel of my right boot is loose from when I'd kicked the living Jesus out of some carjacking piece of shit after he dragged some screaming soccer mom to the pavement at a stoplight. I hate cops and I fucking hate goody-goody hero types, but there is some shit I will not put up with if it happens in front of me. Of course, that was back then, before my trip down under. I wasn't sure what I'd do if I saw the same scene today. I'd probably still put a boot into the car thief, but I don't know if I'd let him walk away.

Right now there's something more important on my mind—the fact that these are the exact clothes I

was wearing when I got demon-snatched. When I'd hit the pavement down under I'd been naked. That got me my first big laughs, stumbling around trying to find my footing before I puked myself in front of an audience of fallen angels. After that, the laughs were mostly about my physical abuse and humiliation at the hands of one devil dog or another. Trust me on this—Hell is a tough room.

It's been a long time since I've seen these clothes. I go through my pockets to see if there's money or anything useful. There's not much. There's nothing in my pockets but twenty-three cents and an empty pink matchbook with the name and address of a Hollywood bail bondsman printed on it. I don't even have the keys to my apartment or the old Impala my father left me.

I feel just above my right ankle and a genuine wave of happiness hits me. The black blade is still there, strapped to my leg with strips of basilisk leather. I put my hand over my heart and can feel the chain under my T-shirt and the fat gold Veritas coin that hangs there. The fact I'm on Earth at all means that I still have the key to the Room of Thirteen Doors, even though I can't touch it or see it. So, I managed to smuggle three things back with me from Hell. That's no small feat. Of course, none of it alters the fact that I have no money, no ID, no wheels, my clothes are half burned off, I don't have a place to stay and no real idea where I am, except for the fact that this tombstone trailer park looks and feels like L.A. I'm off to a damn good start. I'll be the first hitman in history who has to panhandle for bullets.

I make my way slowly, still half blind, to the front gates of the cemetery. Near them, I cup my hands in the water flowing from the top of a contemplation fountain. I take a drink and splash water onto my face. It feels as cool and perfect as a first kiss. Right then it hits me. This isn't some devil's illusion, a glamour or some game designed to crush my spirit. *I'm really home.*

So, where the hell is everybody? Outside, I catch sight of the one thing I've been hoping to see. North from where I'm standing, in the distance, are the big white letters of the Hollywood sign. Perched high on the dirty brown scrub hills, it's never looked so beautiful. In the other direction, toward Melrose, a car hisses by every now and then, but there are way too few. And there are no people on the street at all. There are some small houses off at an angle from the cemetery gate. The green lawns are decorated with lights, plastic reindeer, and an inflatable snowman. Wreaths on a few doors across the street. *Holy shit, it's Christmas.* For some reason, this strikes me as the funniest thing in the universe and I stand there laughing like an idiot.

Someone slams into me hard from behind. The hilarity ends abruptly. I spin around and I'm face-to-face with a young executive type. Brad Pitt's stunt double handsome, with a haircut and black double-breasted jacket that together cost more than my car. Where the hell did he come from? I've got to shape up. Downtown, no one would have been able to creep up on me like that.

Brad Pitt takes a couple of stiff steps back. "What the fuck?" he yells, like it's my fault he walked into me. It's not that hot out, but he's sweating like a racehorse and his movements are quick and jerky, like a broken windup toy. He looks at me like I just killed his dog.

"Calm down, Donald Trump," I say. "You ran into me." He wipes his upper lip with the back of his hand. There's something tucked in his palm, and he's so twitchy he drops it. Brad starts to lunge for it, but takes a step back instead. Lying on the sidewalk between us is a plastic bag with about a hundred little ice-white cocaine rocks inside. I smile. Welcome to Christmas in L.A. Say hi to Saint Nick loading up for a party I'll definitely be skipping.

I look back at the guy, and before I can say anything, he reaches into his jacket. I latch onto his arm just as the stun gun comes out. I snap his wrist back and twist outward, taking him off balance and

slamming him hard onto the pavement. I didn't even think about it. My body just went on autopilot. Guess some part of my brain must still be working right.

