

ALREADY DEAD

A NOVEL

CHARLIE HUSTON



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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BALLANTINE BOOKS New York

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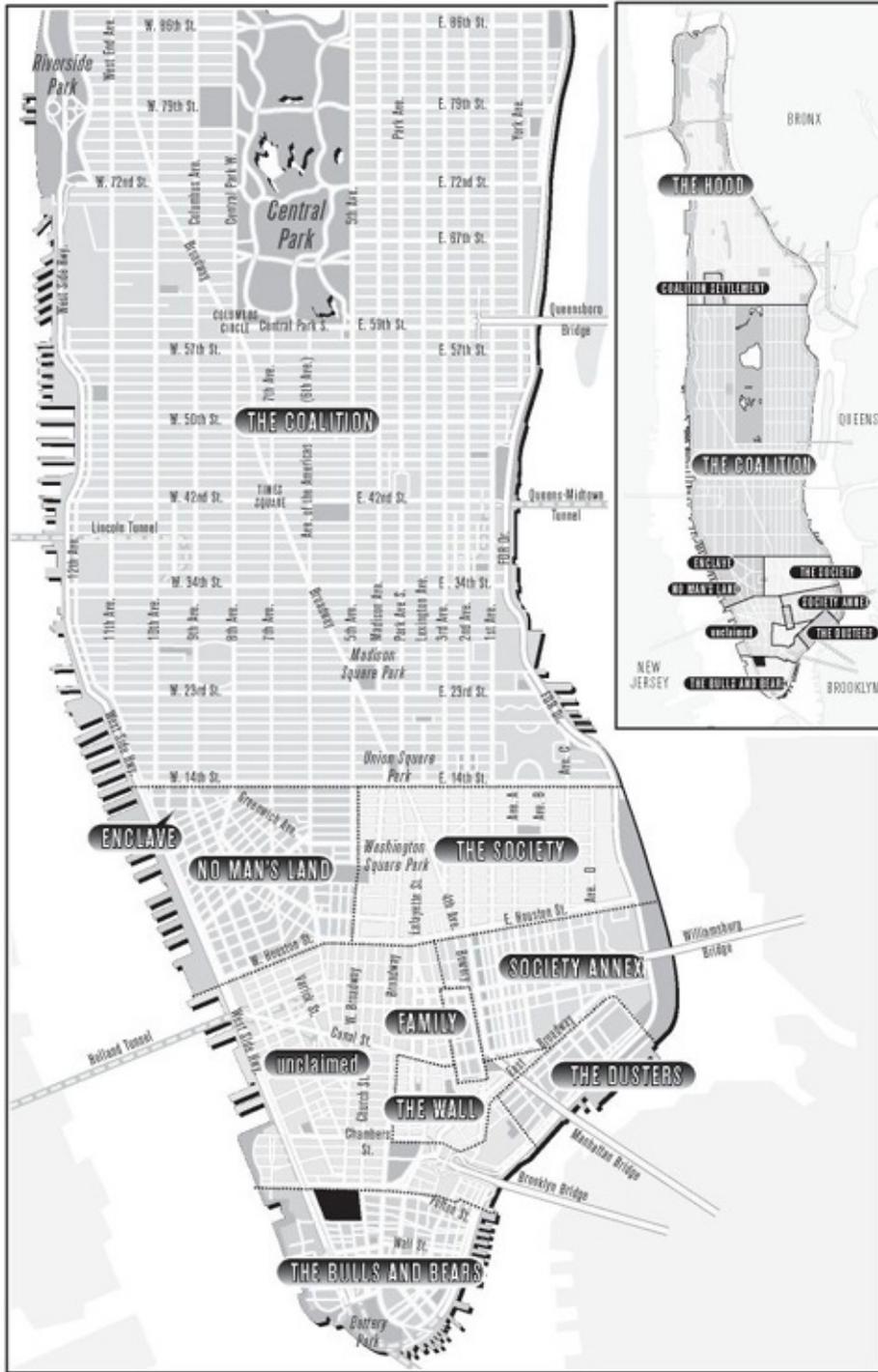
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For Casey Allen, Stephen Bond, Steve Gardner, Chip Harder, Eugene Rominger, Bob Stear, and all the odd and brilliant kids I used to sit around basements and diners with, imagining strange worlds.



ALREADY DEAD

I SMELL THEM BEFORE I SEE THEM. All the powders, perfumes and oils the half-smart ones smear on themselves. The stupid ones just stumble around reeking. The really smart ones take a Goddamn shower. The water doesn't help them in the long run, but the truth is, nothing is gonna help them in the long run. In the long run they're gonna die. Hell, in the long run they're already dead.

