



## Sleeping Late On Judgement Day: A Bobby Dollar Novel

By Tad Williams

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Renegade angel Bobby Dollar does not have an easy afterlife. After surviving the myriad gruesome dangers Hell oh-so-kindly offered him, Bobby has returned empty-handed – his demon girlfriend Casmira, the Countess of Cold Hands, is still in the clutches of Eligor, Grand Duke of Hell. Some hell of a rescue.

Forced to admit his failure, Bobby ends up back at his job as an angel advocate. That is, until Walter, an old angel friend whom Bobby never thought he'd see again, shows up at the local bar. The last time he saw Walter was in Hell, when Walter had tried to warn him about one of Bobby's angel superiors. But now Walter can't remember anything, and Bobby doesn't know whom to trust.

Turns out that there's corruption hidden within the higher ranks of Heaven and Hell, but the only proof Bobby has is a single feather. Before he knows it, he's in the High Hall of Heavenly Judgement – no longer a bastion for the moral high ground, if it ever was, but instead just another rigged system – on trial for his immortal soul...

*Sleeping Late on Judgement Day* is the third installment of Tad Williams' urban fantasy Bobby Dollar series!

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## **Sleeping Late On Judgement Day: A Bobby Dollar Novel By Tad Williams Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #76551 in eBooks
- Published on: 2014-09-02
- Released on: 2014-09-02
- Format: Kindle eBook



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Praise for the Bobby Dollar series:

**"Delicious, crunchy, Hellish fun....** Bobby's odyssey makes for a compelling, page-turning experience, chock-full of visceral sights and sensory overload." —Tor.com

"A noir fantasy series with a **dark and thrilling story of Heaven and Hell battling for human souls.** Exhilarating action, fascinating characters, and high stakes will leave the reader both satisfied and eager for the next installment." —*Publisher's Weekly*

"When I heard that Tad Williams was writing an urban fantasy novel, I got all tingly. Now I've read it, and **it's even better than I'd dared to hope.** It's snarky, fast-paced, and above all, original. You should be tingly, too." —Patrick Rothfuss, #1 NYT bestselling author of *The Wise Man's Fear*

"Fans of hard-living angel Bobby Dollar will no doubt mourn the end of this outlandishly imaginative series, but not before they savor **another unpredictable and enjoyable adventure from Heaven's most unconventional angel.**" —*RT Reviews*

#### About the Author

**Tad Williams** is a California-based fantasy superstar. His genre-creating (and genre-busting) books have sold tens of millions worldwide. His considerable output of epic fantasy and epic science fiction series, fantastical stories of all kinds, urban fantasy novels, comics, scripts, etc., have strongly influenced a generation of writers. Tad always has several secret projects on the go. 2016 will see the debut of a number of them; March 2017 brings *The Witchwood Crown*, the first volume in the long-awaited return to the world of the Memory, Sorrow & Thorn novels. Tad and his family live in the Santa Cruz mountains in a suitably strange and beautiful house.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## prologue

I HADN'T ATTENDED a trial in Heaven before—not in person. They don't happen that often, for one thing.

*But wait, O wise angel, I hear you say. How can there be trials in Heaven?*

Which is a perfectly good question, because once you've made it to the Big Happy you should be golden, right? You've been judged righteous or you wouldn't get in, and after that you're doing the work of the Highest, so how could you go wrong?

Well, first of all, there's the whole Free Will thing—people and angels have to be free to make mistakes, or else we live in a clockwork universe where everything's predetermined and perfect. Most of the time Heaven does seem like that, a flock of serene shiny creatures living in complete harmony, a hive of buzzing happiness and shared purpose. But we all know that in nature, no matter how well any system works, there's always a couple of dumbass birds heading north for the winter when everyone else is flying south, or one dipshit salmon belly-surfing down the rapids, yelling, "Whoo, yeah! Check me out!" as he smacks face first into the more sensible fish swimming upstream to spawn. The fact that these unrepresentative idiots freeze and plummet from the sky or die without issue isn't the point—the point is Free Will, and apparently we angels are capable of poor impulse control just like everybody else. Thus, there *are* trials in Heaven, and I was about to attend my first.

Although "attend" is a bit misleading, I admit. It wasn't really my first, because I'd been aware of several other trials. Here in the Happy Place you can know about important things like that and even follow them closely without actually being present, although it's hard to explain, because—duh—it's another Heaven thing. Imagine sitting in a crowded bar when the playoffs are on and a local team is involved: you don't have to stay glued to the screen to know what's going on in the game; you can pick up what's happening in a dozen different ways. And that's how I'd done my trial-watching in the past.

But this trial was going to be different, and so I had secured myself an excellent seat, front row center. The poor bastard angel on trial was going to face the full weight of Heaven's judgement, and the entire Shining City was full of anticipation. The Hall of Justice sparkled and throbbed with the light of watching angels, angels who wanted more than just a general feeling about this trial, who wanted to experience it up close and personal. I thought I even saw my boss, Archangel Temuel (who us angelic grunts usually called "The Mule") not too far away.

The crowd of the Saved, jostling each other in the massive shining hall despite being only semi-tangible (another Heaven thing which doesn't really translate), began to murmur with anticipation as the jury appeared, a row of blooming angelic flames that represented the great and the good—in fact some of the very greatest and goodest that our Third Sphere had to offer. I recognized them all.

*"We Are Convened In The Sight Of The Highest To Do Justice."* These words came from the diamond-faceted white light that represented Terentia, a powerful angel who was acting as master of ceremonies. The other four heavenly judges, Karael, Raziel, Anaita, and Chamuel watched silently from beside her, their flames lined up like a menorah on Hanukkah Day Five. *"God Loves You All,"* Terentia added, then turned her attention to me. *"Angel Advocate Doloriel, You Are Accused Of Conspiring Against Heaven's Laws. In Addition To Several Crimes, You Are Also Charged With The Sins Of Wrath, Pride, Envy, And Avarice, All Most Dreadful. If You Are Found Guilty, You Will Be Cast From Heaven And Into The Unholy Pit, There To Dwell In Suffering For Eternity. Do You Have Any Questions Before We Begin?"*

So, yeah, the reason I had such a good seat was because I was the one on trial. And if you've got questions, believe me, so did I—probably the same ones, in fact, beginning with “How did I get here?” and “How do I get out of here again?” But for reasons I’ll explain as I go, I didn’t think it would do me any good to ask.

“Look, you’ve already decided what you’re going to do,” I said, with what I hoped came off as a tough, cold-blooded calm I sure didn’t feel. “Let’s cut to the chase, because we all know the fun part is going to be the sentencing.”

*But wait, I hear you say. How did you wind up on trial in Heaven, Bobby Dollar? How could such a thing happen to you, one of Heaven’s most beloved and respected angels?*

Oh, yeah, that’s hilarious. Kick a guy when he’s on trial for his immortal soul just to get a cheap laugh, why don’t you?

You really want to hear how I wound up here? I guess it started with a dream I had.

one

just an angel

THE WOOD was stacked higher than the heads of the catcalling spectators. On top of the mountainous pyre, the prisoner sagged against the stake like something unreal, a discarded shop-window dummy or a forgotten toy. The condemned wore a soldier’s gleaming armor, but the slightness of the figure told a different story. This was a woman about to be burned. This was St. Joan.

She lifted her head and looked out across the crowded town square. Our eyes met. I saw the pale white-gold hair, the eyes red as blood, and my heart went cold. This wasn’t the Maid of Orleans, it was Caz—my Caz, my beautiful demon-woman, the creature who had both captured and endangered my soul.

Someone set fire to the stacked wood. The kindling caught first, freeing wisps of white smoke that quickly rose and spread around her feet. Within moments the flames began to climb the sides of the pyre, painting the rising smoke with sunset tones. Caz struggled against her bonds, more and more desperate as the fire rose.

I couldn’t move. I opened my mouth and tried to call to her, but I couldn’t speak, either. I was frozen, helpless. When she needed me most, I couldn’t do a thing.

“*I can’t reach you!*” she cried, coils of smoke climbing her writhing body like snakes. “*Oh, Bobby! I can’t reach you!*” Then her words turned to shrieks.

Flames leaped high into the air, until I could hardly make her out through the shimmer of heat. Her struggling figure, the smoke, the buildings in the background, all bent and wavered as if under water. Then, through the rising, spreading cloud, I saw a clutter in the air above her—winged shapes, dropping from the sky.

*Hallelujah!* The bells of the town began to clang, ringing out the song of redemption. *Hallelujah!* The winged ones swept down through the smoke—angels, angels coming to save her!

But then I saw the shapes more clearly. Maybe it was the warping of the heated air, but these supposed

rescuers looked grim and terrible, eyes lightning-bright, wings black as burnt paper and glowing at the edges as though fire were their natural element.

*Angels, I wondered, or demons?* Coming to save her—or drag her back to endless torment? Paralyzed, silent, I could only watch as the bells grew louder, louder.

