

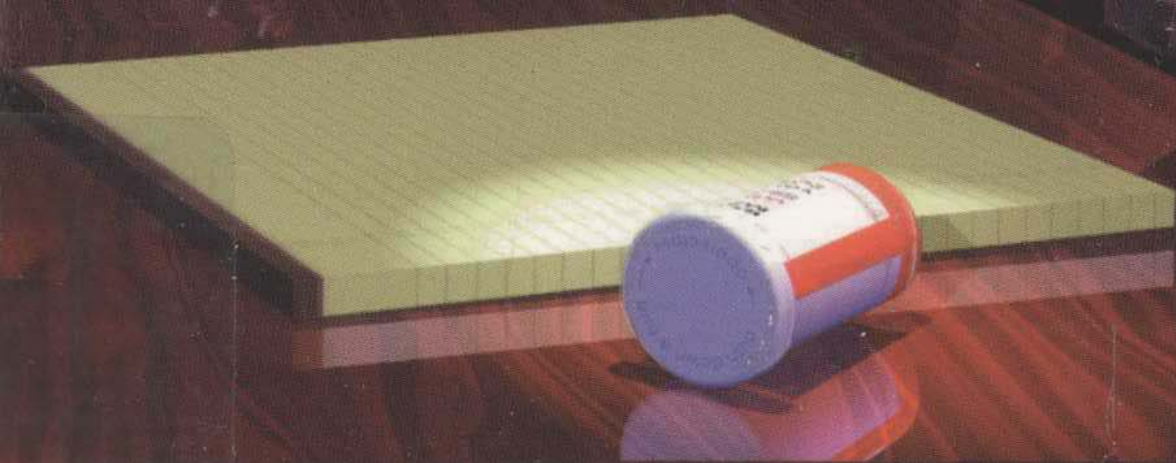
MAX ALLAN  
COLLINS  

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BARBARA  
COLLINS

A new life...for a price.

Regeneration



**AS IF READING HER MIND, LARUE SAID,  
“IT’S THAT SECOND CHANCE  
EVERYONE DREAMS OF,  
BUT SO FEW RECEIVE.”**

Joyce felt as if she were in a dream. “Yes... yes....”

“Let me explain how it is that you came to fit our ideal profile. In addition to your outstanding achievements in your chosen field, you have few ties, few strings. Your parents have passed on.... No close relatives, really....”

“Yes. Only my mother’s sister, my Aunt Beth.... she lives in DeKalb. We’re not...terribly close. I see her at Christmas.”

“You’ll no longer be able to do that, Joyce. For your new life, you’ll need a new name—and you have to leave your own life behind.”

“I just...disappear?”

Larue shrugged. “We have clients who are able to use that option, yes. But you are much too well known in Chicago, Joyce—you would be missed.”

“Considering the way my job interviews have been going, I find that hard to believe.”

“You will need to” —he made quotation marks in the air, with his fingers— “‘die.’”

Other *Leisure* books by Max Allan Collins:  
**MOMMY'S DAY**  
**MOMMY**

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MAX ALLAN  
COLLINS  
BARBARA  
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LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

*For the class of '66.*

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Regeneration



*Hope I die before I get old.*

—Pete Townshend, “My Generation”





## *Prologue:*

### **“Eve of Destruction”**

**(Barry McGuire, #1 *Billboard*, 1965)**

The homeless man leaned against the granite wall of the Kafer Building on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, enjoying the coolness of the stone, waiting for the white-collar workers to leave the building for the day. He was nearly six feet tall, or at least had been, before slouching into anonymity, and the handsome man he'd once been could be discerned by anyone who took the time (which was no one): Indian-sharp cheekbones, skin tanned from the sun, gray-streaked hair pulled back in a ponytail with a rubber band he'd found on the sidewalk.

Wearing faded denim jeans and his best T-shirt, which bore only a few permanent stains, he prided himself on being better dressed than his fellow rabble roaming the streets of the City

of Angels. And he was more polite than his piss-stained peers, too, making sure his demeanor was unthreatening whenever he asked the working class for spare change, because he made out like a bandit that way.