So this pack is half-smart. They've splashed themselves with Chanel No. 5, Old Spice, whatever. Most folks just think they have a heavy hand at the personal scent counter. I close my eyes and inhale deeper, because it could just be a group of bridge and tunnelers in from Jersey or Long Island. But it's not. I take that second breath and sure enough, there it is underneath: the sweet, subtle tang of something not quite dead. Something freshly rotting. I'm betting they're the ones I'm looking for. And why wouldn't they be? It's not like these things are thick on the ground. Not yet. I walk a little farther down Avenue A and stop at the sidewalk window of Nino's, the pizza joint on the corner of St. Marks.

I rap on the counter with the ring on my middle finger and one of the Neapolitans comes over.

—Yeah?

—What's fresh?

He looks blank.

—The pizza, what's just out of the oven?

—Tomato and garlic.

—No way, no fucking garlic. How 'bout the broccoli, it been out all day?

He shrugs.

—Fine, give me the broccoli. Not too hot, I don't want to burn the roof of my mouth.

He cuts a slice and slides it into the oven to warm up. I could eat the tomato and garlic if I wanted to. It's not like the garlic would hurt me or anything. I just don't like the shit.

While I wait I lean on the counter and watch the customers inside the joint. The usual crowd for a Friday night: couple drunk NYU kids, couple drunk greasers, a drunk squatter, two drunk yuppies on an East Village adventure, a couple drunk hip-hopppers, and the ones I'm looking for. There are three of them standing around the far corner table: an old-school goth chick, and two rail-thin guys, with impossibly high cheekbones, that have fashion junkie written all over them. The kind of guys who live in a squat but make the fashion-week scene by virtue of the skag they bring to the parties. Just my favorite brand of shitdogs all in all.

—Broccoli.

The Neapolitan is back with my slice. I hand him three bucks. The goth and the fashion junkies watch the two NYU kids stumble out the door. They push their slices around for another minute, then follow. I sprinkle red pepper flakes on my slice and

take a big bite, and sure enough it's too hot and I burn the roof of my mouth. The pizza jockey comes back and tosses my fifty cents change on the counter. I swallow, the molten cheese scorching my throat.

—I told you not too hot.

He shrugs. All the guy has to do all day is throw slices in the oven and take them out when they're ready. Ask for one not too hot and you might as well be requesting coq au vin. I grab my change, toss the slice back on the counter and take off after the junkies and the goth chick. Fucking thing had garlic in the sauce anyway.

The NYU kids have crossed the street to cut through Tompkins Square before the cops shut it down at midnight. The trio lags behind about eight yards back, walking past the old water fountain with *Faith, Hope, Temperance, Charity* carved in the stone above it. The kids reach the opposite side of the park and keep heading east on Ninth Street, deeper into Alphabet City. Great.

This block of 9th between Avenues B and C is barren, as in empty of everyone except the NYU kids, their trailers and me.

The junkies and the goth pick up the pace. I stroll. They're not going anywhere without my seeing it. What they want to do takes a bit of privacy. Better for me if they get settled someplace where they feel safe, before I move in.

They're right on the kids now. They move into a dark patch under a busted streetlamp and spread out, one on either side of the kids and one behind. There's a scuffle, movement and noise, and they all disappear. Fuck.

I jog up the street and take a look. On my left is an abandoned building. It used to be a Puerto Rican community center and performance space, before that it was a P.S. Now it's just condemned.

I follow the scent up the steps and across the small courtyard to the graffiti-covered doors. They've been chained shut for a few years, but tonight the chain is hanging loose below the hack-sawed hasp of a giant Master lock. Looks like they prepped this place in advance of their ambush. Looks like they may be a little more than half-smart.

I ease the door open and take a look. Hallway goes straight for about twelve yards then hits a T intersection. Dark. That's OK. I don't mind the dark. The dark is just fine. I slip in, close the door behind me and take a whiff. They're here, smells like they've been hanging out for a couple days. I hear the first scream and know where to go. Up to the intersection, down the hall to the right, and straight to the open classroom door.

One of the NYU kids is facedown on the floor with the goth chick kneeling on his back. She's already shoved her knife through the back of his neck, killing him. Now she's trying to jam the blade into his skull so she can split it open. The junkie guys stand by, waiting for the piñata to bust.

The other kid has jammed himself in a corner in the obligatory pool of his own fear-piss. His eyes are rolling around and he's making the high-pitched noise that people make when they're so scared they might die from it. I hate that noise.

I hear something crunchy.

The chick has the knife in. She gives it a wrenching twist and the dead kid's skull

cracks open. She claws her fingers into the crack, gets a good grip and pulls, tearing the kid's head open like a piece of rotted fruit. A pomegranate. The junkies edge closer as she starts scooping out clumps of brain. Too late for that kid, so I wait a couple seconds more, watching them as they start to eat, and listening to the other kid's moaning go up another octave. Then I do my job.