*Hallelujah!*

*HAH-lay-loo-yah!*

*HAH-lay-loo-yah!*

• • •

I lurched upright, my blanket tangled around me. The room was dark except for a little bit of streetlight creeping in between the cheap curtains. No flames, no smoke, but my phone kept beeping out that horrible joke melody over and over.

*HAH-lay-loo-yah!*

My phone. It was just my phone.

*Yeah, I thought through the pounding of my heart and the slow gathering of my confused thoughts. Fuck you, Handel—and your fucking Chorus, too. And fuck whoever in Heaven decided to use it as our ringtone.*

After knocking half the crap off my nightstand, I found the phone and then the “talk” button. The hosanna-ing finally stopped.

“What?” My pulse was banging like I had stumbled off a cliff into empty air. “This better be good or someone’s gonna die.”

“Someone already did.” It was Alice from the downtown office—our local branch of Heaven’s management. “You’ve got a client, Dollar.” She gave me the details like she was reading a shopping list. “Go get ‘em, cowboy. And maybe you wouldn’t be such a grumpy piece of shit if you didn’t drink yourself to sleep.”

She hung up before any witty replies occurred to me.

“I can’t reach you!” Caz had cried in my dream. And I couldn’t reach her, either, because we were separated by much more than distance. One of us was in Hell. The other one only felt that way.

As I lay there waiting for the morning’s first flood of black hopelessness to pass, I heard a scuffling noise on the other side of the wall near my head. I’d noticed it earlier when I was going to bed, and had put it down to rats, or possibly one of the neighbors in the adjoining apartment scraping something off the wall. This time it went on for a while, a repetitive *skritch-skritch-a-skritch* that quickly got on my nerves. Finally I thumped the wall with my fist and everything went silent.

I wasn’t crazy about my new digs in the downmarket Tierra Green apartments, but things and people that wanted to hurt me kept finding out where I lived, so lately I hadn’t been able to stay in any one place for long. And I *hate* moving.

Between my girlfriend-on-fire nightmare and the noise in the walls, it took me a good minute or two dunking my head in a sink full of cold water before I could calm down enough to get my mind to focus on work.

*Angel advocate, I reminded myself. Somebody needs you.*

The client was only a short distance away, out on the Bayshore freeway, but even after I got out of the apartment I couldn't find my car for about ten minutes. Not, I hasten to say, because I had come home drunk (although I might have been a tiny bit fuzzy around the edges) but because after recent experiences with a murderous semi-zombie named Smyler, I'd started leaving my ride in a different place every night.

I felt like I'd only managed about ten minutes sleep, but it was almost dawn, which meant I'd slept a decent amount: I'd passed out almost directly after getting home. Again, not because I'd been drinking, although I'd probably had a few beers with dinner. (I've been trying to cut back lately, in fact, be a little more responsible.) No, I was falling asleep at odd hours and forgetting where my car was because I'd been sleeping so badly. And I was sleeping badly because I kept dreaming about Hell. See, I'd just spent what felt like half a year there, and it was exactly as bad as you'd imagine. No, worse. It's not something you just get over in a night. Not to mention the fact that the whole reason I'd gone there had been to free the demon-woman I loved, Casimira, the Countess of Cold Hands, and I'd failed. Badly. Thus, your pal Bobby's apparently permanent sense of insufficiency, and ugly dreams nearly every night.

This had been a new one, though, and worse than usual. Usually I just dreamed of Marmora, the fake Caz that the archdemon Eligor had used to sucker me like the smallest small-timer you can imagine, and how she had transformed from Caz into liquid nothing in my arms. Sometimes I also dreamed of the horrible things I'd seen happen to Caz while I was being tortured by Eligor, her boss and ex-lover, although I was convinced most of those things hadn't actually happened to her. (I really needed to believe that.) So what had been different about this dream? Caz told me once that when she herself was being executed, she had thought of Joan of Arc, so it only made sense my subconscious would add that nasty wrinkle to the regular pattern of nightmares.

But there had been something different this time—something deeper that I couldn't grasp, almost as though she had truly been trying to communicate with me. But how, why, or about what, I had no clue.

I found my boxy old Datsun at last, down an alley off Heller Street that I only barely remembered choosing. It was late November but dry and clear, so traffic wasn't too bad even this close to downtown; it took me less than a quarter of an hour to reach the accident scene, just a little way south of the Woodside Expressway cloverleaf. Some kind of minivan with writing on its side lay upside down and badly damaged at the end of a trail of wreckage. Black and whites and emergency vehicles had parked all over the shoulder, lights whipping blue and red. The only body was on the ground, covered with a bloody sheet, and nobody looked like they were in much of a hurry.

Angel time.

I left my car on the shoulder about a hundred feet past the accident and walked back through the ice plants. None of the cops gave me a second look as I approached, but that's pretty much how it is: when angels are working, especially at a death scene, we just don't get noticed. Of course, the cops and paramedics were going to see even less of me in a second. When I was within a few yards of the body, I stopped and opened the portal of bright but unsteady light we angels call a Zipper.

Yes, that's what we call them. Spare me the crude jokes, because believe me, I've heard them all, mostly from other angels. The Zippers are just an opening we go through to do our work. They're holes in Time, and everything on the other side of them is kind of a bubble made of that single moment.

The sounds of the freeway died as I stepped through. On the other side, the emergency vehicles and the passing cars, and even the people, had all frozen into place as if a billion gallons of clear plastic had been

poured over everything—cops halted in mid-gesture, lights frozen at different stages of illumination, an entire universe gone silent as a tomb. Other than me, the only thing moving was a guy in work clothes walking in and out among the motionless cars, pounding on windows, trying to get one of the drivers to notice him. They wouldn't, of course, because he was outside of Time and they were all still inside it.

He saw me coming and ran toward me. He had a thick mustache and dark skin, but all I could really focus on were the terrified whites of his eyes. "Help me!" he shouted. "I have had an accident!"

"Gurdeep Malhotra," I said. "God loves you."

"Who are you?" he asked, stumbling to a stop.

"I'm Doloriel, your angelic advocate." I gave him a moment for that to sink in. "I'm afraid you didn't survive your accident."

He stared. If blood had still been flowing in his veins, I'd have said he went pale. As it was, he seemed to lose resolution for a moment as the shock washed through him. "But . . . but I can't! My son! It's his . . ." He shook his head slowly. "My wife! Will I never see her again?"

"There's a lot I can't tell you," I said as kindly as I could. In fact, there's a whole lot I don't know myself. "But first we have to prepare you for judgement. That's my job. I will do everything I can to defend you. I know you were a good man." (I didn't really know that yet, but it never hurts to calm a client down so you can work with them.)

He was still staring at me. "But you . . . you are an angel? How can this be? I am not a Christian!"

"That's okay, Mr. Malhotra. I'm not a Christian angel. I'm just an angel."

•••

The judgement didn't go as fast as I would have liked. The prosecuting demon was a little upstart named Ratpiddle, the sort who thinks he's going to win every case with some amazing Perry Mason move. He dragged out every transgression the poor dead guy had ever made—a reckless driving where the officer hadn't even ticketed him!—and tried to create a picture of a life of unconcern for others, despite the fact that this morning Gurdeep had only been hurrying because he wanted to wrap his son's birthday presents before the kid got up for school. That got to me, and I'm afraid I referred to the prosecutor as, "scum scraped from the restroom floors of Hell," which, although reasonably accurate, was not strictly collegial. Anyway, luckily for me and Mr. Malhotra, the judge was a stolid ball of radiance named Sashimiel whom I'd argued in front of dozens of times; she wasn't prone to getting excited because some prosecutor was trying to make a reputation. After a decent interval she simply cut Ratpiddle off in the middle of some new detour and declared judgement in favor of my client. Whoosh! Gurdeep Malhotra was off to whatever happens next. (Despite the fact that the same thing must have happened to me, too, I don't remember any of it, so I'm afraid I can't fill in the blanks.) The judge poofed back to wherever Powers and Principalities go between judgements, Ratpiddle disappeared in a smoking snit, and I was free to get on with my day.

two

old friends, new fiends

WHEN I got back to the so-called real world from the timelessness of Outside, it was a bit before nine in the morning. See, just because we step outside it doesn't mean Time actually stops. I think it's something to do with us earthbound angels wearing mortal bodies. As soon as we step back through the Zipper we catch up with the difference between Outside and the real world—in this case, a couple of hours or so. I'm not really a morning guy, but the thought of crawling back into bed to dream about Caz again depressed me, so I headed across the waterfront to Oyster Bill's, a bar that serves food, sort of. I have a soft spot for the place, and I've been going there as long as I can remember, which I suppose proves I have more loyalty than sense. In fact, if I weren't already dead, that could be my epitaph.

