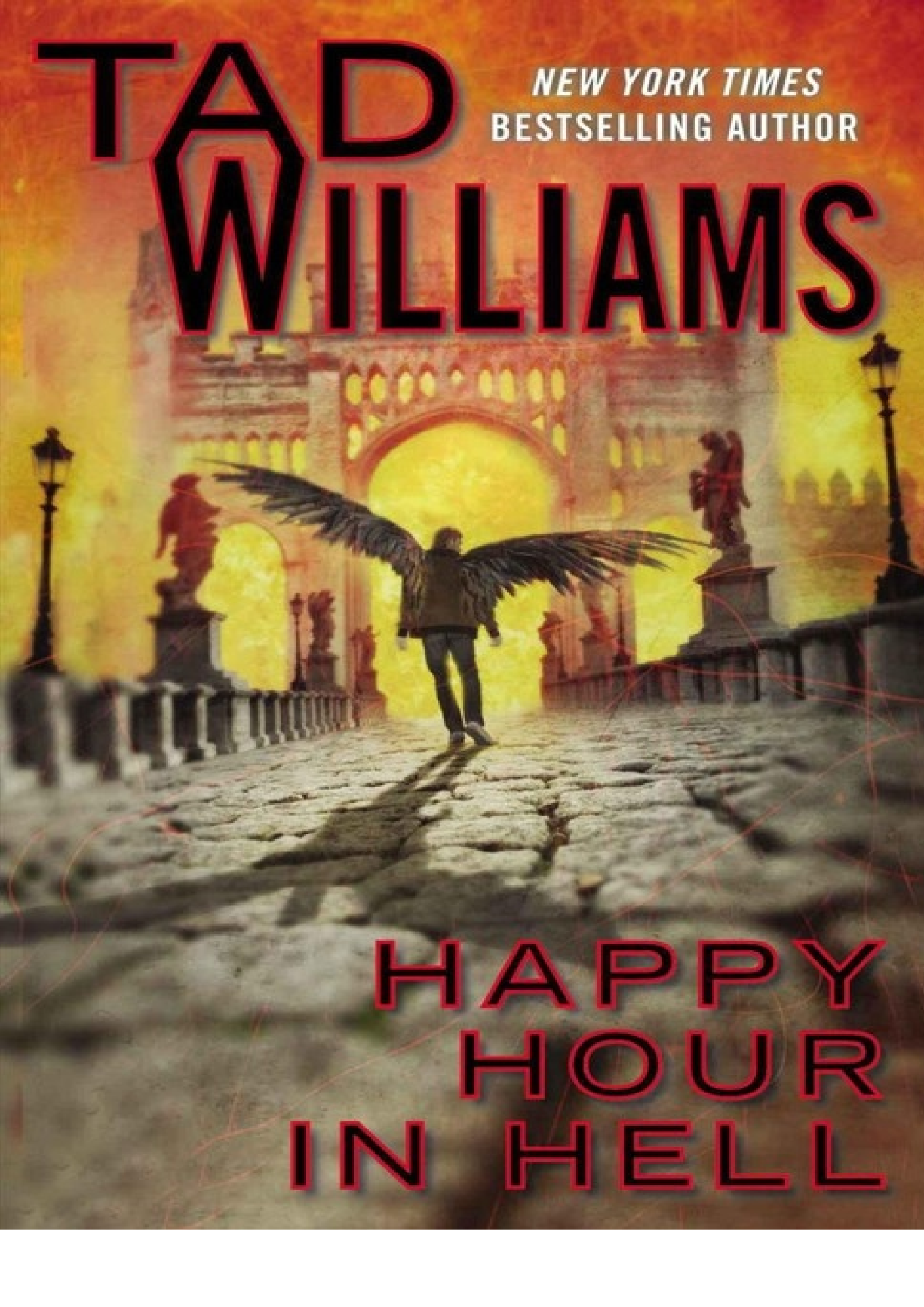


TAD WILLIAMS

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



HAPPY
HOUR
IN HELL

*The Finest in Imaginative Fiction by
TAD WILLIAMS*

BOBBY DOLLAR

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HAPPY HOUR IN HELL
SLEEPING LATE ON JUDGEMENT DAY*

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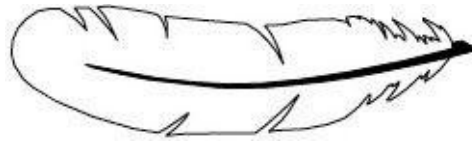
THE DRAGONBONE CHAIR
STONE OF FAREWELL
TO GREEN ANGEL TOWER

OTHERLAND

CITY OF GOLDEN SHADOW
RIVER OF BLUE FIRE
MOUNTAIN OF BLACK GLASS
SEA OF SILVER LIGHT

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**HAPPY HOUR
IN
HELL**



A Bobby Dollar Novel

TAD WILLIAMS

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The first Bobby Dollar book was dedicated to my dear friend David Pierce. Since Dave left us, several other people I really care about have also departed—Jeff Kaye, Peggy Ford, and Iain Banks, to name just a few.

I'm glad Dave's got such good company, but it breaks my heart they didn't all hang out with the rest of us a bit longer.

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Many gratitudes, my droogs.

prologue

welcome mat

A MOMENT COMES in pretty much everyone's life, or afterlife in my case, where they can't help but wonder, *What the fuck am I doing here?* I have more of those than most people (a couple a week on average) but I'd never had one quite like this before. See, I was just about to walk into Hell. Voluntarily.

My name is Bobby Dollar, or sometimes Doloriel, depending on the company I'm keeping. I arrived at this ugly spot by elevator—a long, long ride down that I may or may not tell you about some point. I was also wearing a body that wasn't my own, and all my information about the place came from a rogue guardian angel whispering in my mind while I was sleeping. Not that I had learned much useful stuff from her. In fact, most of it could be summed up with the simple phrase, "You can even guess how bad this is going to be."