It takes me three silent steps to reach the first one. My right arm loops over his right shoulder. I grab his face with my right hand while my left hand grips the back of his head. I jerk sharply clockwise, pulling up at the same time. I feel his spinal cord tear and drop him, grabbing the second one's hair before the first one hits the ground. The chick is getting up off the kid's corpse, coming at me with the knife. I punch the second junkie in the throat and let him drop. It won't kill him, but he'll stay down for a second. The chick whips the knife in a high arc and the tip rakes my forehead. Blood oozes from the cut and into my eyes.

Whatever she was before she got bit, she knew a little about using a knife, and still remembers some of it. She's hanging back, waiting for her pal to get up so they can take me together. I measure the blank glaze in her eyes. Yeah, there's still a little of her at home. Enough to order pizza and pick out these kids as marks, enough to cut through a lock, but not enough to be dangerous. As long as I'm not stupid. I step in and she thrusts at me with the knife. I grab the blade.

She looks from me to the knife. I'm holding it tightly, blood spilling out between my clenched fingers. The dim light in her eyes gets minutely brighter as something gives her the word: she's fucked. I twist the knife out of her hand, toss it in the air and catch it by the handle. She turns to run. I grab the back of her leather jacket, step close and jam the knife into her neck at the base of her skull, chopping her medulla in half. I leave the knife there and let her drop to the floor. The second junkie is just getting back up. I kick him down, put my boot on his throat and stomp, twisting my foot back and forth until I hear his neck snap.

I kneel and wipe my hand on his shirt. My blood has already coagulated and the cuts in my hand have stopped bleeding, likewise the cut in my forehead. I check the bodies. One of the guys is missing a couple teeth and has some lacerations on his gums. Looks like he's been chewing someone's skull. Probably it belonged to the clown I took care of a couple days ago, the one with the hole in his head who tipped me off to this whole thing. Anyway, his teeth aren't what I'm interested in.

Both guys have small bites on the backs of their necks. The bite radius and size of the tooth marks make me take a look at the girl's mouth. Looks like a match. Figure she bit these two and infected them with the bacteria. Happens that way sometimes. Generally a person gets infected, the bacteria starts chewing on their brain and pretty soon they're reduced to the simple impulse to feed. But sometimes, before they reach that point, they infect a few others. They take a bite, but don't eat the whole meal if you get me. No one really knows why. Some sob sisters would tell you it's because they're lonely. But that's bullshit. It's the bacteria compelling them, spreading itself. It's fucking Darwin doing his thing.

I check the girl's neck. She infected the others, but something infected her first. The bite's been marred by the knife I stuck in her, but it's there. It's bigger than the others,

more violent. In fact, there are little nips all over her neck. Fucking carrier that got her couldn't decide if it wanted to just infect her or eat her. Whatever, all the same to me. Except it means the job isn't done yet. Means there's a carrier still out there. I start to stand up. But something else; a smell on her. I kneel next to her and take a whiff. Something moves behind me.

The other NYU kid. Right, forgot about him. He's trying to dig his way through the wall. I walk over to him. I'm just about to pop him in the jaw when he does the job for me and passes out. I look him over. No bites. Now normally I wouldn't do this, but I lost a little blood and I never got to eat my pizza, so I'm pretty hungry. I take out my works and hook the kid up. I'll only take a pint. Maybe two.

The phone wakes me in the morning. Why the hell someone is calling me in the morning I don't know, so I let the machine get it.

—*This is Joe Pitt. Leave a message.*

—Joe, it's Philip.

I don't pick up the phone, not for Philip Sax. I close my eyes and try to find my way back to sleep.

—Joe, I think maybe I got something if ya can pick up the phone.

I roll over in bed and pull the covers up to my chin. I try to remember what I was dreaming about so I can get myself back there.

—I don't wanna bug ya, Joe, but I figure ya gotta be in. It's ten in the morning, where ya gonna be?

Sleep crawls off into a corner where I can't find it and I pick up the damn phone.

—What do you want?

—Hey, Joe, busy last night?

—I was on a job, yeah. So what?

—I think ya made the news, is all.

Shit.

—The papers?

—NY1.

Fucking NY1. Fucking cable. Can't do shit in this city without them poking a reporter into it.

—What'd they call it?

—Uh, *Gruesome quadruple homicide.*

—Shit.

—Looks pretty sloppy, Joe.

—Yeah, well, there weren't a lot of options.

—Uh-huh, sure, sure. What was it?

—This thing I'm working on, brain eaters.

—Zombies?

—Yeah, shamblers. I hate the Goddamn things.

—You get 'em all?