Brad Pitt isn't moving. He went down on the stun gun and it's still jammed into his ribs. I kick the thing away and touch the side of his neck. Even out cold, his pulse is fast. Who says crack isn't good for you? He's wearing a small Christmas tree pin on his lapel. This makes me think about Christmas more, about being somewhere without friends and how I could use a Secret Santa of my own right now. I figure that my new friend is about as close to a Good Samaritan as I'm likely to find outside a cemetery off Melrose. I quick check to see that the street is still clear, pocket the stun gun, and then drag him into the cemetery, behind some hedges.

Turns out, the guy is Santa, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny all rolled into one. His eel skin wallet is fat with hundreds, at least a few grand worth. Even though the twitchy son of a bitch was so ripped on coke and paranoia that he tried to electrocute me for nothing more than standing on the street, I feel a small twinge of guilt as I rifle through his pockets. I've done a lot of questionable things in my time, but I never actually mugged anybody. Not that this was technically a mugging. Brad Pitt here attacked me. In another time, helping myself to this guy's gear would just fall under the heading of "Spoils of War." Besides, I need this stuff. I'm back with nothing. No friends that I know of and no real plan.

I help myself to his cash, his Porsche sunglasses, an unopened pack of Black Black gum, and his jacket, which is a little tight across the shoulders but not too bad a fit at all. I leave him my half-burned leather jacket, his credit cards, car keys, and the big bag of Christmas crack. I'll just add this incident to the list of sins I'll have to atone for later. Ten minutes back on Earth and I'm already adding to the bill.

I crack open the pack of caffeinated gum and chew a piece as I walk. I can't seem to get the taste of burning garbage out of my mouth.

It feels like I'm walking on someone else's legs, wobbly and disconnected. I trip over a couple of curbs and almost jump out of my skin when I step on a squeak toy some kid left in the street. Chuck Norris, I'm not. But the blood starts flowing and my legs start feeling like part of my body again. Other than that, I'm not walking with any purpose or direction. I want to go home, but what if Azazel has sent up some of his pet spiders—the bloodsuckers as big as rottweilers? I'm not ready to face that just yet. I pull the chain out from under my shirt and unclip the Veritas coin.

The Veritas is about two inches wide, silver and heavy. Around the edge in Hellion script it says home sweet home. Good. It's awake and snotty as ever.

One side of the coin is stamped with the image of the morning star—Lucifer—and on the other side is a round, many-petaled flower sort of like a chrysanthemum. It's an asphodel, a Hellion word that translates as "evensong." The flowers sing hymns that the fallen angels used to sing in Heaven. After belting out off-key hosannas all day, getting all the words wrong, they strangle themselves with their roots every evening and die. The next day, they resurrect and start all over again. This has been going on down there for probably a million years and most Hellions still think it's a knee-slapper. Hellion humor doesn't travel well. Plus, except for Lucifer and his generals, most of Hell's troops make the Beverly Hillbillies look like the Algonquin Roundtable.

Holding the big coin on my thumb and forefinger, I flip it thinking, *Hollywood or home?* The Veritas comes down asphodel side up. That's it, then. The Veritas never lies and gives better advice than most people I know. I put it back on its chain and turn north for Hollywood.

It's over a mile to the Boulevard. I'm exhausted by the time I get there, and the payoff isn't exactly what I was hoping for. Sometime while I was gone, Hollywood Boulevard had a nervous breakdown. Vacant storefronts. Trash dissolving in the street. Nothing but ghosts here—shadows of runaways and dealers huddled in padlocked doorways. I remember the Boulevard full of wild kids, drag queens, manic Dylan wannabes, and tourists looking for more than their next fix. Now the place looks like a whipped dog.