So there I stood, just outside Hell, at the foot of the Neronian Bridge, a featureless, flat span of stone that stretched over a chasm so deep that, if we had been on ordinary old Earth, the hole would probably have gone all the way through the planet and out of the other side. But Hell isn't on ordinary Earth and this pit wasn't bottomless—oh, no. See, at the bottom, impossible miles and miles below me in the darkness, the *really* bad shit was going on. I could tell that because of the faint sounds of screaming. I couldn't help wondering how hard those folks had to be screaming to be heard that far away. Also, what exactly was being done to them to make them scream like that? Already I was asking questions with answers I didn't want to know.

Just in case all this isn't weird enough for you, here's another interesting fact: I'm an angel. So not only was I headed to the worst possible place anyone could ever go, I was doing it as a spy and a traitor to my enemy. Oh, and I was going there to steal something from one of the cruelest, most powerful demons that ever existed, Eligor the Horseman, Grand Duke of Hell.

What was I trying to steal from Eligor? My girlfriend, Caz. She's also a demon and she belongs to Eligor, not to him.

Oh, and when I said I was an angel, I didn't mean the avenging kind with wings and the Lord of the Righteous Fire to wield against my enemies. No, I'm the kind who lives on Earth, pretends to be human most of the time, and advocates on behalf of human souls at judgement. In other words, I'm pretty much a public defender. So what I brought to the conflict was just enough information to know I was in serious trouble. Me against a Grand Duke of Hell on his home turf—great match-up, huh? I was in what was, without question, the biggest enclosed space I'd ever seen—that anyone had ever seen, probably. All those medieval artists who'd pictured the place, even the really inventive ones, had never thought big enough for this. A wall of rugged stone surrounded me, extending straight up and beyond sight. It seemed to be ever so slightly curved on either side, as though the vast cavern itself was the casing of a monstrous engine cylinder. Presumably there was another wall in front of me or

the far side of the bridge, the piston inside that bigger cylinder and the point of my visit, the endless tower that is Hell. The bridge itself was narrower than my arms could stretch to either side, a walking surface only about a yard and a half wide. That would have been plenty, except for the fact that beneath the narrow span lay nothing but emptiness—a pit that extended down farther than I could see or even understand, with just enough flickering hell-light to let me know how very, very far I'd be falling if I took a wrong step.

Trust me. Like any sane being, I would have rather been anywhere else, but as I'll explain later, I worked hard to get even this far. I had learned how to get here, found an entrance nobody remembered to guard, and I was even wearing a brand-new demon body (because that's the only way I could travel safely in Hell). I might have been an unwanted guest, but I had already paid quite a bit to take the ride.

As I approached the span I gulped a deep breath made gritty by sulfur smoke and the faint but unmistakable tang of crisping flesh. A stone skittered away from my foot and bounced into the pit. I didn't wait to hear if it made a noise, since there wouldn't have been much point. You can only stand something terrible so long before all the courage just leaks out of you, and I knew that things would only get worse from here. Even if I made it across this whisper-thin span and managed to sneak into Hell, the whole place was jam-packed with creatures that just plain hated angels in general and me in particular.

The Neronian Bridge dates back to ancient Rome, and it's named after the Emperor Nero, the one who supposedly fiddled while Rome burned. Nero wasn't the worst emperor Rome ever had, but he was pretty much of a horrible bastard anyway, and one of the ways we know this is because he had his own mother murdered. Twice.

His mother Agrippina was the sister of another, even nastier little bastard you may have heard of—Caligula. He married one of his other sisters, but he humped them all. Still, despite all the creepy stuff with her brother, after Caligula was stabbed to death by his own guards Agrippina was rehabilitated and eventually married Caligula's successor, old Emperor Claudius. Somehow she even managed to convince Claudius to put aside his own beloved son and instead make Nero, her son by a previous marriage, his heir. Once Nero was the emperor-designate, she bumped off poor Claudius by feeding him poisoned mushrooms.

Clearly grateful for his mother's assistance in becoming the most powerful man in the world, Nero promptly turned around and ordered her killed. He first tried to do it with a trick boat that was supposed to break apart so she'd drown, but Agrippina was a tough old bitch and made it back to land, so Nero sent some of his guardsmen over to her house to stab her to death with swords.

Family values, Roman Empire style.

Nero did a lot of other pretty terrible stuff during the rest of his reign, including burning a buttload of innocent Christians, but that isn't the reason he got his own little highway project in Hell, the bridge I stood in front of now. See, what Nero didn't realize is that his mother's coup in getting Claudius to marry her and raise Nero above his own son was the result of a little bargain she'd made with one of Hell's more influential inhabitants, a powerful demon by the name of Ignoculi. Now Ignoculi and his infernal pals didn't give a (literal) damn about Nero killing his mother—in fact, they rather admired it. But they did expect him to live up to the terms of the bargain his mother had made to put Nero on the throne of the Roman Empire, because Hell had big plans for Rome. But Nero refused to play along. To be honest, he probably didn't realize how big an operation Hell really was—the Romans had a different religious picture of things, Pluto and the Elysian Fields and all that stuff. He was probably a bit like that movie producer in the *Godfather* who thought he could tell Don Corleone

to fuck off, then woke up to find a horse's head added to the bedroom decor.

Pissing off Hell is not a good idea. Things went downhill rapidly for young Nero, and within a short period of time he found himself off the throne and on the run. He eventually wound up committing suicide. However, the real surprises were still waiting for him.

Ignoculi, like most of Hell's executives, was extremely good at bearing a grudge. When Nero arrived in Hell it was to discover a special entrance had been built just for him. Yep, the Neronian Bridge. A thousand demons dressed in the finery of Roman imperial guardsmen were already there waiting to accompany Nero across it in the splendor to which he had become accustomed in life. The great procession set off in single file across the abyss, drums pounding and trumpets tootling, but when Nero reached the other end his retinue abruptly vanished, leaving only the emperor and the one who was waiting to greet him—not Ignoculi himself, but Nero's late mother, Agrippina.