—There's a carrier.

—Carrier huh? Fucking shamblers, huh, Joe?

—Yeah.

I hang up.

It's not like I didn't know leaving the bodies over there could cause trouble, I just thought they'd sit till I could clean things up tonight. Now the neighborhood's gonna be crawling with cops. But that's the least of my worries just now, because the phone is ringing again, and I sure as shit know who it's gonna be this time.

Uptown. They want me to come uptown. Now. In broad daylight. I put on the gear.

In winter this is easy, just wrap up head to toe, pull on a ski mask and some sunglasses and go. I'm not saying it's comfortable, but it's easy and you stay inconspicuous. I'll be OK once I get to the subway, but it's four blocks from here to there, and once I get uptown it'll be another few blocks to their offices. It's those blocks between the subway stations and the front doors I worry about.

I know a guy wears a white delivery-boy outfit with white latex gloves, a big wide-brimmed white cowboy hat, and zinc oxide all over his face. It keeps him pretty well covered, but even in Manhattan he gets looks. Me, I use a burnoose.

I pull on the boots, baggy pants and shirt, then the robe. The headpiece always gives me fits and I have to relearn how it wraps every time I do this. Once it's on and feels like it won't unravel and fall off, I slip on white cotton gloves, draw the veil across my face, put on my shades and head out. Sure I get eyeballed a bit, but who gives a fuck, no one can see my face.

What I do care about is getting to First and 14th fast as I can. Even with all this cover, even with it being white and reflecting the sunlight, even though it's only four fucking blocks, I'm still getting the shit burned out of me by the short-wave UVs. And this isn't like the cuts I got last night that close right up and are gone in the morning. This hurts like hell and is gonna take days to heal. And if a patch of bare skin should happen to get hit by some direct rays? Well, I just need to be careful that doesn't happen. So I walk fast and think about aloe and ice-water baths while my skin gets roasted and my eyes tear up behind my shades and I make it to the station and rush down the steps to the sweltering, but dark platform.

The uptown guys are making a point. They could say what they need to say on the phone. They could wait for dark to rip me a new asshole, but they want to make me burn a little. They want to flex and teach me a lesson for getting sloppy. That's what's on the surface anyway. The real reason they're doing it this way is because I still haven't joined the Coalition. And the truth is, I haven't joined exactly because of shit like this. But I did get sloppy last night, and someone is gonna swing for it. So I'll fry a little to keep them happy and to keep myself alive. Because I don't want to die.

Except, oh yeah, I'm already dead.

They have this building on 85th between Madison and Fifth. Nice piece of real estate. One of those anonymous brownstones that could be a consulate building or a discreet plastic surgeon's office. And, hey, right around the corner from the Guggenheim and the Met. Everything you want to know about these guys you can tell from the address: old, traditional, wealthy, powerful, and no fun at all.

I take the three steps up to the front door and press the button set in brass right next to the security camera.

—Yes?

—Pitt.

—Who?

—Joe Pitt. I have an appointment.

There's a pause and I slide into the sliver of shade available in the doorway.

—I'll need to see your face, Mr. Pitt.

—Are you kidding?

—I need to confirm your identity, Mr. Pitt.

This is choice. This is fucking brilliant. I hold the robe up over my head to shade my face and use my free hand to pull the veil quickly aside. I can feel the burn scorch my cheek and chin. I'll be bright red for a few days until it peels.

—Thank you, Mr. Pitt.

The door buzzes and I push it open and step into the foyer. It's a hardwood-and-muted-colors kind of a place. The weasel that made me strip is sitting at the security desk. I'd like to say that he's big, but that's just not the case. I'm big. This guy left big several workouts ago and has been living in huge ever since. He comes out from around the desk and looms at me.

—Sorry about the inconvenience, Mr. Pitt. May I take your things?

I pull off the robe and the headpiece and he takes them over to a coatrack while I check out my face in a mirror by the door. Yeah, I can see myself in the mirror, big deal. My face is a little pink just from being out, but there's a violent red streak across it from pulling open the veil. I can already see where the skin is turning white and flaking. It hurts like fuck. The steroid king comes back over and looks at my face.

—Hmm. I could get you something for that if you like. Some unguent or Bactine perhaps?

I stare at him.

—What happened to the guy used to be here?

—I'm sorry?

—What happened to the guy used to be here that knew who I was and didn't need to see my face?

—Oh, him.

The giant walks over to his desk and sits down so that he's back on eye level with me.

—He was executed.

No playful euphemisms around here, boy. No. *He was retired or dismissed*. Just get it out there, *He fucked up so we dragged him outside and staked his hands and feet to the ground and waited for the sun to come up and burn him dead from advanced skin cancer in about twenty minutes*. How do I know they did it that way? I said they were traditionalists. That's the way traditionalists do it.