I'm beat from walking on these stranger's legs and I'm sweating in Brad Pitt's jacket. I should have taken the idiot's car. I could have left it on the Boulevard, safe and sound. Though, more likely, I'd have tossed the keys to one of the street kids slouched against the buildings, just to see if there was any life left inside some of those dead eyes.

Walking deeper into Hollywood, I pass Ivar Avenue and see a funny sign flanked by burning tiki torches. BAMBOO HOUSE OF DOLLS, it says. I remember the name. It's an old-school kung fu movie with a women-in-prison twist. I saw it when I was Downtown. The devil steals cable. Who knew?

The Bamboo House of Dolls is cool and dim inside, and I can take off Brad Pitt's sunglasses without wanting to faint. There are old Iggy and Circle Jerks posters on the black-painted walls, but behind the bar it's all palm fronds, plastic hula girls, and coconut bowls for the peanuts. There's no one in the place except for the bartender and me. I grab the stool at the end of the bar, farthest from the door.

The bartender is slicing up limes. He pauses for a second to give me a nod, the knife loose and comfortable in his right hand. That other part of my brain kicks in, sizing him up. He has close-cropped black hair and a graying goatee. He looks big under his Hawaiian shirt. An ex-football player. Maybe a boxer. He realizes I'm looking at him.

"Nice jacket," he says.

"Thanks."

"Too bad the rest of you looks like you just dropped out of the devil's asshole."

Suddenly I'm wondering if this is some Hellion setup, and if I can reach Brad Pitt's stun gun or my knife in time. He must see it on my face because he gives me this big deer-in-the-headlights grin and I know that he was kidding.

"Relax, man," he says. "Bad joke. Looks like you had a shitty day. What are you drinking?"

I'm not sure how to answer that. Yesterday, I'd been hunting for water that sometimes dripped through the ceilings of limestone caves under Pandemonium. Mostly I drank a Hellion homebrew called Aqua Regia, a kind of high-octane red wine mixed with a dash of angel's blood and herbs that made cocaine seem like Pop Rocks. Aqua Regia tasted like cayenne pepper and gasoline, but it was there and I could hold it down.

"Jack Daniel's."

"On the house," says the bartender, and pours a double.

There's strange music playing. Something odd and tropical, with fake bird chirps every now and then. There's a CD case on the bar. A Hawaiian sunset on the cover and the name "martin denny." I put the chewed Black Black in a cocktail napkin and sip the JD. It tastes strange, like something a human might actually drink. It washes the last of the garbage taste away.

"What the hell is this place?"

"Bamboo House of Dolls. L.A.'s greatest and only punk-tiki club."

“Yeah, I always thought L.A. needed one of those.” I’m in a bar, but something’s missing. “I forgot my cigarettes. Think I can borrow one?”

“Sorry, man. You can’t smoke in bars in California.”

“When did that happen? That’s ridiculous.”

“I agree completely.”

“At least I’m home for Christmas.”

“Close. But you missed it by a day. Didn’t Santa bring you anything?”

“This trip, maybe.” I sip my drink. So, not Christmas, after all. Just Christmas enough to keep the streets deserted so no one saw me crawl home. Lucky me.

I ask, “You have today’s paper?”

He reaches under the bar and drops a folded copy of the *L.A. Times* in front of me. I pick it up, trying not to look too eager. Can’t even read the headlines. Can’t focus on anything but the date at the top of the page.

*Eleven years.* I’ve been gone eleven years. I was nineteen when I went Downtown. I’m practically an old man now.

“You have any coffee back there?”

He nods. “That’s how you missed Christmas. A lost weekend. I’ve had a few of those.”

The coffee is beautiful. Hot. A little bitter, like it’s been brewing for a while. I pour the last of the Jack Daniel’s into it and drink. My first perfect moment in eleven years.

“You from around here?”

“I was born here, but I’ve been away.”

“Business or pleasure?”

“Incarceration.”

He smiles again. A normal one this time. “In my reckless youth, I did six months for boosting cars. What were you inside for?”

“I’m not really sure, to tell you the truth. Mostly wrong place, wrong time.”