She must have made a pretty awful sight, crooked and broken and soaking wet from Nero's first attempt on her life, streaming blood from the sword-thrusts that killed her. Nero, suddenly realizing that he was going to receive something less than a hero's welcome, tried to flee back across the bridge, but now Ignoculi himself made an appearance on the bridge, a huge, quivering glob of eyes and teeth that blocked the ex-emperor's retreat like a ton of angry snot.

"*Caveat imperator,*" the demon reportedly said. In Hell, bad puns are considered a particularly ripe form of torture. Then Agrippina grabbed her son in her bloody, mangled fingers and, with a strength she'd never had in life, dragged him shrieking through the gate to Hell and the less-than-imperial fate prepared for him. And of course, from what I've heard he's still there, probably down at the bottom with the rest of the screamers.

After that, the Neronian Bridge was largely forgotten until I got there, just another monument to why you never, never, *never* get one of hell's high rollers mad at you—something that I had already managed, big time. Do you think the universe might have been trying to tell me something?

I stepped onto the bridge and started walking.

I had been putting one foot in front of the other for what seemed hours when I noticed that the screams wafting up from below seemed to be growing louder. I hoped that meant I was finally nearing the center of the bridge, but it might just have been that lunch break was over downstairs. I looked down, steadying myself against a dizziness that wasn't just physical but existential. Perspective turned the flames issuing from cracks in the pit walls into shrinking, tightening rings of concentric fire like a burning bull's-eye.

Leathery wings flapped past my face, startling me badly, and I realized how close to the edge I was standing. I moved back into the middle of the bridge and began walking again, still in the wrong direction by any sane standard. The winged thing fluttered past me again, brushing against my skin, but the light was too faint to make out what it was. I don't think it was a bat, because it was crying. Hours and hours later, the smoldering bull's-eye was still more or less right beneath me. When you're crossing a Hell-moat that could be as wide as South Dakota I guess the idea of "near the middle" is fairly relative, but it sure was depressing.

But this was all for Caz, I kept reminding myself, for the Countess of Cold Hands, the beautiful ruined young girl trapped in an immortal body and sentenced to Hell. No, it wasn't even for Caz, it was for what we had together, for the moments of happiness and peace I had felt lying in bed with her while the infernal hordes harrowed the streets of San Judas looking for me. Yes, she was one of those infernal minions herself, and yes she had all but told me that I was turning an incident of straightforward battlefield sex between two enemies into some absurd, juvenile love story . . . but oh my sweet God, she was lovely. Nothing in my angelic life had made me feel like she did. Even more

my time with her had showed me that my existence up to this point had been hollow. If it hadn't been for that, maybe I could have believed it was all demonic glamour—that I had simply been seduced that I'd fallen for the oldest trick in the Adversary's book. (There was another reason I didn't think it was simply being played for a chump. It had to do with a silver locket, but I'll tell you more about that later.) Anyway, if what I felt for Caz was just a trick, an illusion, then nothing else mattered, either.

Love. Tired old jokes aside, a real, powerful love does have one thing in common with Hell itself: it burns everything else out of you.

Hours in, hypnotized by endless, flickering shadows, it took me far longer than it should have to realize that the spot of darkness on the bridge ahead of me was not simply another shadow or a floating spot in my vision but something real. I slowed, squinting, my dreamy half-life suddenly cracked into pieces. Was it waiting for me? Had Eligor found out I was coming and prepared to welcome for me, something like that horned Babylonian nightmare that I had barely managed to survive back in San Jude? The only thing that had stopped the last one was a precious piece of silver—Caz's locket, but I didn't have anything like that now. My new demon body was naked and I didn't have a gun. I didn't even have a stick.

As I got closer I saw that the shape wasn't standing erect like a man but was on all fours like a four-legged animal. Closer still and I could see that it was crawling *away* from me, which gave me my first moment of relief since I'd stepped onto this bloody bridge. Mama Dollar's baby boy is no fool, though, or at least not in the obvious ways; as I began to catch up to the solitary crawler I slowed down so I could examine it.

It was manlike but unpleasant to watch, like a blind, clumsy insect. Its hands were clubbed and fingerless, the body distorted, and even by the standards of that miserable place it reflected very little light: it seemed less like a solid thing and more like a smudge on the surface of reality. I was right behind it now, but it seemed unaware of my presence, still crawling like a crippled penitent, drawing itself along as though each movement was miserably difficult. The very slowness of its progress made me wonder how long it had been on the bridge.

I didn't want to walk around it, not on that narrow span. Just because it looked slow and stupid didn't mean it wouldn't turn on me. I considered simply jumping over it, but I didn't trust the footing either.

"What are you doing?" I said. "Are you hurt?"

The sudden noise of my new, raspy demon-voice startled even me, but the crawling thing gave no indication it had heard. I tried again.

"I need to get past you."

Nothing. If the crawling thing wasn't deaf, it was sure acting like it.

Frustrated, I finally reached down and yanked on its leg to get its attention, but although the man-shaped shape looked solid, it was as brittle as a dessert meringue. The entire limb broke loose underneath my fingers in flaky shards, leaving nothing below the knee. In horror, I dropped the substantial piece of leg. It broke into pieces, many of which bounced slowly over the edge of the bridge and vanished into the darkness. The thing finally stopped crawling long enough to turn toward me, and I caught a glimpse of a gray face with empty hollows for eyes and an equally empty hole of a mouth stretched wide in surprise or horror. Then it tilted to one side as if the loss of the leg had overbalanced it and toppled off the bridge without a sound.