• • •

I was polishing off the last of the starch-and-grease mélange Bill mischievously refers to as "breakfast" when an old rummy wandered in from the street and started making his way down the counter, discreetly panhandling (because Bill doesn't like begging in his bar—he thinks it lowers the tone of the joint, which is about the cutest thing I've ever heard). Most of the other customers didn't talk to the guy or even acknowledge him, waiting until he got the point and walked away, but when he reached me I fished in my pocket for some loose bills. The old fellow had rheumy eyes and hair that stood up like it had been fashion-moussed back in the 80s and never touched since. He also smelled like he'd been drinking something you aren't supposed to drink—Aqua Velva, perhaps, strained through an old shirt.

I put the money in his hand and said, "Good luck. God loves you." I didn't say it very loudly, because being polite in Oyster Bill's is a bit like visibly limping past a pride of hungry lions, but he seemed to hear. He smiled toothlessly and patted my shoulder.

"Thank you, friend," he said, slurring less than I would have expected. "I'd like to give you something for your kindness."

"No, really, you don't need to . . ."

He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a creased, once-white sheet of paper that had been folded like a letter. He handed it to me like it was worth something, which was another kind of sad. "Promise you'll read it. Promise you'll think about it. God knows you and wants you for His great plan." Then he shuffled off and out onto the esplanade.

Okay, yes, it was a tiny bit ironic for a wino to be assuring an angel that he's wanted for God's great plan. I glanced at the piece of paper, but it seemed to be more political than religious. The headline was something about "Someone in the White House wants you destroyed!" I almost left it on the counter, but for all I knew the old duffer was watching me through the window from outside, thrilled someone had actually accepted one of his crumpled handbills, so I stuck it in my pocket before I headed out.

I still didn't want to go home, but ten in the morning was way too early to go over to the Compasses and get blotto in the company of sympathetic co-workers, so I decided I'd try my buddy and co-angel Sam, who I hadn't heard from in the last couple of days. (Sam had inadvertently got me into most of the shit I was currently wading through, so it speaks volumes that I still considered him my bestie.)

I hate walking and talking on the phone almost as much as I hate people who walk and talk on the phone, so when I saw an empty bus bench on Parade Street—usually full of brown-bagging office workers, tourists, or those ubiquitous, slightly ratty-looking, downtown young people whose dogs always wear bandanas—I grabbed it and got out my phone. In the process the rummy's screed (which really sounds like a horror movie now that I think of it—*The Rummy's Screed! Return of the Rummy's Screed! Curse of the . . .* okay, you get it) fell out of my pocket, so as I listened to Sam's phone ringing on the other end I looked it over again.

There wasn't actually a whole lot on it. At the top, in big blocky handwritten letters it said, "Someone in the White House wants to destroy you!" with a picture of the building in question floating in the clouds. Then it said, "You have enemies. Don't you want to know about them? THEY know about YOU!" Beneath that was the mandatory bible quote found in so much of your finest crazy-person literature:

*Ecclesiastes 9:12*

*For man also knoweth not his time: as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.*

Down at the bottom a group of slightly odd things had been cut out of magazines and taped to the original before it was photocopied. The first two were a picture of an angel and another of a donkey. The angel bit was an interesting coincidence. I glanced at the donkey, wondering if that was meant to indicate the Democrats, the current White House occupants. Sam's phone kept ringing. At last I hung up, but something else was bothering me now.

Then it hit me. Donkey. *Mule*. Archangel Temuel, my supervisor.

Two more pictures were at the bottom of the handbill, a clock out of a child's picture book and a cartoon of a garden bench. That seemed another long coincidence, since I'd met the archangel on a bench in Beeger Square a few times in the past. And if it wasn't a coincidence, I was being ordered to a meeting.

I trotted over to the square but saw no sign of the fragrant old man on any of the benches. Could it really have been Temuel? Our archangel liked disguises, especially when he was being secretive, and it was entirely possible he knew that everyone in my department called him "The Mule." Also, "White House" wasn't that different from "the Big House" and other things we angelic grunts called Heaven. But did I need a message to tell me people in Heaven were out to get me? Shit, I knew that already. *Temuel* knew that I knew that already. So either it was what I'd thought in the first place, a slightly coincidental piece of mail from Farthest Crazyland, or my boss had come all the way to Earth to meet me so he could warn me I was in even deeper trouble than I thought I was. And I'd missed the meeting.

I looked at the piece of paper again and this time I noticed that the hands on the clock were pointing to eleven. I checked the time on my phone. Nine-forty. No wonder there was no sign of Temuel—I still had almost an hour and a half to wait. So apparently I was going to the Compasses after all, because I sure as hell wasn't going to sit in windy Beeger Square for all that time. Besides, I wasn't going there to drink, just to kill time until I could find out if this was a real communication, so it didn't really count.

How often have you held a piece of paper in your hand and prayed that it belonged to a real drunk smelling of real, rank sweat and old aftershave instead of being a message from an archangel?

First time for me.

• • •

When I got to the Compasses, the place was all but empty—just a couple of angels I didn't know too well, French Didi and another guy, sitting in one of the booths emptying a bottle of wine between them like it was ten in the evening instead of ten in the morning. They only looked up long enough to nod, then went back to arguing about Formula One racing. Like I said, I didn't know them, and Formula One isn't really my thing, so I almost walked out again. I bellied up to the bar instead and asked bartender Chico to slide me a beer.

Yes, I know I said I was cutting back. See, vodka, that's drinking. Beer—well, beer is just getting the inside

of your mouth wet.

Anyway, as Chico pushed the bottle of Negra Modelo over to me, he said, “Looks like all you special cases are coming home to roost today.”

“Who else beside me?”

“What am I, your secretary? Go look in the back room.”

I figured it must be Sam, who had already made one dangerous (and as far as I could tell, completely pointless) return to the bar, where he’d been treated like a returning war hero by the rest of the Whole Sick Choir, but what he was doing in here at this hour was beyond me. The idea made me very nervous, and it wasn’t because it was so early. Because of his known involvement in the Third Way, Sam was seriously *angelica non grata* with our bosses in Heaven.

The back room at the Compasses is actually a little alcove on the way to the restrooms—what the Brits call a “snug.” I pushed aside the curtain and found Walter Sanders huddled over a mug of beer.

Yes, *that* Walter Sanders: the angel who had been stabbed by a crazy dead guy who I’d assumed was trying to stab me, just when Walter was about to tell me something important. (I now felt pretty sure Walter himself had been the target, to shut him up.) Then he had disappeared completely. The last time I’d seen Walter he’d been in Hell wearing a demon-body, working on a slave ship. The last thing he’d done had been to point a finger at Anaita, one of my most powerful angelic superiors, as the person behind the Third Way (Heaven’s currently Most Wanted rebels) and much of the rest of my recent troubles. And Hell was where I’d left Walter Sanders, too, which meant I was more than a wee bit surprised to see him sitting there in an overcoat, nursing a drink like any other Compasses regular.

“Walter!” I threw myself onto the bench across from him. “What the hell—pardon the expression—are you doing here?”

His first response had been a flinch, but when he saw it was me, he smiled. It was a tired sort of smile. “Hey, Bobby. Good to see you. I’m back.”

“Fuck, yeah! I noticed. But how? When? What happened?”

“Still not quite sure. Last I remember, you and I were walking down the street, then . . . nothing. When I got rebodied, I found out I’d been gone for weeks! Pretty strange. A little hard to . . . to get up to speed again.” He laughed unconvincingly and sipped his beer. “But it’s nice to see a familiar face.”

All the questions about to pour out of me suddenly clogged my brain like a dammed-up stream. It took me a couple of seconds to work through what he’d just said. “Hang on. You don’t remember anything? Since you were stabbed?”

He shook his head. “Not a thing. I hardly remember the night it happened, either. I just remember you were there. I hope it wasn’t too tough on you, Bobby. I know you tried to get me help.”

I could only sit, my beer untasted, and stare at him. What was going on? Had Walter been mind-wiped after being sprung from Hell? Or was he just being cagey—too smart to start blabbing in an angel bar about the kind of things that had really happened? I took a deep breath, tried to keep my hands from shaking, and made appropriate small talk while we drank our beers, although I didn’t want mine now at all. When I’d drunk about half, I put it down and announced that I had to go. I asked him if he was walking and if he wanted

company, but Walter only shook his head again in that sort of dazed way.

“No,” he said. “No. I’ll be honest, Bobby. It’s my first day back and this is about all the talking I can handle today—I saw a couple of the gang already, earlier. I’m . . . I don’t know . . . tired. Really tired. I’m just going to finish this, then I’ll call a cab.”

I was feeling a little desperate. “Okay. But you’re sure there isn’t anything you want to talk to me about? Doesn’t have to be tonight. Any time is fine. Because you wanted to talk to me that night. You had something to tell me.”

He gave me a strange look. “There *is* one thing, actually. Does this mean anything?” He pulled out his wallet, fumbled for a moment, then produced a piece of folded paper. It was a leaf from an executive calendar, one of the note pages without a date, and it said, “*Talk to D about A -?s*”

My pulse sped a bit. “Is this your handwriting?”

“Yeah. But it’s from before the stabbing, and I don’t remember what it’s about. I just realized “D” might be you. Ring any bells?”