“That’ll put a smile on your face.” He refills my coffee cup and pours me another shot of JD. This bartender might be the finest human being I’ve ever met.

“So, why’d you come back?”

“I’m going to kill some people,” I tell him. I pour the Jack into the coffee. “Probably a lot of people.”

The bartender picks up a rag and starts wiping glasses. “Guess someone’s got to.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“I figure that at any given time, there’s probably three to five percent of the population that are such unrepentant rat-fuck *pendejos* that they deserve whatever they get.”

He’s still wiping the same glass. It looks pretty clean to me. “Besides, I get the feeling you might have your reasons.”

“That I do, Carlos.”

He stops wiping. “How did you know my name was Carlos?”

“You must’ve said it.”

“No, I didn’t.”

I look over his shoulder, at the wall behind the bar. “That trophy on top of the cash register. ‘Carlos, World’s Greatest Boss.’ ”

“You can read that from here?”

“Apparently.” The thing with his name popping into my head? That was weird. Time to go. “What do I owe you?”

“On the house.”

“You this nice to every aspiring assassin who wanders in here?”

“Only the ones who look like they just crawled out of a burning building and didn’t even get their jacket dirty. And I like repeat business. Maybe now you’ll come back sometime.”

“You want someone who, like you said, just fell out of the devil’s asshole as a regular?”

“I’d love it.” He looks away, like he’s trying to think of the next thing to say. “There are these guys. White boys. All tattooed, like Aryan Nation or some shit. They’re coming around, wanting money for protection. A lot more money than I can afford with a little bar like this.”

“And you think I can do something about them.”

“You look like someone who might know what to do in a situation like this. Who wouldn’t be . . .” That look again, groping for words. “You know . . . afraid.”

I could tell it was really hard for him to say that. Is this why the Veritas sent me here? I’m back a couple of hours and already I’m into karmic payback? And with the carnage I have planned, but haven’t even started? No, that didn’t make any sense.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I can help you.”

“How about this? Free drinks. Free food at night, too. Good burgers, ribs, tamales. You eat and drink free until the end of time.”

“That’s a really nice offer, but I don’t think I can help you.”

He looks away and starts wiping glasses again. “If you change your mind, they come on Thursdays, in the afternoon, when we’re getting deliveries.”

I get up and head for the door. When I’m halfway there he says, “Hey,” and slides something down the bar at me. It’s a pack of American Spirit browns, the nonfiltered kind. There’s a pack of matches tucked under the cellophane wrap.

“Take them,” he says. “I can’t smoke in here, either.”

Slipping on Brad Pitt’s shades, I ask, “You have anymore of these back there?”

“No.”

“You’re a hell of a first date, Carlos.” *Damn. When someone gives you his last cigarette, you owe him.*

Martin Denny bird chirps follow me to the door.

Turns out, I don’t need the shades for long. It must have been later in the day than I thought when I went into the Bamboo House of Dolls. As I leave, the sun is almost down and lights are coming on all along the Boulevard. I’ve always liked Hollywood better at night. The streetlights, headlights, and flashing signs outside the tourist traps blur away the straight lines and hard right angles that ruin the place. The Boulevard is only ever real at night when it’s both bright and black and there are promises hidden in every shadow. It’s like it was designed and built specifically for vampires. For all I know, it was.

Yes, there are vampires. Try to keep up.

I count to eleven as I walk deeper into Hollywood.

Eleven parking meters. Eleven hookers looking for their first post-Christmas trick. Eleven actors I never heard of on eleven stars in the sidewalk.

Eleven years. Eleven goddamn years and I'm home with a key and a pocketknife and a coin that won't buy me a cup of coffee.

Three, five, seven, eleven, all good children go to Heaven.

Gone eleven years and I make it back the day after Christmas. Is someone trying to tell me something?

I pull out one of Carlos's American Spirits and light up. The smoke feels good in my lungs. This body is starting to feel like mine again. Like me. I'm just not sure about the rest of the world.