Shaken, I stepped over the greasy flakes that remained and walked on. Whatever the crumbling horror might have been, it was not the only one of its kind. I caught up with the next gray thing before too long, another man-shaped blob creeping toward the still invisible wall

of Hell. I tried to poke this one gently enough to get its attention. It seemed as fragile as sea foam, but just the feel of it on my fingertip made me queasy. How could something with no substance hold shape, let alone crawl forward with such blind determination?

But this is Hell, I reminded myself, *or at least the suburbs*. Nothing normal applied here.

I poked it again. Like its predecessor it turned, but this one reached for me with its shapeless hands; in fear and disgust I stepped back and kicked at it, catching it square in the hindquarters. With a whispering crunch it broke into several large pieces. I waded through them, though they were still slowly squirming, and kicked several of them into the abyss. I didn't stop to watch them fall.

As hours passed, or would have anywhere else, I encountered more of the hideous things. I'd give up any idea of communicating with them and simply kicked them out of my way, wading through the sentient scraps. When I had crushed several of them I began to notice an odor on my skin, like faint traces of lighter fluid in the ashes of a barbecue pit. The things were slow and mindless as dying termites, and disgusting in a way I can't even explain. I wanted to grind each one of them to powder to scatter their very atoms to the void. In fact, I was losing what little remained of my mind.

What saved me, strangely enough, was Hell itself. After fighting my way through an entire squirming pack of the things, showering myself and the emptiness on either side of the bridge with ashy fragments, I bent over in a cloud of the last swirling bits and realized that the bridge no longer narrowed to nothingness in front of me. The terrible span had an end point, something I had once believed because I had to. Now I could see it ahead of me, a wall of broken black stone with a titan gate of rusted iron in the middle of it, tall as a skyscraper. But thousands of the gray, mindless things still squirmed between me and that gate.

I'm betting that some of you can't imagine what was so bad about having to fight through things that offered no resistance of any kind, that collapsed under my touch like fireplace ash. Try thinking about it this way: there might have been nothing left of them but crude shapes, like the dead of Pompeii preserved in the fiery ash that spewed from Vesuvius, but they had all been people once.

You see, as I came up that last span, fighting my way through the creeping shapes, making a storm of floating, powdery fragments until I couldn't see my own feet or the bridge, I finally realized what they were. Not damned souls—that would have been bad enough. These weren't prisoners of Hell; they weren't trying to get out, they were trying to get *in*. The shapes were souls who had been sentenced to Purgatory, the essences of countless human lives—failed lives but not irreparably evil. And for whatever reason, these things, once men and women, were so consumed by self-hatred that they crawled forever toward the place where they felt they truly belonged.

I should have pitied them but understanding only made it worse. As I neared the walls of Hell the things flocked as thickly as insects swarming around a hot light bulb, driven by a self-destructive urge they couldn't understand. I was too exhausted to say anything, but inside I was screaming. I thrashed through the clotted mass as if I were swimming, until everything I was and had ever been dissolved into a madness of greasy flakes and swirling, kerosene-scented dust, until I no longer knew where I was, let alone where the bridge was—the only thing between me and oblivion. The fact that I did not fall is the only testament I will ever need that something or Someone bigger than me wanted me to survive.

Grunting, gasping, I stopped to suck in air and realized abruptly that nothing stood before me now but the massive, rusty entrance and bare black stone: I had reached the shadows beneath the gate. The swarming crawlers were now behind me, confined to the bridge as if by an invisible fence. The pathetic, self-loathing things didn't belong in Hell, they just believed they did. They would not be admitted.

But Bobby Dollar? Apparently I was different. No guards and nothing to keep me from walking but the good sense I had surrendered a long time back. By Hell's charming standards, they'd pret much put out the welcome mat. But I don't think I'm giving away too much when I tell you it wasn't going to prove anywhere near as easy getting back out again.

one

pillow talk

WE ONLY had one night together, really. And I remember every moment of it.

“So what’s it like, living in Hell?”

“Oh, it’s great. We drink ice cream sodas all day and play pool and smoke cigars and never, ever turn into donkeys.”

*“That sounds more like *Pleasure Island*, from *Pinocchio*.”*

“Shoot. You got me.”

“Come on, woman, it was a serious question.”

“Well, maybe I don’t want to answer it, Wings. How’s that for serious?”

We were both naked in Caz’s secret hideaway and had just made love for the first (well, technical first, second, and second-and-a-half) time. Her head was on my chest and her legs were clamped around my thigh like a bivalve mercilessly trying to compel surrender. I stroked her hair, a gold so pale you could only tell it wasn’t white in direct sunlight.

“That bad, huh?”

“Oh, you beautiful, stupid man, you can’t imagine.” She lifted herself on one elbow so she could look me in the face. She was so gorgeous that I promptly forgot what we were talking about and lay there staring like I was brain damaged. By any normal standards I must have been, because otherwise why would a minion of Heaven be making naked squishies with a tool of Satan in the first place? “Not just bad,” she told me. “Worse than you could possibly imagine.”

I kept wondering how anyone, even the lords of Hell, could want to harm that radiant beauty. The official version would be that she had a face like a Renaissance angel, beautiful, delicate, full of lofty thoughts. But the truth was that she looked like the most innocently wicked graduate of a very, very expensive private school. If I hadn’t known for a fact that Caz had been around since before Columbus sailed, I’d have been feeling very, very guilty after all the things we’d just done. I was beginning to believe I was in love with this woman, but of course she wasn’t actually a woman at all, and she came from Hell. Think about that a little and you’ll probably understand why I didn’t want to consider our situation too closely.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything . . .”

“No! No, thank your lucky stars that you don’t know, Bobby. I want you to stay that way. I don’t want you ever to know what that place is like.” And then she suddenly hugged me so tightly that for a moment I thought she was trying to crawl through me somehow and out the other side. Her small, hairless body seemed both the most real and the most vulnerable thing in the world.