“Could be.” Damn straight. *Talk to Dollar about Anaita asking questions*, that was what it meant. “Appreciate it, Walter. I’ll give it some thought. Feel better.”

When I returned to the bar, Chico looked at the half bottle I put on the counter. “Sick?”

“A little,” I said. “Unsettled” would have been a better word. Because I knew that was all I was going to get from Walter Sanders. Whatever had made him want to talk to me on that fatal night was gone, burned out of him by the machineries of Heaven. But thanks to the note Walter had made to himself before he was taken off the board, I wasn’t going to waste any more time wondering whether I was right about that supreme bitch-angel Anaita. From now on, as far as I was concerned, she absolutely *was* out to get me.

Which still left me with the unpleasant fact that somebody much more powerful than me wanted me silenced, if not utterly obliterated.

As I came out of the Compasses, wishing I still smoked, something scuttled under a car at the edge of my sight. Normally I wouldn’t have paid any attention, but Walter’s return—or at least, the return of part of Walter, just not the part I needed—had me more than a little on edge, so I looked carefully. After all, if knife-wielding Smyler had come back and decided I was Bobby Bad Angel again, I didn’t want to be caught by surprise. From the split-second view I had before it vanished down a storm drain, whatever it was didn’t look much bigger than a cat, but cats didn’t run like that, legs splayed out, bellies almost on the ground.

If I hadn’t known better, I might have said that what scurried silently back into the darkness behind a dumpster had, just for an instant, looked like a spider as big as a bicycle wheel. But that could have just been my eyes playing tricks on my twitchy, extremely stressed brain.

three

archangelic aftershave

I COULD SEE the crusty old man all the way across Beeger Square. He had the bench to himself, which

wasn't much of a surprise.

"You've got the smell down." I seated myself, but not too close.

Any doubt I might still have had vanished at his shy smile. "Good? I didn't overdo it?"

"You sure didn't underdo it." I stretched my legs out. One useful thing—nobody was going to sit down here and interrupt us. The aromatic top notes of aftershave-strained-through-a-sock nestled atop a deeper tang of rancid sweat with just a fruity hint of human urine. "I was just in the Compasses. I saw Walter Sanders."

"Ah," said Temuel.

"Yeah—'Ah.' What happened to him?"

"He's back to work. Back to normal."

"Bullshit! That guy's been cored like an apple, memories lifted right out. And it's because of me, as we both damn well know. Because he knew something about why this shit is happening to me." *Something about Anaita*, I wanted to say, *that hellbitch everyone else calls an angel*. But Temuel had made it very clear in the past that he didn't want to talk names. "Last time I saw Walter, he was working on a slave ship in . . . well, let's just say a very unpleasant place. Did you spring him?"

No eye contact this time as Temuel watched some pigeons fighting over a tortilla chip. "Your information was acted on. Walter . . . Advocate Angel Vatriel . . . was returned to active duty. That's all I can tell you."

Which was clearly a big yellow Dead End sign. "Okay, let's try something else. If it's not about Walter, then why did you want to talk to me today? Why hand me your little mystery rebus?"

He gave me an irritated look. The cross-hatching of purplish veins on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose were as realistic as his odor. "Because I can't talk to you in Heaven. And I can't be seen talking to you anywhere else. But you need to know that things are bad, Bobby. Some important people Upstairs are losing patience with you."

It was still odd to hear him use my Earth-name, though outside of Heaven he hardly seemed to use anything else, which puzzled me. I still wasn't entirely comfortable with this "my supervisor, my secret protector" bit either, although without him I'd never have got to Hell and had a chance to rescue Caz. Not his fault that hadn't worked out, at least as far as I knew, but I still had too many unanswered questions about Temuel for my liking. "What does that mean? How bad?"

"Bad. It wasn't easy covering for your long absence. And it's not just the Ephorate asking questions, now it's other higher-ups, too. You don't have any idea how hard it is to keep something from Powers and Principalities."

I was getting tired of being made to feel guilty. "So why do it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's in it for you, Archangel? Why should you lift a finger to help me? Why risk your own soul? Because you like me? That seems strange, because nobody else does."

"I do like you, Bobby, I suppose." He gave me a grandfatherly look, or it would have been if the grandfather in question were a piss-soaked degenerate. "But of course that's not all that's going on. Of course not.

Karael, Terentia, Anaita, they're all much, much more powerful than I am—and they're not even part of the High Host, His most important servants. They're just Third Sphere like the rest of us, watching over Earth. There are powers above the Powers, you know." He spread his blackened, crack-nailed fingers as if to illustrate the universe as a string game. "My goodness, it goes up and up and up!"

"Yeah, I get it, I don't want the higher-ups thinking about me so much. So what am I supposed to do about this unwanted attention? Get down on my knees and stay there?"

"That wouldn't be such a bad idea, at least for the moment." He was stern again, an Old Testament prophet in a grimy pea coat. "Just try to keep a low profile for a while, will you? Don't ask for time off. Don't draw attention. And *stop moving around*, for goodness' sake. You've had several apartments in the last year, not to mention your tour of various unsavory motels."

"I could have stayed in better ones if Heaven paid us anything decent to live on." As you can guess, I wasn't the biggest team player even before all this nutty Third-Way, angels-and-demons clusterfuck got going. "Look, I know you're trying to help me. I get that, and I'm grateful. But you know why I had to move all those times, right? You remember the various things that were trying with extreme prejudice to kill my ass?"

"Yes, but that doesn't matter to Heaven, because it doesn't happen to the other advocates. It's you, Bobby. You're a magnet for trouble, and even the Powers that want . . . even the Powers that don't have anything against you are beginning to wonder why your name comes up so often."

"Yeah, I get it—don't make waves, don't do anything weird. But it's the weird that keeps coming after *me*."

Disappointment, this time. I was getting the full treatment. "You know there's more to it than that."

And he was right. Yes, crazy shit does keep happening to me, but a big part of that is because instead of minding my own business, I go over to crazy shit's house and say, "Hey, wanna come out and play?"

"But the stakes are too high for me just to quit," I said. "You know why I went where I went. To that place." *To Hell*, I meant. "And why it didn't work out."

"Don't tell me anything." Temuel lifted his hands as if to cover his ears. He looked like that Munch *Scream* painting. "Just, please, whatever else you do, stay out of trouble. Stay visible to the folks upstairs. Stay in one place. And do your job, your *real* job. I'll help when I can." And then he abruptly got up and walked away across the square.

You know your life is pretty screwed up when even the winos turn their backs on you.

four

too hot

I WOKE UP twice in the night, the first time because I thought I heard something tapping at my window. I took a flashlight and my gun, just to be prepared, but found nothing. The second jolt into wakefulness a few hours later was for no reason I could put my finger on. Still, as I lay there listening to the silent darkness, I couldn't help noticing a very bad smell, as if a large rat had gotten into the apartment heating ducts and died.

Wouldn't that be just my luck?

I woke for the third time about five minutes before the alarm went off, and lay there thinking about some of the bad decisions I'd made in the last year. Then my phone rang. It was Alice, of course, with her usual impeccable timing. She had work for me, an eighty-eight year old lady who had just died in the Orchard District west of Spanishtown. I had time only to chug a cup of reheated coffee before going out, and my head felt like it was full of wet grit.

It could have been worse, I guess. The job itself wasn't too bad. Everything about the deceased's life proved to be ordinary and even praiseworthy, and I saw her soul off to Heaven about eleven o'clock (or at least that's what it was when I returned to Earth Time).

Since I had nothing I immediately needed to do, I parked at the San Judas Amtrak station—what some old timers in Jude still referred to as “the Depot”—then walked through the Station Arcade, first built at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, when the railroad station was the heart of the city. I badly needed some stimulants and there's a coffee place there I like, not because they serve anything other than the high-priced stuff you can get everywhere else these days, but because the manager or somebody likes jazz, and it's usually playing on the sound system.

In fact, I have a soft spot for the arcade in general, and not just because of the coffee joint or the spectacular glass and iron fretwork roof that runs from the station all the way to Broadway. Walking along one of the upper levels beneath the high atrium ceiling, looking down on all the busy shoppers, reminds me in a weird way of Heaven. Of course, unlike the Happy Place, retailers at the Station Arcade have splashed corporate logos on everything, undercutting the Edwardian grace of the building just a teensy bit, but I still enjoyed it. I *like* people, see, I really do. I just don't like them much close up.

The coffee shop is called Java Programmers, which I assume is a tech joke of some sort, but I forgive them because of the background music. I ordered regular coffee, a chicken salad sandwich, and some kind of non-potato chips (a mistake I will not make again because they tasted like baked sawdust). The sound system was playing something modern, a saxophone duet. As I chewed and sipped and listened, I tried to get my head around what I was going to do next.