Who the hell are all these people on the Boulevard the day after Christmas? How am I supposed to blend in with them? There's a nice guy at a bar a few blocks from here. He was just doing his job, but he had a knife in his hand and all I could do was count all the ways I knew to kill him.

It hits me then how unprepared I am for being back, how everything that made sense Downtown is strange here, wrong and ridiculous. All the skills I developed—how to draw an enemy in and how to kill, all the magic I'd learned or stolen—suddenly feels feeble and foolish in this bright and alien place. I'm steel-toed boots in a ballet-slipper world.

I finish off the first cigarette and light another. The world is a much louder and stranger place than I remember. I need to start doing and stop running around screaming inside my own head. Brooding is for chickens, as my first-grade teacher used to say. Or maybe it was Lucifer. Homily reciters all kind of run together for me.

I need to concentrate on what's important, like my sure and certain plans to find and kill, in as painful a way as possible, the six traitorous snakes who stole my life. And something worse. It makes me weak inside to think about it. It's a woman's face.

Her name is Alice. She's the only bright thing I ever loved, the only person I ever met worth giving a damn about. If Heaven ever meant anything, she should be married, probably now to some skinny leather-pants guitarist she has to support with temp jobs in those fluorescent-tube high-rise dungeons along Wilshire. Or she'd have gone straight, married a dentist, squeezed out a minivan full of crib lizards, and gotten fat. That would be okay, too. But none of those things are going to happen for her. Nothing nice happens to murdered women, except that maybe someone cares about how they got that way.

If Alice was still around, would she even recognize me under all these scars? There was a mirror inside the entrance to the Bamboo House of Dolls, but I'd been careful not to look at it. Walking along the Boulevard, I take quick glances at my reflection in the dim glass of dead store-fronts. I'm bigger than I was when I went down, heavier with muscle and scar tissue, but still thin by human standards. I can still recognize the rough outline of my face, but it looks more like stone than flesh. My cheeks and chin are chiseled out of concrete; my eyes are dark, shining marbles above lips the color of dirty snow. I'm a George Romero zombie, except I've never been dead. Just vacationing in the land of the dead. Suddenly I want to get my hands around the throat of fat Alice's imaginary husband and squeeze him till he pops like a balloon.

That stops me cold.

It's the first time I've fantasized about killing anyone outside the Circle. What a stupid and dangerous thought. Exactly the kind of thing that will steer me away from the real job and maybe get me killed. Then I'd be right back in Hell with nothing to show for it and wouldn't that be a lot of laughs?

That leads me back to the \$64,000 question: Why did the Veritas send me this way? It's interesting

being back on familiar turf, but I could have brooded back at the cemetery. That's why it's called a "cemetery." And I didn't need a bartender to offer me a job or give me free smokes. With a pocketful of Brad Pitt's hundreds, I'm Richie Rich with a knife in his boot. So, why am I here?

I'm walking and smoking on a block that's two open liquor stores, an empty secondhand bookstore, a dead record store, and a shuttered sex shop. As I'm speculating on how fucked up a town has to be when it can't even keep a dildo-and-porn shop open, the inside of my skull lights up like God's own pinball machine.

I have my answer. I know why I'm here.

He's turning off the Boulevard onto Las Palmas, waddling on his little legs a short way up the block to a place called Max Overdrive Video. At the front door, he has to juggle things for a minute—transfer a cup of coffee to one hand, grip the top of a bag of doughnuts in his teeth, and do a little ass dance so he can work the keys out of his pocket and let himself into the store.

I watch him from across the street, just to make sure that I'm not imagining things. As he enters the place, I get a nice backlit shot of his face.

It's Kasabian, one of my friends from the old magic circle. One of the six on my list.

Santa brought me something, after all.

Max Overdrive Video occupies both floors of an old Hollywood town house, the kind of weekend getaway kept by the gentry back in the forties and fifties, when this area was the most glamorous place in the known universe. Kasabian is moving around inside Max Overdrive like he owns the place. I think I should go and ask him if he does.