He hadn't always been homeless, of course, though he knew plenty who had grown up a part of this under-est of underclasses. But even the riffraff who'd raised themselves on the fringes of L.A. had histories. Ben was no exception—he wasn't just another sad, tortured creature rummaging in dumpsters and sleeping in parks. He was a man, a person. He had a past.

Benjamin Franklin McRae was born and raised in a small river town in Missouri where he grew to be captain of the football team in high school, a three-point senior with a bright future looming after graduation in '66. He and his steady, Betsy Jane, had been in the homecoming king and queen's court, and they'd gone to Kirkwood Community College together. They were engaged in the summer of '68.

But that same turbulent summer, he drew an unlucky draft number, and instead of finishing college as planned, he left his life and future wife behind and soon found himself in Da Nang, knee-deep in rice paddies, no longer breathing in clean fresh Midwestern air, but the pungent aromas of napalm and Agent Orange.

He had killed people and seen people killed. While he had no atrocities on his conscience, personally, he had seen the ditches filled with Vietnamese civilians, families, fathers and

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mothers and sons and daughters, sleeping wide-eyed in those silly pajamalike outfits, riddled with slugs, soaked with blood. He had walked the tall grass and seen his buds fall dead beside him, a bullet through the throat, through the chest, through the groin, disappearing into the brush as if swallowed by the earth; he had shot upward at trees and, like weird falling fruit, snipers dropped to the ground near his feet, teenage boys with empty faces and full rifles.

And, too, he'd seen sweet innocent kids—four or five at most—hurling homemade hand grenades.

After two tours of duty, Uncle Sugar returned him to the States—many in his platoon were not so lucky—and, with his mom and dad dead and Betsy Jane married with two kids, he had left Missouri for the promise of sunshine and prosperity the Beach Boys had sung about. Settling in Los Angeles, he grew his hair out, fell in with the make-love-not-war crowd and never let any of the hippie chicks he was banging or longhairs he was scoring dope off of know he was one of the baby murderers they so disdained.

One day he woke up, shook the drug hang-over off, and walked back into the real world. Within days, he was pouring cement for the construction business, which was just the sort of mindless labor he craved. But terrible nightly dreams began taking him back to the jungle and the rice paddies and he would wake shivering,

sweating, not even wanting to try to go back to sleep. So he would drag into work half-dead, and perform his job half-assed.

A rash of illnesses followed, including fatigue and depression, causing him to lose one job after another. The doctors at the veterans hospital had some kind of term for it—delayed post-combat stress fatigue syndrome or some such shit—and put him on a variety of anti-depressants.

Drugs again.

But these, whether uppers or downers, only made his constant fatigue worse. Drinking helped numb the hurt, but didn't do much for his job prospects.

Ben wanted to work, he really did, and, yeah, he drank some, but he was no rummy, he had never been one to drink on the job; but even if he felt better and his fatigue went away, who would hire him now?

Now that so many years had slipped through his fingers, and he was pushing fifty?

It was a little after six o'clock in the evening and dusk was beginning to sneak in like Cong from the east, the buildings casting long shadows over the city. Ben had been there since four that afternoon, to catch the older executives slipping away early for the day, heading out to the links for a round of golf before dinner. He generally did well with them, especially if he mentioned he was a Viet Nam vet; these were his classmates, from the late '60s and early '70s—they looked at him and saw the shell of

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their brother who got killed over there, or the best friend they'd lost contact with a million years ago. So they would hand him a buck or two, perhaps feeling guilty that they, too, hadn't gone off to that senseless war, as if Ben wouldn't have stayed home if he could.

But Ben had learned that the professionals who left later, between five and six o'clock— younger ones in their twenties and early thirties, Generation X, wasn't that what they were called?—were a cold, callous lot. The only thing he ever got from them was a blankly contemptuous stare, if they bothered to look at him at all.