—Too bad, he was alright.

Big boy just watches me.

—So any chance I can get in for my appointment? It's a really beautiful day out there and I want to make the most of it before it gets cloudy.

The giant picks up a phone and presses a button.

—He's here. I did. Thank you, sir.

He places the phone back in its cradle and points at the door across the foyer.

—Just up the stairs and to the right.

—Thanks.

I walk to the door and he presses a button on his desk to buzz it open. I stand there holding the door and turn back to him.

—Hey, who they got me seeing anyway?

—Mr. Predo will be meeting with you today, Mr. Pitt. Just up the stairs and to your right.

—Yeah, thanks.

I step through the door and let it swing shut behind me. Dexter Predo. Fuck. Predo is the head of the Coalition's secret police, and party chairman all rolled into one. He's the guy keeps everybody in line. He's the guy in charge of staking people out in the sun.

I take the stairs to the second floor. The stairwell walls are covered with portraits of great Coalition members from back a couple hundred years right up to the present. At the top of the stairs is a photo of the current Coalition Secretariat, the twelve members and the prime minister. But the truth is, most of the faces in this photo are the same as the ones in the first one down at the bottom of the stairs. Not a lot of turnover in the old Secretariat. Not pictured anywhere, Dexter Predo, a man who prefers to remain obscure.

The stairs reach up for three more flights, but I've never been asked beyond the second floor, and I'm not looking for an invitation. The upper floors are for Coalition members only. As it is I'm lucky my appointment isn't in the basement. I walk a short way down the hall to the first door on the right and knock.

—Come in.

Predo's office is modest as these things go. I mean, I'm sure all his little objets d'art are priceless, but it's not like he has a killer view of the park. Not that the shades would be up anyway. He's at an oak cabinet, pulling a file. Three guesses whose it is.

—Pitt.

—Mr. Predo.

—Please. Come in. Have a seat.

I couldn't tell you how old Predo really is, he looks about twenty-five, but he was around long before I was born. He looks up from the file, sees that I'm still standing and points to a chair in front of his desk.

—A seat, Pitt, have a seat. Be comfortable.

I sit, but I'm not comfortable, and it's not just because the chair is too small. Predo remains standing and flips through the pages of the file.

—Rough business last night, Pitt.

—Yes, it was.

—I don't suppose there was any way for you to reduce the damage?

—I don't suppose there was.

—You might have taken the time to destroy the evidence.

I look at my lap for a moment. He taps the edge of the file against the cabinet to get my attention back.

—The evidence, Pitt?

—That's a residential block, Mr. Predo. If I had torched the school the tenements next door would have gone as well. Bird and the Society would have been all over my back. Plus, there was the other kid still alive in there and all.

—I don't much care what Terry Bird and his ragtags have to say. And as for the kid? That was the evidence I was speaking of, Pitt.

I'm still wearing the white cotton gloves. I slip them off. The knife cuts on my left hand are just thin white traces now. By evening they'll be entirely gone. Predo gets tired of waiting for me to respond.

—Barring that, you might have rigged the scene. A murder-suicide perhaps.

—I'm curious, which one would have been the suicide? One of the shamblers with a broken neck? The chick with the knife in her brain? The kid with his head ripped open?

Predo pushes the drawer of the cabinet closed and walks behind the desk.

—The real question is how it got that bad in the first place. What was it that kept you from destroying the filth more cleanly?

—They were eating the kid's brain. I wasn't gonna wait until they gobbled the second one and went to sleep. I had to go at the Goddamn things while they were feeding. They fought back. It got sloppy. Next time I'll let them have the kid.

—*Sloppy* is an apt word, Pitt. It did indeed get sloppy, and has potential to get sloppier. The police are involved. And worse, the press. Such a grisly murder with *Satanic* and

supernatural overtones, how can they resist? It must be quelled, Pitt. It must be hushed before it draws too much attention and there are prying eyes. It is exactly the kind of business we avoid, Pitt. It is exactly the kind of business you are meant to take care of. It is why we tolerate your independence. And am I to understand that on top of this mess, there is a carrier involved? And that you failed to destroy that carrier?

Fucking Philip! I should have known. That prick never calls just to lend a hand.

—I'll take care of it tonight.

—How will you do that, Pitt, with your neighborhood crawling with police and newscasters and the curious?

—I'll take care of it tonight.

Predo stares at me. He drops the file on his desk and finally sits in his chair.

—You will need to. Tonight and no later.

I wait for it.

—We have found a patsy.

—There was a witness, you gonna change what he saw?

—No we are not, Pitt. We do not need to. The witness is our patsy.

I close my eyes.