Don't get me wrong, it was nice to be back to work and living the old, familiar angelic life, something I'd doubted I'd ever see again when I was slogging through Hell. On the other hand, I was only having this brief vacation in normality because I'd managed to avoid being ripped to bits, shot, or stabbed several dozen times by folks who, as far as I knew, still wanted to do all those things to me. Several loose ends from that Hell trip were still dangling, the two most important being Caz, the woman I loved, who remained a prisoner in Hell, and Anaita, the powerful angel who kept trying to off me for no reason I could discover or even guess. You'd have thought I'd stolen her designated space in Heaven's executive parking lot.

The whole mess seemed to revolve around a bargain that important angel, Anaita (masquerading as angel Kephas) had made with Grand Duke Eligor, the big-name demon who was holding Caz prisoner. Eligor had received an angel feather from Anaita as a symbol of their bargain. Actually, the feather was meant as blackmail fodder, to keep her quiet if their deal to create a home for the Third Way experiment fell apart. The feather had eventually come into my possession (don't ask unless you've got a free week or so) and after I got back from Hell, I'd tried to trade it for Caz's freedom. Eligor tricked me: he got the feather, but he also hung onto Caz.

But just when I had begun seriously wondering whether angels could commit suicide, my junior angel friend Clarence had asked me what Eligor contributed to the deal as *his* marker—in other words, what had the demon swapped for the feather? This had never occurred to me, and with this realization I found a reason to go on. See, if I could get my hands on Eligor's marker—which I was pretty certain had to be one of his

horns, since I'd seen that he was growing one back when Eligor accidentally showed me his real (and really scary) face—it would be worth just as much to him as the feather, and I could trade it for Caz and get the swap *right* this time.

But here was the problem: I didn't *have* Eligor's horn, and I didn't have the slightest idea where it might be. I was going to have to figure out where Anaita had stashed it, then steal it from her. Oh, and get away with it, without either Anaita or any of my other bosses finding out or, in fact, learning *any* of the stuff I'd been up to lately.

Easy, right?

As I finished my sandwich and sawdust chips, I watched a bunch of teenagers dicking around in front of a video game shop across the way. Something about the way one of them was spinning around, smacking his friend with a wool scarf, reminded me of Mr. Fox, the dancing maniac I'd met near the beginning of the whole wretched Third Way mess. Foxy had helped me by setting up an auction to sell the feather. I never intended to sell it (at that time I didn't know I actually *had* it) but I wanted to find out what it was that everyone thought I had, so I decided to get a bunch of crazy people in to bid on it.

Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

As with so many of your hero's thrilling adventures, the auction ended with a bunch of nasty folks trying to blow me to pieces with dangerous weapons, and then a giant Babylonian Demon Whatsit—a *ghallu*—shredding my car into metal scrap with me and Sam inside it. But thinking of Mr. Foxy-Foxy reminded me that he knew the kind of people who were interested in things like a genuine angel's feather. Which made him a logical candidate to know things about a Grand Duke of Hell's horn, too. It wasn't a perfect fit—Fox had only known about the feather because word leaked out that it had been stolen from Eligor—but he might be able to point me to someone who could give me a few leads. I certainly needed *somebody's* help, because right now, I was as empty as the giant cardboard bucket whose contents I'd just downed—what passed for a coffee cup these days.

So: not a plan, maybe, but at least I had a caffeine buzz going now, and a next step: ask Foxy.

I was so close to downtown I decided to leave my car in the station lot and just walk. The weather was pretty nice—November in Northern California is like September most other places—and I didn't mind stretching my legs.

I passed several of the city's cherry-picker trucks: the public Christmas decorations go up in Jude right after Thanksgiving. You know, in case someone didn't know it was the holiday shopping season, despite every store in the city draping itself in tinsel and pumping in canned versions of "The Little Drummer Boy" and "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen."

Downtown Jude has really grown a lot in the last ten years. I admit to being just enough of an old-timer now to find some of it a bit irritating. They were pretty careful not to muck up the historical buildings at the heart of things, but everything else seemed to be painted these toy-town colors that really didn't work for me—big swathes of yellow and purple and blue, bright colored awnings, lime-green lamp posts. Sometimes it looks like the whole downtown has been turned into a daycare center for overgrown children. I guess that's progress of a sort. I'm told that in the 70s and 80s it got pretty grim in the old part of town, nothing but bums and liquor stores and strip joints, but I've lived downtown since I got out of the Harps, and I'm enough of a romantic to say I might have preferred the old version to living on *Sesame Street*. And now I hear Jude's chamber of commerce wants to rename the old part of downtown "the Pioneer District." Shudder.

As I slowed down near the entrance to Beeger Square, to let a large family cross the intersection in front of me, I noticed that a couple of guys I'd seen earlier were still walking behind me and that they'd stopped too; they were now having a discussion in front of the showroom window of a baby needs store called Small Wonders, pointing at things and animatedly discussing them. The pair looked a bit like Mormon missionaries, young, clean-cut white guys wearing boring suits. I suppose they could have been a couple of young fathers-to-be, but the act seemed a little forced, and something about their suits and black shoes didn't look quite right. Cops? The po-po did seem younger every year, at least to me. Or were these guys something more sinister?

I was tempted to lure them into an alley and scare the shit out of them, but for all I knew they really were just a couple of kids looking for people who needed the word of Jesus. It would have been bad enough terrorizing innocent Mormons, but if they were undercover cops, things could get complicated. Besides, I had something to do and didn't want to be observed, so I strolled into Beeger Square, doubled back behind one of the food trucks that swarmed to the square at lunch and dinner times, then slipped into one of the public restroom kiosks. I stayed there, savoring the smells of human failure for several charming minutes, then stepped back outside. No sign of the missionaries, so I headed out to the street corner where I had first successfully summoned Foxy Foxy, everybody's favorite dancing dealer in stolen supernatural goods.

When I reached the intersection of Marshall and Main I climbed onto the nearest pedestrian island, pushed the "WALK" button, then pretended to wait for the light. Nobody seemed to be looking, so I drew a line down the air and one of Heaven's patented Zippers sprang into being. As the first group of pedestrians gathered around me I waited, then as soon as the light changed and they stepped off, I leaned in and softly called Fox's name into the glowing crease that only angels and a few other select folk could see.

He had appeared almost instantly the first time, so I looked around. The usual river of cars was inching past, but there was no sign of Mr. Fox—and believe me, he's a hard guy to miss. I waited a minute or so, then was just about to try it again when I noticed something flitting at the edge of my peripheral vision on the far side of Marshall Avenue, a white shape like a very tiny, very agitated ghost. When I focused on it properly I saw it was a handkerchief being waggled up and down from behind a wooden hoarding where construction work was going on. I waited for the light to change, because even an angel doesn't want to get his earthly body ground to hamburger in the middle of a busy street, then I wandered over.

As I reached the plywood hoarding, defaced with an entire catalogue of graffiti, I saw the hand emerge again, sans handkerchief, and beckon me toward the shadows at the edge of the building area. As I got closer, I could make out a familiar silhouette.

Mr. Fox, or Foxy Foxy, or whatever his name really is, looks like a cross between Dick Van Dyke in "Mary Poppins" and the host of a really weird Japanese game show. He wears baggy suits and floppy scarves, and he also happens to be an albino, I think. I say "I think" only because he might be something that just *looks* like an albino human. If you want to get past making snap judgements, hang around with Bobby D. for a while and meet some of the people I know. Seriously. It'll cure you of the tendency very quickly. One of the nicest people I'd met in the last few years was about ten feet tall with a giant axe wound right in the middle of his skull. He looks like he should be making sandwiches out of kindergarten students, but he's actually a sweetheart. Too bad for him he lives in Hell.

Anyway, back to Foxy. I could tell immediately that something wasn't quite right, because even though it definitely was him—same corpse-white skin, same cat-yellow eyes—he wasn't dancing. At least, not the way he usually did—constant swirl of motion, bending, spinning, a bit of soft shoe, jazz hands and big finish! That kind of thing. Instead he was staying in one place, and the only consistent movement was a nervous shuffling of his feet.

“Mr. Bob!” He smiled but it wasn’t the most convincing thing I’ve ever seen. “So nice to see you! Too bad can’t talk now!”

“What do you mean?” I looked back in case he’d seen something I hadn’t, but we were well out of the flow of foot traffic, mostly hidden by the construction scaffolds and the plywood wall.

“Oh, you know, Dollar-man—lots of work! Foxy Foxy always on call. But I see you real soon!” He was already backing deeper into the shadows.

“Hold on. I need to ask you a question. About the auction at Islanders Hall. You remember that, right?”

He laughed—a trifle bitterly I thought. “Oh, yes! Very exciting! Many shootings! Completely not bad for business, Mr. Bobby.”

“Look, I’m as sorry about that as you are. You should have seen how I spent the rest of that evening.” That had been the Babylonian Demon Whatsit I referred to earlier, which had not only killed my car, but had destroyed half the Compasses when it followed me and Sam there. “But I need to know who was at that auction. More specifically, I need to know who might be interested in certain kinds of articles. Not the one I was selling that night, but something . . . um . . . similar.”