He was ready to call it quits for the day, when a young woman he'd seen before, wearing a fetching, formfitting red suit with an oversize collar and straight skirt, stepped out of the building onto the sidewalk.

A smile tickled his stubbly face. There was always time to take a look at this one. Not that good-looking women were exactly rare in this part of the world—but there was something about her, something that reminded him of the girls he'd dated, of Betsy Jane and the backseat of his Chevy Nova.

She had shoulder-length auburn hair and pink satiny skin that seemed to glow. Her face was youthful, her features exquisite, as beautiful as any of the Hollywood wannabes he'd seen on these streets.

She paused in front of the building, looking up Wilshire Boulevard, then down. He re-

mained where he was, leaning against the building, too intimidated to ask her for money.

No, not intimidated—embarrassed. It was goddamn hard to embarrass a homeless beggar like him, but this vision, this reminder of a life lost or anyway misspent, made him ashamed. Made it all his own fault, somehow.

Then something extraordinary happened: She walked over to him.

“I’m afraid I don’t remember where I parked my car,” she said with a little laugh, as if he were a casual friend or coworker. The laugh had a falling, tinkling cadence, like a wind chime.

Ben looked into eyes as green and glimmering as an emerald. Cleared his throat. “White GM, right?”

She had an odd look on her face, like she couldn’t even remember the make of her car. Was she on something?

“White GM,” he repeated.

Then she nodded. “Thanks for remembering. Funny—I’ve seen you standing over here. You look at me, sometimes.”

Ben did something he hadn’t done since high school: He blushed. “Yes, I . . . I didn’t mean anything by it. . . .”

“No, it’s okay. But isn’t that funny? I remember that you stand here every day, but I don’t remember where I put my own car?”

Another tinkling laugh.

“Yeah, uh, funny,” he said.

“Hysterical . . . Can you help?”

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"Sure," he said, and pointed across the boulevard. "I've seen you park up that side street sometimes. I wasn't here this morning, but it's worth a try."

"Thank you," she responded with a little smile. "You're very kind. You have nice eyes."

Was she flirting with him? That was insane. He remembered his place.

And he took his best shot. "Uh . . . you wouldn't happen to have any spare change, would ya? I could use a hot meal."

Her confused emerald eyes turned compassionate. "I'll look," she said, and dug into her black purse. She withdrew a twenty and handed it to him. "Will this do?"

"Ah . . . yeah," he said, stunned by her generosity. And touched. But before he could thank her, she turned away.

He watched her walk down to the corner and wait for the light to turn green. When it did, she began to cross the busy intersection, the hem of her silk-linen red dress rising up her luscious Betsy Jane legs with every step. . . . And he wished he was eighteen again and captain of the football team and the prom, the goddamn fucking prom, was tonight.

Suddenly a tan sedan with tinted windows squealed around the corner, the driver apparently not seeing her crossing the street.

Ben shouted a warning, but it came too late, the impact of the car sending her up over the hood, with a terrible splash of blood, hurling her like a rag doll up and over the car, then



down again, bone-crunchingly hard on the cruel pavement, behind the vehicle with another ghastly splash of blood, tossing her crumpled form, limbs askew, head at an unnatural angle, to the cement.

The driver did not stop. And Ben saw something more grotesque than he'd ever seen in a life filled with grotesqueries: As the sedan sped away, the driver—through the tinted windshield Ben barely made him out, sunglasses, dark hair, male, twenties—turned on his windshield wipers and wiper solvent shot up and helped the blades wash away the blood.

Ben was already breaking into a run, dodging in and out of traffic that was shrieking to a halt, and within seconds he reached her and, dropping down on his knees, gathered her broken body in his arms, her blood as red as the dress.

And then he was back in the rice paddies, screaming, "Medic! Medic!" telling her to hold on, to hold on, a chopper was coming. . . .

But she just stared back at him with lifeless green eyes, and the EMT boys—when they finally came—were confused that Ben kept calling the dead woman Betsy Jane when her ID said something else.