It's full-on night now and I'm surrounded by fat, ripe shadows. I cross the street and pick a plump, dark one around the side of Max Overload, next to a health food restaurant. I glance over my shoulder to make sure the street is clear, and when I'm sure I'm alone, I slip into the shadow. The key tickles inside my chest and I emerge into the Room of Thirteen Doors.

I cross to the Door of Ice and quietly step out of the shadow on the other side.

I'm in the far back of the store, in the porn section. The lights are off back here, so I get a good look at the rest of the place.

There's a door to an employee restroom on my right, tucked back behind the porn. Just beyond this section is a chained-off stairway leading upstairs. Neat racks of DVDs and bins of VHS tapes fill the rest of the store. I guess that's something that's changed in the last eleven years. Even the porn in the back is all discs. The only tapes I can find are piled carelessly in the sale bins. VHS is dead. This is something good to remember since I don't want to sound like the Beverly Hillbillies when I'm talking to regular people. I should sit down and make a list of everything I missed while I was gone. If you can't smoke in bars anymore, what other atrocities has the world committed?

Kasabian is up front, behind the counter, going over the day's receipts. He lost some hair while I was away, but he's made up for it by getting fat. He'd always been a little chubby, but now he'd taken on a truly odd shape. Not like one of those guys who grows a big belly and man boobs. He just seems to have expanded horizontally, like a balloon filled with too much air. It's admirable in its own weird way. His chin and gut are defiant in the face of gravity, making him look more like Frosty the Snowman than Orson Welles.

I walk slowly down the main aisle toward the counter, checking the corners of the room, making sure we're alone. Kasabian is deep in thought, crunching numbers. When I'm halfway to the counter, I take Brad Pitt's stun gun from my jacket pocket and hold it behind my back.

“Evening, Kas. Long time no see.”

He starts and knocks a pile of receipts to the floor. I stop where I know he can see me, but also where the lighting is weak enough that I’m pretty sure he can’t see my face.

“Who the fuck are you? Get out of my store. I don’t want any trouble.”

“It’s right after Christmas, Kas. Don’t you ever take a day off?”

“Everybody’s on vacation. Who are you?”

“Did you have a merry Christmas this year? Did you sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to baby Jesus? Maybe pick up something at Baby Gap?”

“What do you want?”

“Know what I did for Christmas? I cut a monster’s head off. Then I did the same thing to the guy who owned the monster.”

“You want money? Take it. It was a lousy day and I’ve already deposited all the Christmas money, so you’re shit out of luck there.”

Kasabian has been a drama queen from the first day I met him, so I can’t resist hitting him with a Vincent Price moment.

“I don’t want your money, Kas. I want your soul,” I say, stepping into better light to give him a clear full frontal.

It gets exactly the reaction I was hoping for. His mouth opens, but he doesn’t make a sound. One of his hands comes up to cover his open yap, stifling a silent scream. He steps back from the counter, his eyes wide.

Forgive me, God and Lucifer and all you angels high and low, but this is fun. This is an e-ticket roller coaster.

“Shut your mouth, Kas. You look like one of those blow-up sheep in the back of porn zines.” I stop about ten feet from the counter, just letting him feast on me. “What did you get me for Christmas? Right, you gave it to me eleven years ago. Damnation. The gift that keeps on giving.”

His hands are down now and he’s leaning on the counter like a drunk trying to decide whether to fall on his face or his back. I thumb on the stun gun.

“It’s okay. I know you don’t have anything for me. But I sure as hell have something for you, Kas. Climb up on Santa’s lap and I’ll show you.”

I take a baby step closer to the counter and Kasabian takes one back. Then he does the funniest thing. He raises his hands and there’s a gun there—a .45-caliber Colt Peacemaker. Wyatt Earp’s favorite gun. He gives me five of the six slugs in the chest and belly, completely ruining my moment.