“I won’t let you go back,” I said.

I thought she laughed. I only realized later that the noise had been something else, something far less simple. Her legs tightened on my thigh; I could feel her wetness pressing against me. “Of course

you won't, Bobby," she said. "We'll never go back, either of us. We'll stay here and drink ice cream sodas forever. So kiss me, you dumbfuck angel."

Have you ever had somebody you loved die on you? All that stuff you feel, and you're *still* feeling it, but they're just gone? You carry that around with you every moment—all the things you failed to tell them, all the ways you were stupid, all the ways you're missing them. It feels like holding up a huge, collapsing wall, as if you were some hero in a movie waiting for everyone to get to safety, but you already know you're not going to get away yourself. That eventually the weight will just crush you.

Ever had somebody leave you and tell you they never really loved you? That you're a loser, a waste of time they should have known to avoid? You carry that one around too, but instead of a crushing, insupportable weight, it's more like a horrible burn, nerve endings fried and stuck on jangling alert, a pain that occasionally subsides to a bitter, itching ache, but then flares up into agony again without warning.

Here's one more: Ever had somebody steal the thing that mattered most to you? Then laugh in your face about it? Leave you helpless and seething?

Okay, now imagine that all three things happened at the same time, with the same woman.

Her name was Caz, short for Casimira, also known as the Countess of Cold Hands, a she-demon of high standing and about the most mesmerizing creature I'd ever seen. When we met we were on opposite sides in the ancient conflict between Heaven and Hell. We became lovers, which both of us knew was an extremely stupid, supremely dangerous thing to do. But something drew us together, although that's a pretty damn bland, vanilla way of putting it. We made sparks—no, a raging fire—and it still blazed inside of me, long after she'd gone. Some days it seemed like it was going to burn me to ashes.

Caz belonged to Eligor, one of the Grand Dukes of Hell. After our affair, our fling, whatever you want to call it, she went back to him. She even tried to make me think she'd never cared about me, but I see, I didn't believe that. I was certain she felt something too because, if not, then I was wrong about *everything*. I'm talking about *up is down, black is white, the world is really flat after all* kind of wrong.

Call me stupid if you want, but I wouldn't believe that. I couldn't. Beside, I had a more practical reason for thinking that she really cared for me. Don't worry, we're coming to that soon.

Anyway, now Eligor hated me because I'd messed with his "property" (okay, also because of some other stuff, like shooting his secretary, getting his bodyguard eaten, and generally interfering with his plans). The power imbalance between us was ridiculously skewed in Eligor's favor: he was infernal royalty, and I was a minor mid-level functionary who already had a bit of a negative reputation with my superiors. So why wasn't I dead? Because I had *the feather*—a golden feather from the wing of an important angel that marked an illicit bargain made between Grand Duke Eligor and someone in Heaven whose identity I still didn't know. Eligor definitely didn't want that feather going public, and as long as I had it stashed safely away I felt sure he would leave me alone. On the other hand, Eligor had Caz, and he'd taken her back to Hell, far out of my reach. Stalemate. At least that's what I thought when the whole thing started. As it turned out, I had built a house of cards out of the flimsiest set of assumptions possible.

Oops. Getting ahead of myself a little. A lot of things happened before I even heard of the Neronian Bridge, and I should probably tell you about some of them before we return to Hell.

The latest episode of the ongoing craziness that is my afterlife started with what normal folk would call a job review. Except normal folk wouldn't be reviewed by a group of pissed-off celestials who could literally destroy an immortal soul with a single word. Even the poor bastards who work for

Trump don't have to put up with that.

two

five angry angels

I'D BEEN called to Heaven, specifically to the Anaktoron, the great council chamber I had visited once before, an astounding architectural impossibility with cloud-high ceilings, a floating table of black stone and a river running right through the middle of the floor. My archangel, Temuel (sort of my supervisor) brought me into the mighty building and then discreetly retired. Floating on the far side of the stone table, as if someone had jerked away a candelabrum and left the candle flame burning in midair, were the *ephors*, my five special inquisitors.

"God loves you, Angel Doloriel," declared the filmy white flame that was Terentia. "This Ephora welcomes you." Like the first time I'd met them, Terentia seemed to be the one in charge, although I knew that Karael, the warrior-angel beside her, was about as high as anyone can get in the hierarchy of the Third Sphere (everything to do with Earth and its inhabitants). Beside him hovered Chamuel, a mist that gleamed from within, and next to Chamuel was Anaita, a childlike presence that I knew from unpleasant experience could be as coldly formal as Terentia. At the edge of the group was Raziel, a being of dim red light who was neither male nor female. All of these important angels were Principalties, the judges of the dead and the living. There is no higher rank among the angels in our sphere.

I returned Terentia's greeting, trying not to look like I was waiting for my blindfold and cigarette. "How can I serve you, Masters?"

"With the truth," said Chamuel, but almost kindly. "These are great matters in which you have been caught up, Doloriel. Dangerous matters. And we wish to hear of them from your own lips."

Yeah? And what would you know about lips? I wondered, since Chamuel's form was indistinct as a rain cloud. I'm not entirely stupid, though, so I only bowed my head. "Of course."

And so the ephors asked, and I answered. I tried to tell the truth when I could (it makes keeping track of the lies easier) but there were just too darn many things I didn't dare mention, too many laws of Heaven that I had stomped all over while trying to get to the bottom of the whole mess. They knew that my demon-lover Caz had given me information but they definitely didn't know what else had happened between us, which was good, because I was pretty sure fraternizing with the enemy was a capital offense in the angel business, and I had gone a lot farther than "fraternizing." They also knew that my buddy and partner Sam Riley, aka Advocate Angel Sammariel, had been secretly working for a group that hijacked souls belonging to either Heaven or Hell and offered them instead a "Third Way" that both sides of the ancient struggle were pretty eager to obliterate. They also knew Sam had escaped, but luckily they hadn't found out it was because I'd let him go. (They also didn't know that he'd had offered to take me with him to the Third Way's new-minted afterworld. I still thought about that sometimes.)