—The child whose life you saved will now return the favor by paying the price for this *horrid crime*. He, of course, has not volunteered to do so, but the evidence we have arranged will make his guilt a foregone conclusion by sundown. But for it to stick, you will need to see that there are no further incidents of this nature.

I open my eyes and look at him. He raises a finger.

—Be useful, Pitt. Your value to the Coalition lies in your usefulness. Be useful and inconspicuous. Destroy the carrier.

I get up from my chair.

—I'm more than useful. I take care of my neighborhood and clean up all the trash the Clans don't want to deal with. So unless you've found another slob to handle your business below Fourteenth, stay off my back.

I head for the door.

—Indeed we shall. But for now, be assured that the cleaning of last night's mess will come with a price, Pitt.

—Yeah, just like everything.

I pull the door open.

—One more thing, Pitt.

I stop and stand in the open doorway, my back to him.

—From what I understand, the boy's veins had been tapped. He had been bled. Unusual behavior for zombies, yes?

I stand there.

—Remember what your mother told you, *finish everything on your plate*.

I walk out and close the door behind me.

He's right, of course. Tap some kid's veins, take a couple pints and leave him breathing? You might as well put up a sign that says VAMPYRES FEEDING HERE, COME AND KILL US. Of course most people who heard about something like that would just think it was freaky, but there are folks out there who know. And those are exactly the ones we don't want around. Which is why my apartment is so hard to get into.

At my place on 10th between First and A, I have to punch a code into the street door to get into the vestibule, then open two locks to get into the building hallway. After that my door is the first on the left. It looks normal, but it's a factory door I salvaged. I had to rebuild the frame with steel bolsters so it could carry the weight, but it was worth it. If you want to bust into my place your best bet is to go through the walls.

I open the three-key lock, turning all the keys in the right order to keep the alarm from going off inside. I step in, close and lock the door and enter the five-digit code into the keypad that rearms the system. No one would hear the alarm if it did go off, not the neighbors or the police or even me. All that would happen is the lights inside would flash on and off to tell me someone was trying to get in, and a beeper I carry at all times would start to vibrate. And if I was at home, I would wait for whoever it was to get in, and then kill them and drink their blood. But that's just me.

I walk down the short hall to the living room, take off the burnoose and toss it on the couch. I want to get cleaned up, but I don't go into the bathroom on my right or through the kitchen to the bedroom. Instead I go to a spot in the living room, bend down, flip up a small square of hardwood and pull on the steel ring hidden underneath. A large panel set into the floor swings up, revealing a short spiral staircase. I go down, pulling the panel closed behind me.

This is the basement apartment that I rent under another name. This is where I live. I have a bed, a bathroom, a dorm fridge, a hot plate, my computer, my stereo and my TV and DVD player. The door down here isn't quite as fancy as the one upstairs. I just sealed it by driving nails directly through the door-frame and into the door. But first I installed a kick panel in the bottom half, I can boot it out from the inside and wriggle through if there's ever anyone upstairs I don't want to deal with. I also have a small window at sidewalk level, but I've dry-walled over it so no damn Van Helsing can sneak in here and pull the curtains away and burn me to death while I'm trying to sleep.

I run the tub. While I'm waiting I go to the mini-fridge and check my stash. This is the extra fridge, in the closet, the one with the padlock. I pop it open and take a look. With what I tapped last night I have a dozen pints stored up. That's not a bad stash, enough for a month or more. But like any good junkie I'm always looking to lay in a little extra for the dry times. I don't need it now, I drank one of the kid's pints last night, but it will help with the burns, and I can afford to bogart a little. I take one of the plastic pint bags and go sit in the cool tub.

My entire body is dark pink, just a half shade from red. The strip on my face is fire-

engine and starting to peel. I sip from the pint. The taste of the blood uncoils things inside me. It oozes down my throat and I feel an instant tingling rush as the Vyrus that makes me what I am attacks the new blood and begins to colonize it. The burns ease up and I can almost see them lighten as I watch. I close my eyes, sip the blood and think about the zombies and how I'm gonna deal with this mess.

It's not like it's my job to kill zombies for Christ's sake. But the damn things are so sloppy until they fall apart that it's never a good idea to have them around attracting attention. Last week I caught the first sign that there might be a carrier down here.

It's just after sundown and I'm lounging in Tompkins, having a smoke, enjoying a sweltering summer evening. Normal shit, just like people do. I don't have a job at the moment, no money gigs, no errands for the Coalition or the Society, and no Good Samaritan crap. Just me on a bench puffing on a Lucky and thinking I might drift over to the Mister Softee truck and grab a cone. Then this squatter comes stumbling past me stinking to high heaven. Nothing unusual there, squatters all stink, and most of them are junkie freaks and expert stumblers as well. What tips me off on this guy is the bloody hole chewed in the back of his head.