Now the fidgeting became a full-force tap dance of agitation. “So sorry, Mr. Dollar Bob. Don’t remember any of it! Don’t remember anyone there! Don’t even remember what you are talking about—suddenly it is all oh-so-distant.” Now he really did back away, still jiggling like a man who badly needs to urinate.

“What is this bullshit, Fox? You’re the one who came to me in the first place, remember? You’re the one who said you’d be happy to work with me anytime.”

“Oh, and I would, I tell you true! But right now? No. Simply too hot. Too much bad stuff. Sorry!”

“What do you mean, too hot? What’s too hot?”

“You are. Whole thing. Mister Foxy can’t get involved. Way too big for poor little Fox Man.”

I didn’t like the sound of that at all. “Just tell me what you know.”

“Can’t. Talk to you soon, Mr. Dollar Bobby. I’m sure everything will go super swimmy great for you. No problem. Just . . . just . . .”

While I waited for him to finish that sentence, a car horn blared a short distance away. I jumped, but it was only a cab driver honking at an adventurous pedestrian who had decided to explore the zone outside the crosswalk. When I looked back, Foxy Foxy had vanished like a New Year’s resolution in February.

• • •

Did I like this idea of myself as a doomed target that even crazy semi-people would avoid? I did not. Fact is, if I hadn’t been all the way across downtown from my car, I would have sloped right back to the Compasses and had myself a shot or two of tell-Reality-to-shut-up. But I didn’t want to get a work call while I was still a sober fifteen minute walk away from my car, let alone a more lubricated twenty-five minute stumble, so I turned my back on the big bayfront skyscrapers and started back toward the railroad station. I kept an eye open, but this time I didn’t see my friends in the missionary suits, or—and I was even more grateful for this—any giant might-be-spiders lounging under parked cars, either.

We should always be thankful for the small, good things.

Back home to my only-slightly-squalid Tierra Green apartment. Just as I got through the door and reached for the lights, something furry ran across my feet. I admit that, in the mood I was in, I might have been a little wound up, which probably explains the fact that I jumped and bellowed in surprise so loudly that the upstairs neighbor started pounding on his floor. It also explains why I didn't see more than the last little bit of whatever it was that scuttled out the open window of my second floor walk-up. What it *doesn't* explain, though, is why the thing on the windowsill appeared to be a hairy, skinny, gray and black arm with a shriveled little bruise-colored hand at the end of it, like an un-mummified version of the Monkey's Paw. But before I had a chance to make a foolish wish, or even to start shouting again, the clutching fingers let go, and it dropped out of sight.

I rushed to the window, of course, but saw nothing in the alleyway below but a couple of recycling bins too small to hide even the most modestly sized ape.

Maybe I was catching all the crazy floating around. Maybe it was just post-traumatic shock. I still slept with my gun underneath my pillow that night.

five

haunted

“SERIOUSLY,” I told Clarence the junior angel as we waited to order, “it’s starting to freak me out a little. It’s been going on for days. First, there’s something scratching in the walls. Oh, and an intermittent smell of rotting meat. *Love* that. Then there’s the Monkey’s Paw or whatever that was.”

“Monkey’s Paw?”

Clarence brushed some lint off his sweater as I explained about the little gray hand on the windowsill. The kid had upped his game a bit lately, clotheswise—more GQ preppie, less Your Dad On His High School Debate Team. He was even rocking some cool wire-rimmed glasses, plus he had let his hair grow out a bit and had the floppy, *just got off my sailboat* look going on.

He was also, at least at that moment, wearing the facial expression of an astrophysicist who is listening to an anal probe hysterical explain why aliens are real. This pissed me off a bit because pretty much all the stuff I’ve told him has turned out to be true.

“Yes, it was a *hand*, damn it,” I said. “Don’t look at me like that. With little fingers and a little tiny thumb.”

“Maybe it was a raccoon.”

“Fuck your raccoon. Besides, there’s more. Last night, I start hearing something bump against my window while I’m lying in bed—like a really big fly, you know how they do, but this sounded *huge*. I kept trying to catch it, but every time I get up, I find nothing. Then, when I checked in the morning, I saw a kind of slimy smear on the outside. Like something really disgusting had been pressing its nose against it.”

The kid was still doing the slow nod. “So, you’re being stalked by Mormons, monkeys, and whatever the thing with the wet nose was—some kind of ghostly Irish Setter?”

“Yeah, see how funny you think it is when *your* apartment turns out to be haunted. Oh, wait, it is—by old people.” Clarence rented a room in some rich folks’ house. *Living* rich folks.

“Burt and Sheila are really nice, actually.”

“I’m sure that my visitor is a really nice cursed Monkey’s Paw, too. Kind to children and dogs and shit like that. But I still don’t want it hanging around my apartment when I’m not there, especially since the Mule told me I’m not allowed to move somewhere else, which would be the obvious solution. By the way, thanks for your words of support, Junior.”

“Look, I’m not making fun of you, Bobby, I just don’t know what to say. This is still a bit new to me, all these demons and monsters and stuff.” He stared at his menu, which he had been doing a lot since he’d come in. “Speaking of new to me, I don’t know what any of this stuff is. Seriously, I don’t recognize anything. Do they eat actual food in Indonesia?”

“Kid, kid. If you’re going to start hanging out with the big boys like me and Sam, you have to start eating big boy food. You live in San Judas, one of the best restaurant towns in the world. We’ve got people selling gyros and Vietnamese-Mex and even chicken and waffles out of street trucks! Not to mention a zillion different interesting ethnic restaurants like this one. You’re going to be dead a long time—hey, you might have been dead a long time already, for all I know—so you might as well branch out.”

“Yeah, but do I have to start with Indonesian? Look at what they’re eating over there. Rocks and bark!”

I shook my head. “First off, this isn’t Indonesian, it’s actually Javanese food. Java is only one of thousands of islands in Indonesia. Like all Boston clam chowder is American food, but not all American food is Boston clam chowder. Second, what those folks are eating is *nasi gudeg*, and it’s really good. The rock, as you so ignorantly called it, is a marbled, hard-boiled egg. The stuff it’s sitting on is not bark but *gudeg*, which is made from jackfruit.”

“Yeah? How about the fried washcloth?”

“Buffalo skin. Probably from a cow, actually. No, it’s *good*. Stop making faces. Just let me order lunch for both of us and try not to hyperventilate.”

While we waited for the food and Clarence watched various menu items go to nearby tables—the kid’s expression was like someone forced to watch ugly people have sex—I brought him the rest of the way up to date. Well, not about Anaita’s involvement: Clarence was still new to this whole disobeying-the-bosses thing, and Anaita was seriously high in the hierarchy. I wasn’t ready to drag him in that deeply. He listened, but he also seemed distracted, like there was something on his mind. He kept saying things like, “You know, Bobby,” and then kind of trailing off as though he’d chickened out on whatever he’d been about to say. Whatever it was, I figured he’d bring it up when he was ready, and besides, I had worries of my own—not just unexplained things-going-bump, but Foxy Foxy and his very obvious case of The Fear.

“Who is that Foxy guy, anyway?” Clarence asked. “How did he find out about your feather in the first place?”

“I don’t know, but once it had been stolen from Eligor I’m sure the word got around, and locating odd items for interested buyers seems to be what dancing Mr. Fox does.”

He frowned. “So the feather means Kephas made a deal with the Grand Duke of Hell.” “Kephas” was the angelic pseudonym Anaita had used setting up the Third Way.

“Eligor is a grand duke,” I told him. “I think there are a few.” But only one whose heart I personally needed to tear out of his immortal chest and squeeze like a ripe tomato, and that was Eligor the Horseman.

“But why would a high angel like Kephas do that?”

“Because no one could open up a new territory like this Third Way place without both a major angel and a major demon signing off. That goes all the way back to the Tartarean Convention.” I saw what looked like our order being lifted onto the pass-through, so I signaled the waiter to bring me another Bintang. (I said I was cutting back and I meant it. Bintang beer doesn’t have a lot of alcohol in it. Honest. But you need something cold and wet to wash down the peppers.)

“Yeah, I get that, but *why*?” Clarence asked. “The two of them made this big bargain and opened this new territory, I understand that. And I get that . . . Kephas wanted it for this experiment or whatever.” He had hesitated oddly before using Anaita’s pseudonym. Did he have suspicions of his own about the identity of Sam’s mystery angel? “But why would Eligor go along with it?”

“Actually, that’s a good question, and I don’t know the answer. So the angel would owe him a favor, maybe. That’s got to be useful if you’re a major player in Hell. The rivalries those guys have with each other are as bad as anything they feel about us.”

“Still, it seems weird.” His look of dissatisfaction turned into something altogether more perturbed as the waiter thumped a bunch of plates down on the table. “You ordered rocks.”

“Eggs, kid, eggs. And I don’t care if you sit there and starve, but if you keep me from enjoying my food I’m going to skull you with one of them, and it’s going to hurt.”