As I think I said, I've never just stood up and lied to Heaven before. I've kept many a not-ver-

angelic thought to myself, of course, but I always told the truth about what I was doing and whom I was doing it with. But the last couple of months had changed all that: truth was no longer an option. If my bosses found out what I'd done I'd be sentenced to the nastiest pits of Hell or, if I was lucky, I'd just have my memory wiped and start over again, another fledgling angel learning how to keep his robe clean and sing Hosanna. So I lied and kept on lying.

“. . . As for the last part, well, it's all in my report.”

“Which we have absorbed with interest,” said Terentia. “But we have called you here so you can relate your experiences again, and perhaps, with our help, discover details which were inadvertently left out of your report.”

How could a guy resist such thoughtfulness? “Well, as I said, when the monster attacked me in the abandoned amusement park, Angel Sammariel took advantage of the distraction to escape. I didn't see where he went. By the time the *ghallu* was dead, there was no sign of him.” (Fighting the monstrous ancient demon—and almost being swallowed by it—had definitely happened, I promise you. It was the oops-Sam-got-away part that hadn't.)

Raziel's dark light grew darker for a moment, like a thunderstorm starting to roll. “But both you and Angel Harahiel were together after the creature of the pit was dead, or nearly so. He says he was struck by one of the creature's death-throes, but before he was rendered senseless he confronted Sammariel. These conflicts confuse us.”

A silence fell between the boss angels; I had the disturbing sense of things flying past above my head, of conversations I couldn't hear but which would determine my fate whether I liked it or not. Angel Harahiel was the real angelic name of rookie advocate (and company spy) Clarence, and trying to make the kid's report jibe with my invented recollections was one of my major challenges.

“I'm sorry, Master,” I said quickly. “You're right, of course. When I said ‘attacked,’ I meant the creature's last movements. I thought it was dead. It lay still for a long time, but then it stunned Angel Harahiel with its leg and started to get up again. I fired my last bullets into it, and it finally stopped moving.” I was praying—ironic, no?—that I was remembering the details right, or at least the details of the version I'd submitted to Heaven's auditors. I had been studying my report and Clarence's for days, like a panicked freshman in finals week. I've got a pretty good memory, but being here in the Anaktoron would be enough to make Einstein put his fingers to his lips and go *bblbblbblbbl*. “The next when I looked up, Angel Harahiel was unconscious and Sam—Angel Sammariel—was gone.” I was tempted to prattle on, reemphasizing all the important points, but instead I clamped my mouth shut and waited. Again the awesome, nerve-wracking silence. Moments only, but a moment in Heaven can literally seem like hours.

“Another thing that has been puzzling me, Angel Doloriel,” said Anaita in her sweet, childlike voice. “How was it that you were able to defeat a creature of Old Night with nothing more than silver bullets? It seems strange that such a mighty enemy should be dispatched as easily as one of the Adversary's foot soldiers.”

Because the silver I put into the monster at the end was more than just any old silver. It was a gift to me from Caz, a tiny silver locket, the only precious object that remained from her life as a human woman. And it was given to me with love, I'm convinced of that. The fact that a monster from the depths of time had died from that fragile little bit of silver but had laughed off all the earlier silver slugs was one of the biggest reasons that I didn't believe what happened between Caz and me had been mere infernal seduction. But I could no more admit that to the ephors than I could claim that God Himself came down in a fiery chariot and crushed the *ghallu* beneath its wheels.

“I still don't know,” I said as humbly as I could. “I put quite a few silver bullets in it during the

course of perhaps two hours. At the end . . . it seemed to be laboring.” Which was a lie. Until I used Caz’s locket, the thing had swallowed silver rounds like they were lemon drops. “Perhaps . . . I . . .” I had been breathing, I would have stopped to take a deep, deep breath, because I had no good answer and I was just plain scared. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Don’t underestimate an angel of the Lord,” said Karael suddenly. He was talking so I could hear him, but he was clearly saying it for the benefit of his fellow ephors. “Angel Doloriel was trained as a member of Counterstrike Unit *Lyrae* to resist the enemies of Heaven, and those angels are as brave and tough a group as we have. I have fought many times beside our Counterstrike Units. If anyone could bring down a creature of such ancient, evil lineage, it would be a CU veteran. Isn’t that right Doloriel?”

I could have kissed him, I swear. I could have wrapped my arms around his fiery, beautiful awesomeness and planted one right on him. “We . . . we do our best, sir. We always do our best.”

“Exactly. Doloriel was a Harp.” The way Karael said it, it seemed to roll and echo through the great council chamber. “One of those courageous souls who defend the walls of Heaven itself—even the ones they protect do not always remember. That *means* something.”

So was Karael trying to get me off the hook simply because he didn’t like to see the angel equivalent of ex-military being run down by the bureaucrats? Or was there something else going on? Shit, who was I kidding? In Heaven there’s *always* something else going on.

“Of course, noble Karael,” said Terentia, again speaking so I could hear. “But this angel left the *Lyrae*, did he not?”

I couldn’t figure out what was going on, and that scared me all over again. Why were the top brass arguing in front of me, a mere foot soldier? It didn’t make sense.

“Doloriel left Counterstrike because he was gravely wounded in a battle with Hell’s forces. Karael almost sounded defensive.

“And now he serves the will of the Highest as a member of His holy advocates,” said genderless Raziel in a voice like quiet music. “Defending the souls of the worthy from the lies and trickery of Hell.”