I hop off the bench, wrap my arm around the squatter's shoulders and steer him toward a dark corner of the park. His head bobs around and he looks at me and gnashes his teeth a few times like he'd sure like to sink them into my noggin, but this guy is too far gone, just enough brain left to keep him on his feet for a couple days more. Once we get away from the dog run and basketball courts, I push him down on a bench and take a look at the back of his head. Whoever opened him up wasn't dainty about it. No tools on this job except maybe a rock. There's even a couple teeth lodged in the hole.

Zombies eat brains. It's their *raison d'être*. It's the thing that keeps them going. Rather, it's what keeps the bacteria that keeps them going, going.

They feed one of two ways. In the most popular scenario they eat the whole brain and whatever else looks yummy and they leave a corpse. That's not so bad. Zombies don't last long. They're too busy decomposing, their flesh being consumed by the bacteria. A straight-up feeder's gonna eat a couple people and fall apart soon, say a couple weeks at the outside. With a feeder, the worst case is they get distracted halfway through their meal and leave a guy with just enough brain to be able to walk around and cause some problems. Figure that's this guy here. He's leftovers. But sometimes you get a carrier, a zombie who bites their victim without feeding. Why? How the fuck should I know? To sow chaos and fear? To create confusion among zombie hunters everywhere? For fucking company? Figure mostly it's just to make more zombies. Who cares anyway? They're zombies for Christ's sake and when they pop up you got to rub 'em out quick. The alternative is to let them go around making messes and drawing attention. And the one thing we don't want is attention. And by *us*, I don't mean the undead or the damned. I mean the Vampyre, folks like me who are infected with the Vyrus. But that's a different can of worms.

So I had a shambler, not quite eaten. Might be a carrier out there, might just be a feeder that let his prey get loose. Regardless, this guy's gonna bum around for a few

days until he decomposes or someone else notices the not so subtle gaping wound in his head. So I had a choice. The wound was fresh, very fresh. With a little work I could trace this freak's scent back to where it intersected with the feeder's and then track that bastard down and squelch the whole deal right away. Or I could take the time to get rid of laughing boy before he got himself noticed. I opted for the latter. That was the prudent thing to do. Take care of the problem in front of you, then move on. So I did the prudent thing.

First, I wrap the squatter's head in a dirty bandanna I find in his pocket. Then I get him up off the bench, put my arm around him and start walking him east, swaying and lurching like we're just a couple of Tuesday night drunks out for a stroll. We walk all the way out to the East River Park. I plop him onto one of the benches facing the river and go get a bunch of rocks from the kiddy park just behind us.

It's the end of the exercise hours and people are jogging, biking and rollerblading past his face. He makes little lunges from the bench, but his motor skills are too eroded for him to catch any of that fit prey.

Kinda pathetic watching this chump gibber and drool while he jerks, and grabs at the sleek spandex shapes whizzing past. I'm tempted to trip one of the yuppies so I can watch his face while laughing boy crawls up on his back and starts biting through his scalp. But that's just the reactionary in me. Fucking yuppies are ruining my whole neighborhood.

I get my rocks, take them back over to the bench and start filling up the squatter's pockets. He paws at my head and tries to take a bite. I push his hands away and shove him back against the bench, kind of like trying to get a restless child dressed for school. Soon enough I have his pockets stuffed with stones. I get him up and over to the handrailing between the river and the path. We stand there like we're enjoying the view of Queens and the Domino Sugar sign. I wait for a break in the jogging path traffic. Then I wrap my arm around his waist, lean forward and flip him up and over the railing with a little hip toss. He splashes into the water. Maybe he makes a noise before the stones drag him under, but I couldn't say for sure.

Did he feel anything? Did he panic as the water filled his lungs? Probably. It's not like I'm out here doing mercy killings. This was a sponge job. Wipe up the spill and get rid of it. So I waited to see that he didn't bob up then I trotted over the pedestrian bridge across the FDR and caught a cab. Back in Tompkins I tracked the squatter's scent to a public garden on 12th where it got mixed up with the flowers and plants and children and families and I lost it.

Anyway, that's how I got into this current mess, being prudent.

After I get back from uptown and take my bath, I stretch out on the bed to catch up on the sleep I lost this morning, but my sunburn and memories of the scolding I took off Predo keep me awake. That prick is just like any one of my foster parents, or the youth authority counselors, or the cop of your choice. He likes putting people in their place, gets a charge out of it. And me? Every time one of his kind of prick tells me to shut up or sit down or get up against the wall it just makes my stomach bunch up and boil over

and I start saying things that get me into trouble.