I drop to my knees, vision going black. The stun gun falls to the floor and I follow it down. I can feel my lungs drawing in air. I can feel my heart beating. Both organs seem more than a little confused by what’s happening. Death is settling over me, soft and warm, like a down comforter fresh from the dryer. My heart stops.

SOMETHING FUNNY HAPPENED to me when I was Downtown. I got hard to kill. When I first arrived there, I was the first and only living human to ever set foot in Hell. I was a sideshow freak. Pay a dollar and see Jimmy, the dog-faced boy. Later, when they got tired of slapping me around, examining me, and displaying me like a pedigreed poodle, they thought it might be fun to watch me die. They made me fight in the arena and they made a big deal out of it. Imagine the Super Bowl every week or two.

Naturally, the location being Hell and the setting being an arena, there was a lot of cheating going on. Hellions don't like losing bets any more than humans. Before almost every fight, a bribed trainer or attendant would show up with a sneaky little gift. They slipped me special weapons. They gave me diabolical drugs. They whispered fiendish spells into my ears. It all helped, though it didn't make me Superman. I was knifed and speared. I was burned. I was almost torn in half by a giant crab-thing that bled fire and screamed in the anguished voices of all the souls it had devoured. My ribs and skull were beaten to Silly Putty.

But I didn't die.

I don't know if it was the spells, the drugs, the Aqua Regia, or just clean living, but I was changing. Every time I should have died but didn't, I got stronger. That meant that the next attack had to be harder, faster, even more ferocious than the one before. After a while, I actually looked forward to the beat-downs. Each one changed me and that change meant that I was immune from a similar attack next time. By the end, I was a flesh-and-bone, armor-plated Dirty Harry.

By the time the ruling-class, old-school Hellions and nouveau celebute fiends decided it was time to get rid of me, it was too late. I was too strong and by then I was doing more interesting things than killing in the arena. I was freelance-killing Hellions out of the arena, and that meant I was protected from on high by forces far darker than your run-of-the-mill tail-and-pitchfork type.

On the other hand, I'd never been shot before.

"Stark?" says Kasabian from a million miles away. "Is that really you?" He laughs quietly, nervously. "Mason is going to shit himself."

My left hand shoots to the side, grabbing the .45's still-warm barrel and driving it into the floor. Kasabian's fat finger is still looped in the trigger guard, so he comes down with the gun. Meanwhile, my right hand flickers to my boot and tears free the black bone knife. I twist my body toward Kasabian and bring down the knife in a smooth arc. Kasabian's head tumbles to the floor and rolls away like a pumpkin. His body flops to the floor.

From beneath the Disney new-releases rack, Kasabian's head begins to wail.

"Oh God! Oh Jesus, fuck! I'm dead!" It's quality wailing. Downtown, I became kind of a connoisseur of wailing and this is prime stuff.

"I'm dead! I'm dead!"

Crawling shakily to my feet, I pick up Kasabian's shrieking melon by the hair, tuck the .45 in the back of my jeans, and grab his leg by the ankle with my free hand. In a situation like this, when you want to clear away the evidence, you want to drag the body. You might think it's faster to toss it over your shoulder in a fireman's carry, but lifting a limp body is like wrestling with two hundred pounds of Jell-O. It wiggles, shifts, and refuses to stay still. Dragging is slower, but much less aggravating.

I carry Kasabian upstairs, his head still screaming blue murder and his heavy torso bumping along behind us.

The second floor is one big room. It's large, with a nice big window on one wall, but sparsely furnished. There's a bed, a couple of desk chairs, and a table piled high with tape decks, DVD burners, and a big color printer—a mini video-bootlegging factory. I drop the body by the door and set his head on the worktable. The gun I toss on the bed. Kasabian is still shrieking like a banshee, which is pretty good for a guy with no lungs.

I grab a chair and drop down in front of him. Digging the cigarettes out of Brad Pitt's now-bloody jacket, I light one up and blow smoke in Kasabian's face.