“Perhaps,” Anaita replied. “But it was one of those selfsame advocates who conspired with members of the Opposition to create this wretched Third Way, causing all the trouble in the first place. And while there is no doubt that Angel Doloriel has been a brave fighter and an effective advocate, no one could dispute the fact that he seems to . . . attract trouble.”

“It is true,” said Raziel slowly, “that there have been times since I created the Advocacy when I wonder if we are asking too much of the Elect, requiring them to take on earthly bodies again, exposing them to all the temptations and despair that beset the living every day on Earth.”

They fell into silent conversation again, which was just as well because I must have been gaping like someone had broken a bottle over my head. Raziel created the Advocates? I had never heard that. In fact, I had never heard anything to suggest our existence came from anything less than a divine order from the Highest Himself. How important *were* these five angels? And why were they spending so much time with little Bobby Dollar?

Then an idea came to me, stealing over me like a fog, sending chills up and down my non-corporeal form. Something was going on here far beyond a fact-finding meeting, or even a meeting about something as important to these high angels as the renegades of the Third Way. Sam had told me that he’d been approached by a disguised angel that called itself Kephias, and everything about Kephias had suggested powers beyond that of Heaven’s rank and file, including the God Glove it had given Sam, a device or power or whatever it was that had allowed him to do so many unexpected

things. Might Kephas, the revolutionary behind the Third Way, be a high angel like this quintet of ephors? Or, even weirder and more disturbing, was Kephas one of the Furious Five themselves?

The games they play in Heaven are incredibly subtle, but they're still deadly—no, worse than deadly, because the loser's lot is an eternity bathing in fire. What was I caught up in? And how was I going to avoid becoming a Bobby-colored smear in the grinding gears of heavenly politics?

"Angel Doloriel," said Terentia suddenly, breaking into my thoughts so abruptly that I almost squeaked in terror. I'm glad I didn't, since angels usually don't squeak.

"Yes, Mistress?"

"We must consider all you have told us. We will speak to you again. Be ready for a summons."

And just like that it was all gone, the fiery ephors and the gleaming magnificence of the Anaktoron's council chamber, and I was back in bed in my miserable apartment once more, back in my miserable, shivering human body. It was still dark outside, but I was pretty sure I wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep.

three

coming back

I CAN ONLY look at four walls so long before I start to get a little crazy. It was worse the morning after my inquisition, because almost everything I owned was still in boxes on the floor of my new apartment, and the paltry number of those boxes made me think about how little I had to show for my existence. I suppose one of God's chief servants should have been proud of such a sparse, monkish existence (if a crate of jazz and blues CDs and a couple of boxes of hot rod magazines interspersed with the occasional Playboy and Penthouse counts as "monkish") but it just depressed me. If I'd been a happy little angel doing the work of Heaven it probably wouldn't have been that way, but I'd always felt that somehow there must be something more to my afterlife. Now that I woke up each day with a Caz-shaped hole in me, I knew what was missing but that didn't mean I was ever going to have it.

I'd sworn that I was going to get her back, and I'd really meant it. I still did, but the heat of my anger was less now that several weeks had passed, and I had begun to realize just how unlikely it was that I could make it happen. For one thing, Caz was back in Hell, and nobody just waltzes into Hell any more than they walk into Heaven without a reservation. In fact, you'd have a better chance of rolling a shopping cart into Fort Knox and helping yourself to gold ingots. Both Heaven and Hell are way off the grid, by which I mean almost certainly not on our big old round physical Earth. Even if I managed to sneak in, there would be the little matter of me being an angel. Conspicuous? Yeah, a bit. And last but certainly not least would be the fact that Caz was currently the unwilling property of Eligor the Horseman, Grand Duke of Hades, who'd already demonstrated his intent to torture me for at least an eternity or two, as soon as he cleared a few other matters off his desk. I'm not sure even Karael and an entire heavenly legion could manage to get Caz away from him, so you can imagine the odds against me on my own. In fact, the whole project was really just a complicated, painful way of committing soul-suicide.

But oh my dear Lord, every morning that I woke up, and Caz wasn't with me, I ached. And every night I lay down by myself in that punky little room on Beech Street, and I thought about ways to get her back. But the one thing I could never imagine was an outcome where we were together, happy, and sane.

If I knew Heaven, I wasn't going to hear anything from my inquisitors for a few days: one thing they've got plenty of up there is time. I wouldn't have been surprised to discover they were all still floating around that conference chamber one-upping each other and hadn't even started deliberating my fate. Just about the worst thing to do would have been to sit around my little studio apartment waiting for Heaven to call, even if I wasn't already prone to maudlin Caz-thoughts, so I invented a few pressing errands to give me a reason to get dressed.

I took a cab over to see Orban, the gunsmith. He's the one who built cannons for the Sultan to use at the siege of Constantinople a few hundred years back. Here's how that worked out: Sultan wins

Constantinople falls, Christendom is seriously hacked off with Orban. Because he knows he's never getting into Heaven, he refuses to die and still hasn't done it. That's how he tells it, anyway, and I'm not inclined to argue with him, especially since the stuff he supplies has saved my skin and soul many times.

Anyway, Orban also armors cars, and he still had my custom Matador in storage in his garage. And although I had enough money now to get it out of pawn, I was beginning to think that a gleaming topaz-colored muscle car might not be the best ride for a man developing such a large collection of enemies. What good was it changing apartments and then parking the Amber Amigo out in front of it? Not that I was going to give that car up—I'd put too much money and sweat and spare time into it—but I was going to have to find something else for day-to-day use. In my business as an advocate and I drive a lot and at all hours. No way I was going to be sitting at bus stops at three in the morning hoping the Number Eleven crosstown would get me to somebody's bedside in time to be there when they died.