Thinking about Predo reminds me that he knew about the carrier, knew soon enough to get a crew down here to rig the scene. And that makes me think about Philip. I slipped up and told Philip about the carrier this morning when I was still half asleep. And that gets me pretty fucking pissed at Philip. And why was Philip calling me first thing in the morning? It was like he already knew the mess was mine. Like maybe he had been following me around and maybe caught at least part of last night's action.

Philip is a turd. He's a toady weasel, likes to hang around and try to get close to the Clans or some of the Rogues. Makes him feel like he's connected, inside the velvet rope. Thirty years ago he would've been sucking up to the Studio 54 crowd. Of course he has no official status, no affiliations. He'd like to be infected, has a hard-on for the Vyrus, but the big Clans don't go in for that kind of thing, and he's too chickenshit to approach any of the small ones. Those small outfits are a little too unpredictable. Some Renfield like Philip shows up looking to be infected, they say sure, and the chump ends up tapped out and floating in the river.

But the Coalition has given him an unofficial sanction. He's just servile enough for them. They hand him some shitty errands that even I wouldn't take and they slip him some cash. He's not a *total* Renfield, mind you, not a full-blown bug eater. But that's just because a bug would look a little too much like food to this pill-popping, emaciated speed freak.

Anyway, it's Philip's connection to the Coalition that's gonna keep me from wringing his head off when I get my hands on him.

And it's not like the Coalition is all I have to worry about. I haven't even heard from the Society yet. When Terry Bird and that crew find out I was involved in this, there's gonna be hell to pay. And they will find out. Anything busts below 14th and Bird knows.

After the sun goes down I cover my burns in aloe and put on a clean pair of jeans and a loose black shirt. While I'm getting ready I flick on the TV to look at the news, and there he is, the kid from last night, the one didn't get his brain eaten.

Cops are leading him up the courthouse steps downtown. He's surrounded by a press mob. The announcer is telling me his name is Ali Singh and that he's a twenty-one-year-old marketing major at NYU. Ali is being charged with a couple of last night's grisly murders. The authorities suspect the others were committed by his victims. They're looking at the whole mess as some kind of ritual-cannibal-murder-suicide pact. A murder weapon with Ali's prints was found in his room along with Satanic materials and *trophies* from one of the victims.

Ali looks drugged; slack-faced and dead-eyed. Cameras are crammed in his face and flashes explode at point-blank range. It'll only take a week or two for him to be convinced that he did it. Another couple weeks of evaluation and the case gets pleaded to insanity and Ali spends the rest of his life in a facility for the criminally insane. Could have been worse. Could have been me.

I turn off the news and walk over to Niagara at the corner of 7th and A. It's about

nine and the place is dead, the hipsters won't start crowding in till eleven.

The bartender is a guy named Billy. He's floated around the East Village working the bars for the last nine, ten years. Far as he knows, I'm a kind of local tough guy does work for people who need it; some arm bending and maybe some PI type stuff. While back I bounced for a couple months at a place called the Road-house, Billy was working there at the time and we got to know each other a bit.

He comes cruising down the bar. Good-looking guy, thirtyish, wearing pleated gabardine pants, two-tone loafers, and a silk Hawaiian print shirt. Got his hair slicked back and tattoos of dice and eight balls and bathing beauties on his forearms. And as greasy a greaser as Billy is, he is far from the greasiest that'll be cramming into this greaseball haven come midnight.

—Yo, Joe, whaddaya know?

He stops; his face freezes.

—Jesus fuck! Whad happen ta yer fuckin' face?

—Tanning bed, those things are dangerous.

He blinks, slowly, a grin starting to tug the corner of his mouth.

—Yeah?

—Yeah, industry doesn't want you to know, but there are almost as many tanning-bed-related deaths a year as highway deaths.

—No shit?

—I barely got out, man.

He takes another look at the severe scorch on my face and nods his head.

—Bull.

—Sunlamp?

He squints his eyes. I hold up my right hand in pledge. He shakes his head.

—Hey, man, ya done wanna tell me, ya done gotta, but hey, done fuck wit' me.

I've been working on Billy's accent since I met him, and still don't know where the hell he's from. He claims to be Queens born and bred, but he sounds more like a French Canadian educated in Boston.

I shrug my shoulders in surrender.

—Kitchen accident. No shit, I fell asleep with my head in the microwave.

He laughs and wipes at the bar with the rag he keeps tucked in his belt.

—Yeah, baked ya fuckin' brains too, bub. Whad ya drinkin'?

Blood.

—'Bout a bourbon? Whatever's on the rail is fine.

—Heaven Hill comin' up.

He grabs a rocks glass and fills it with whiskey while I look the place over. The Niagara is skinny around the bar then opens up into a big back room, but that area is kept roped off until the crowd builds up later and the cocktail waitress comes on. No