• • •

As we ate, I thought about what Clarence had said. I was beginning to think he was right: if I was going to find the horn that Eligor had given as a marker on the deal, it might help if I understood the deal better.

“Maybe it’s time I let Sam show me his new place.” I shoveled in a last wiggly fork full of *bakmi Jawa*. “There might be something about his Third Way that would put the whole thing in a different light. Because right now, I’m stuck.” The Third Way was what they called the alternative to Heaven and Hell that Anaita had put together. Sam had jumped ship to work for them, so he clearly thought it was a good idea, but I still didn’t entirely get the whole premise. I mean, yeah, Heaven and Hell are moribund and old-fashioned—why wouldn’t they be after eleventy-nine gazillion years?—but I wasn’t sure that creating a competitor for the two of them was a smart thing to do. After all, Heaven has a long memory and Hell has lots of lawyers.

“Where is Sam, by the way?” Clarence had tried a few things, but mostly he had been pushing his dinner around like a ten year old pretending to eat enough to earn dessert. “I thought he’d be meeting us.”

“I left him a message and asked him to, but maybe something came up.” At the table behind Clarence a couple of very American-looking teenage girls were sitting with their parents and an older Asian lady who was probably their grandmother. The girls looked about as happy to be here as my guest did, rolling their eyes at every new dish that came to the table. “But one way or another, I’ve got to get hold of that devil horn. It’s my only bargaining chip.”

*To get Caz back*, I could have said, but didn’t have to. Clarence knew. He’d been in the parking garage with me when it all went sour, when Eligor went home with the angel’s feather and I was left with nothing but a couple of gallons of dissolving fake Caz. Clarence and Sam had basically carried me home that night, then

poured me back out of a vodka bottle a couple of weeks later.

The girls at the next table were ignoring their parents completely now. As the adults conversed quietly in what was probably some Indonesian dialect (if you think I know the difference between Balinese and Javanese you've definitely got the wrong angel) the girls giggled and squealed in English. "She says she's getting an after-school job!" pronounced one of them with disdain.

"As a slut!" said the other. They both collapsed into laughter again. The parents and the old woman didn't even look at them. They may not have understood English very well.

*The grown-ups probably don't know much about what their kids are getting up to here in the Land of the Free, I thought.*

This sparked an idea, which distracted me enough that I missed part of what Clarence was saying.

"... Because if this Kephas stashed the horn in Heaven somewhere, you'll never find it, Bobby."

"No, I don't think that's where it is." But I was focused now on what the girls behind him had said—*after-school job*. "If you had something that belonged to an important demon, the last place you'd want to stash it would be Upstairs. Talk about something sticking out like a sore thumb! It would be like trying to hide a chunk of uranium in a Geiger counter factory."

"So you think the horn's somewhere here on Earth?" He snorted. "Should be easy to find after narrowing it down so far."

"Sarcasm is like training wheels for the humor-impaired," I informed him. "You want another beer?"

"No, thanks. I've got something to do in a little while." Suddenly he seemed to go a bit cagey. "But thanks. The buffalo washcloth thing was actually pretty good."

"You're a miracle of tolerance, Junior." I flipped some money onto the tray to cover the bill and the tip. "I just thought of something I have to do, too."

"Oh." He looked disappointed. "I thought we might hang out a bit longer."

"Why?"

"Nothing." But he looked like it had definitely been something—the kid wore a mild but distinct air of disappointment. "I just wanted to talk to you about—never mind, it doesn't matter. It can wait."

"Good. Because I just realized I have another resource besides the fabulous Mr. Fox who can give me some information about auctions—especially auctions for exotic objects, like angel feathers. And possibly demon horns, too."

•••

There are very few activities that are going to make a guy look and feel more like a pervert than driving slowly past a Catholic girls' academy when school lets out, examining all the young women. (You have to look closely, because the uniforms make them look alike, you see. Honest, there's a reason I was doing this.)

I finally spotted her and eased up alongside the curb. Luckily for me, she was walking by herself. I had a suspicion she did that a lot. I rolled my window down.

“Hi. Can I buy you a milkshake, young lady?”

She looked up with a slightly unfocused expression, as though she needed to see me before knowing whether she was being teased or actually threatened. She pushed her glasses up her nose, then smiled.

“Mr. Dollar! Hi. What are you doing here?”

“Like I said, Edie, buying you a milkshake—if that’s okay. Can you spare me fifteen or twenty minutes?”

“Sure. Do you want me to get in?”

“Probably give people the wrong idea. The SJ Creamery’s just around the corner and down a block. I’ll meet you there.”

Because of slow traffic from all the people picking up their daughters, Edie actually reached the place before I did. I settled in on the other side of the booth, facing her and her enormous backpack. Despite her youth, Edie Parmenter was one of the most acute sensitives in Northern California, and her after-school job had nothing to do with rolling burritos or stacking jeans at the Gap.

We both ordered chocolate shakes. I was still fairly full from lunch, but it’s hard to turn down a serious milkshake, and that’s the kind they made there. “It’s weird to see you here, Mr. Dollar,” Edie said. “Not bad, I mean, just . . .” She laughed. “I totally didn’t expect you.”

“Me and the Spanish Inquisition,” I said. “Sorry—old joke.”

Edie gave me a stern look. “I know about Monty Python, Mr. Dollar. My dad quotes them all the time.”

“Ow.” I leaned back. “How’s life? How’s school?”

“Tenth grade completely sucks, but at least I don’t have to board at school this year. But I have to say I don’t think nuns make the best science teachers. Like, Sister Berenice was telling us the other day that humans only went to the moon to try to find God. And this other teacher told me that God hates San Judas because there are so many gay people living here.”

“Yeah, especially around the downtown fabric stores,” I said. “That’s a real problem for Heaven. Armageddon is supposed to start right here in the Pioneer District.”

She looked at me carefully. “I get it. You’re joking. There’s nothing wrong with gay people.”

“I agree. Not to mention that anybody who pisses off nuns is okay with me.” I paused while our shakes arrived, nodded thanks to the server, then unsheathed my straw. “Hey, I wanted to ask you something, Edie. The last time I saw you—remember?”

“Islanders Hall?” She pushed back her glasses again so she could see to force her own straw into the thick shake. “The auction, yeah. That was totes scary! All those people shooting! And you knocked me over on my bike.”

“It was quite a night, all right. But I wanted to ask you to tell me what you remembered about it. Mostly I want to know who else was there.”

I had picked the right girl. Edie reeled off a list—Japanese Crowleyites, some Jesuits, Scythian priestesses (Foxy had called them “Amazons,” I remembered) and more. But none of the names sparked any new ideas.

I asked Edie in a roundabout way if she'd heard anything lately about a horn that might have the same kind of value as the feather, but she only shook her head.

"Oh, no! That feather—that was crazy! I've never heard of anything like that before. Not since then, either." She paused for a moment, sorting something out in her mind. "The person who sent me that night, well, that person (she was walking around the pronoun, I noticed, protecting her client) wanted me to describe everyone else who was there, too, just like you."

"I don't want to get you in trouble, but can you tell me anything about your client? Anything at all?"

She put down her milkshake. "You know I can't do that, Mr. Dollar. It's bad business."

"I get it. Drink up, I understand. Okay, here's another question. I have a real need to find out some things, and that night and the people who wanted the feather make a good starting point. Any chance your client would talk to me?"

Edie's eyes went big. "I don't think so."

"Well, do me a favor. Contact him or her and ask, would you? Tell them it's important to me and that I'd make it worthwhile to them."

She still looked worried. "I don't know."

"It can't hurt to ask. You've known me for a few years now, Edie. Have I ever lied to you about anything? Done anything crooked?"

"You hit that guy in the face that one time."

"Are you talking about the jamoke who was trying to sell that bogus relic of Le Saint Prepuce? Come on, that was gross, and he totally had it coming. Let's be fair—he threatened to pull a knife on me."

She giggled. "Actually, it was pretty cool. Like a movie." She slurped up the last of her shake and sat back, studying me through her slightly crooked glasses. She could have been Encyclopedia Brown's cooler sister. "Okay, Mr. Dollar. I'll check it out with my employer. How do I reach you?"

I wrote down my cell number on the receipt and pushed it across to her.

"I gotta go. I've got a crap-ton of math homework. Thanks for the milkshake!" She slid out of the booth and out the door, trundling her backpack on wheels behind her, just another tenth grader who could read ancient Akkadian and tell a genuine Stone of Giramphiel from a realistic fake at twenty yards' distance.

•••

Just as I was pulling up next to my apartment, my phone rang. This time it was my frequent co-conspirator, Sam. Finally.

"Sorry I couldn't make lunch today, B. Things to do, people to irritate. What's the good word?"

"The good word is *gudeg*, boychik, and you missed it."

"Yeah, I know. Next time."

“But I still need to talk to you. The shit is getting thick around here. And now, on top of everything else, my apartment is haunted.” I gave him the five-cent tour of my recent spectral happenings.