Orban wasn't in the shop when I arrived, but one of his assistants, a bearded guy who looked like he would have felt comfortable with a parrot on his shoulder and his keel being hauled or something, recognized me and opened up the garage, a long building on the next pier over from Orban's gun factory. Most of the vehicles inside had been brought in for some kind of modification, usually bullet shielding, but the owners had either gone broke or had really needed the shielding earlier, and Orban had been stuck with the rides they left behind. He sold a few, especially if the security work had been finished, and kept the rest to cannibalize for spare parts.

The guy with the pirate beard wandered back to whatever instrument of destruction he had been working on, leaving me to walk along the row of grills, footsteps echoing from the stained concrete below my feet to the rounded aluminum roof. Most of the cars were huge, limos and old American luxury sedans, the ones Orban had more trouble selling than the Hummers and pimped-out SUVs that today's drug dealers preferred. One of Orban's old classics, a Pontiac Bonneville, had been ripped up like tinfoil by the *ghallu*, so I was in need of a new ride. I spent a few agonizing minutes yearning over a scratched-up but sound 1958 Biscayne that, with a little sanding and a new coat of paint, would have made me a very happy man, but it was just too damn interesting for my purposes. If I wanted something interesting, I'd keep driving around in my Matador. Inconspicuous was what I needed, though it went against everything in my character.

Down at the end, looking like the runt of the litter because of its size and pushed-in snout, was a 1969 Nova Super Sport. The paint that remained was a faded coat of candy-apple red, but I could cover that with a less conspicuous color. It was probably a hot little number in its day—the SS's had a standard 350 inch V-8. The frame was basically okay, but it looked like it would be quite at home rusting away on blocks in the front yard of somebody's mobile home. Not bad for my purposes.

I left a note for Orban asking what he wanted for the Super Sport, then walked back from the Sa Piers by way of the freeway overpass, so that I'd worked up a pretty good appetite (and killed an hour or so) by the time I arrived at Oyster Bill's. It was a little weird to think I might never eat there with Sam again, since we'd spent a lot of time there, but I also felt like I was honoring his memory.

The truth was, I didn't know how to think about Sam and what had happened to him. When you know somebody as long as I've known Sam Riley, aka Advocate Angel Sammariel; when you've gotten drunk together, been in firefights together, and watched a few dozen human beings die in each other's company, you kind of figure you've seen everything that other person has to show. So when I found out he'd been working for mystery-angel Kephias and the secret Third Way operation, essentially running a side game right on Heaven's own turf, under my nose and everyone else's . . .

well, I still wasn't sure how it all jibed. The last time the two of us had talked, just before he stepped through a shimmering door to somewhere I'd never seen before, he seemed pretty much like the Sam I'd shared all those breakfasts with in this very restaurant, watching the tourists get their money lifted by waterfront locals both legit and otherwise. But all that time, or at least the last couple of years, he'd been hiding the whole Third Way thing from me. It made a guy think, and to be honest, I really wasn't too fond of thinking right at the moment. Still, I missed Sam and his big old country face. I couldn't help wondering if we were going to see each other again and what that would be like.

After lunch I manufactured a few more errands, dropping off a hamper full of laundry at Lavanderia Michoacan and picking up some connectors from Radio Shack so I could finally get my television hooked back up. Then I sloped on home, grabbing a couple of burritos I could microwave when I got hungry. The television thing took longer than it should have—the way the wall jack was laid out I would have had to put my television right in the middle of my bed—so I had to go back to the Shack for another reel of cable. When I got back, *again*, I fixed myself a drink. Okay, maybe two. By the time I finished them the sun had gone down and the television was the only light in the room. I heated a burrito and watched the Giants game (they were playing the Pirates in Pittsburgh) until enough of the vodka buzz wore off that I began to look around at the walls, which seemed closer than they should have. I'd had that feeling a lot, and I don't think it was just because my new apartment was even smaller than the last one. After a while I wanted another drink, but instead of fixing one I got up, put my shoes and coat on, and headed out to the Compasses where at least I'd be drinking with other people—a time-tested excuse for not being an alcoholic. I didn't really want to go there, since I knew all my advocate angel buddies were going to ask me about my hearing with the Ephorate, but the idea of going to some other bar, where I didn't know anyone, was even more depressing. And I was pretty sure that if I didn't get out of the apartment I'd wind up fully dressed and painfully hung over the next morning, lying in front of the television, exposed to horrible people chatting away on some breakfast show, which I'm convinced is one of the torments of Hell. There'd been a few too many mornings like that since I let Eligor take Caz away. So I went to the Compasses.

It's an angel bar—the angel bar in downtown San Judas. It's in the old Alhambra Theater building near Beeger Square, a former Masonic meeting hall. The Masons' insignia, the Square and the Compasses, still hangs over the door. A lot of the place was recently torn up by a Sumerian demon (I was chasing me, as it happens) but although there were still signs of ongoing construction, the bar was more or less back to normal.

The Compasses was predictably loud, with the usual suspects in residence—the Whole Sick Chicks as we sometimes called ourselves. (We'd even put it on softball shirts once, but dropped out of the local league when we found out we were actually expected to show up and play softball.) Chico was behind the bar, looking his usual combination of Mexican biker and aloof Confucian scholar, fiddling with his mustache while deciding which of the guys singing off-key at the bar he was going to cut off first. The serenaders were led by Jimmy the Table, a portly fellow who liked to wear old-fashioned gangster suits and looked like he should be out helping Nathan Detroit find a place to hold his famous floating craps game. He waved to me when I went past, but he didn't stop singing, being well into the middle verses of "Roll Me Over," a song that's always more fun to sing than to listen to. I didn't intend to do either. I had Chico get me a Stoli, and then I crept off to one of the back booths. For about ten minutes nobody noticed me, and I just sat and watched God's warriors at rest and play. Pretty horrifying sight, if I do say so myself, but good for some laughs.

Of course I couldn't stay that lucky very long. Sweetheart, large, bald, and fabulously angelic spotted me and rolled over to give me a frighteningly detailed account of all the cheap punks and

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