“Are you sure it’s not just a couple of your one-night stands still knocking around the place?” he said. “Judging by your past habits, I wouldn’t be in a hurry to call an exorcist.”

“Yeah, well, fuck you too.”

We passed a few more lazy insults and agreed to make a new lunch date in the next couple of days. As I went up the stairs toward my second-floor rooms, I was feeling like I might actually be making some headway with the four or five thousand critical issues hanging over my head. Then I got to my apartment, and even as I reached into my pocket for the keys, I noticed that the door wasn’t entirely closed.

You know how those alarms blare when a sub starts diving? That’s what I felt up and down my spine—*danger, danger, danger!* I left the keys where they were and pulled out my gun instead, then ducked down and slid through the door as quietly as I could.

I didn’t have to go far. Two young, pale guys in suits—yep, the same two I’d seen following me downtown—were pulling stuff out of my cheap pressboard book shelves, making a big old mess in the process. Worse, they had actually painted a big ragged swastika on the wall above the television set.

“Freeze!” I stepped in, gun up and braced, and swung it back and forth between the two of them. Both were young, probably mid-twenties. One had dark hair, one had light, but both were as Caucasian as Betty Crocker’s firstborn. They looked like student athletes, maybe a little older, but certainly less than thirty. And though they were equally wide-eyed as they looked at my gun, neither of them seemed particularly frightened, which was not a soothing thing. These weren’t just thugs or thieves, although I was pretty sure they were both human.

“So,” I asked, “you Jehovah’s Witnesses need to supplement your income these days, huh? You’re not going to get much for those old issues of *Car and Driver*.” I gestured to the swastika, but didn’t take my eyes off the men. “Or are you something else? The local Neo-Nazi Welcome Wagon?”

One of them started to lower his hands, but I gestured angrily for him to put them back up.

“If you just tell us where it is,” he said in a calm voice, “there’ll be no need for trouble.” He sounded American, that’s all I could tell you.

“And if you lie face down on the floor with your hands where I can see them, I won’t have to send you to Jesus with a bunch of holes in your face,” I pointed out.

Several things happened in the next second or so. I heard a noise behind me, then something hit me hard on the back of the skull. I staggered, and the only shot I took went wide and high of both the guys in suits. I fell forward onto my hands and knees, my head suddenly feeling like a broken cabin window at thirty-five thousand feet, all my thoughts rushing around and being sucked out into darkness. Also, and I realize I wasn’t a very reliable witness at that instant, but I swear that the swastika painted on my wall ran away.

As I crouched there in the silence following the echo of my shot, swaying, trying to find the strength to get up, I heard my upstairs neighbor start pounding on the floor again, as if a gunshot was no different than playing the stereo too loud. Then somebody kicked me in the head—yes, the same, hurting head—and I went off to sleepy-bye land, which was very, very dark.

six

black sun

YOU CAN tell it's not a good day when you get coldcocked, and then you regain consciousness and they're still hitting you.

Two guys had my arms, one on either side of me. I couldn't see them very well through the blood running down into my eyes, but I was pretty sure it was the two missionaries, because the guy in the black t-shirt currently punching my face was a new player in the game. He was a muscular, bald-headed thug a little shorter than me, with forearms like premium hams. Unlike the other two, he seemed like someone who hit people for money. Instead of just beating my face into hamburger, he was working the body as well, softening up my ribs (well, turning them into the bottom of a snack bag, to be precise) and then going back to the head every now and then just when I started to be able to think straight. He'd already opened cuts above my eyes, judging by all the blood, and my nose cartilage definitely felt bendy and wrong.

He paused when he saw me looking at him.

“Okay. Now we can get down to business.” Bald Thug looked like he might be local muscle. I couldn't swear to it, but I thought I might even have seen him in Oyster Bill's once or twice, on the ass-end of a Saturday night. He finished up with one last, solid punch into my breadbasket, doubling me up.

“How'm I . . . s'posed . . . talk?” I grunted, trying not to puke Javanese food all over my shoes.

“Shit, I don't care whether you talk,” said B-Thug. “Just point. Where is it?”

Man, I was getting fucking tired of that question. I'd gone through a long stretch earlier in the year of being asked that by an animated corpse with a long knife. That had been about the feather. Since Eligor had taken the feather back, I was pretty sure this was about the horn. That worried me almost more than the beating, because there was no way anyone should know already that I was looking for it. So I played dumb. “Where's what?”

He hit me again, a quick, straight right that split my lip and sent a generous dribble of blood down the front of my shirt. “Don't bullshit me. Where's the thing? Some important people want to know—now.”

“Whatever it is, I don't have it.”

An open-handed shot from his left rocked me back. I couldn't help wondering where my gun was: I'd dropped it when I first got hit and I couldn't see it anywhere.

Who were these people, why did they want Eligor's horn (if I was right about what they were hunting) and why did they think I had it? I was pretty certain they were all human, which meant they might be uninformed enough to think I really was holding out on them, and *that* was a scary thought. The young guys on either side of me, although hanging on to my arms with grim determination, didn't look or act like pros, but Bald Thug definitely seemed capable of killing me, or at least killing this particular body. I really hate dying at the best of times, and at the moment I wasn't absolutely certain that my bosses would give me a new body afterward.

I let myself go slack so that the two guys holding me had to pull harder to keep me upright. While I pretended to a moment's grogginess—even more believable if they didn't know I was angel-strong, because their muscle guy had absolutely knocked the crap out of me—I glanced at their positions on either side. As I

did, I couldn't help noticing that one of the missionary boys' had an unusual tattoo on his wrist. I couldn't make out the whole thing, but it was enough to catch my attention.

Then, as they set themselves to haul me up straight again, I smashed my foot down on the instep of the guy on my right, then back-kicked the other guy in the shin. Even as they both let go, howling in pain, I lunged forward and rammed my head right into Bald Thug's gut. I drove him backward, doing my best to knee his face as he fell. I didn't catch him solid anywhere, but I knocked the breath out of him long enough to throw myself onto the floor. I scrambled to the couch as fast as I could, because I could already hear B-Thug climbing to his feet behind me. If I'd been planning to make a run for it, I wouldn't have made it. I wasn't, though. I was just trying to get to my sofa gun.

What, you don't have a sofa gun? I thought everyone did.

I kept mine under the cushions where they came together in the middle, a place nobody ever sat (mostly because I almost never had any visitors). It was my good old S&W five-shot revolver, a piece I'd semi-retired. It was about as reliable a gun as you can find, excellent for stashing in a couch against a sudden need. I yanked it out, rolled, and there was Bald Thug still a couple of feet away, stock still now and staring at the muzzle that I was pointing between his eyes.

"Down on your knees," I told him. "Hands behind your head. Yeah, you've been here before, haven't you?" I moved back a little so I could keep all three of them under the gun, but I kept talking to the pro. "I'm not going to punch you just because you punched me, Slappy—I'm not the vengeful type. But if you *or* either of your buddies move, I'll immediately blow the whole middle part out of your face and then figure things out from there. Clear?"

Thug nodded, hands still behind his head, so it looked like he was doing yoga or something.

"Good." I stared at him for a long second or two, then turned to his partners. "Okay, boys, pull up those sleeves. I want to see what's on your wrists. No, the other wrist, shithead."

As I suspected, they both had the tattoo, which I could now see in full:

"What the hell does *that* stand for?" I asked. Neither of them would meet my eye. "I strongly suggest somebody tells me what's going on and who you three are before I get any more irritated." Strangely, it wasn't just the muscular pro who looked like he was going to keep his mouth shut, but both missionaries, too.

I turned to the one on my right. "Hey, I could shoot you in the balls. That might loosen you up a bit, unless you're extra-brave." I swiveled the gun to the other missionary. "Or I could shoot you both in the gut, and you could watch each other bleed to death, all the time thinking how much easier it would have been just to answer my questions—especially after you broke into *my* place and painted a fucking swastika on my wall, then beat the shit out of me." But I noticed there was nothing on the wall now, as if my hallucination of it running away had been real. "Where did it go, anyway? Did you wipe it off?"

Weirdly, both the younger guys only looked more frightened when I mentioned this. The muscular, bald guy just shook his head. "They're not going to talk," he said. "They're crazy. And you don't have the stones to get anything out of me."

I walked to the nearest missionary, the dark-haired one, and put the snout of my .38 up next to his eyeball. He was clearly nervous but held his water pretty well. "Is that true, kid? You'd really take a bullet instead of just having a friendly chat?" He only set his jaw. I was beginning to wonder what I was going to do with them. I

couldn't be sure one of them didn't have a gun—shit, they probably all had guns—so I didn't know how long before one of them did something dramatic and the serious shooting began. Not that things would go all that easy even if they were all unarmed.

The dark-haired guy, up close, may not have been the sort of mayhem machine that B-Thug was, but he and his blond partner both looked pretty fit, and they certainly weren't panicking. They were both clean-shaven and had similar haircuts, trimmed high on the neck and sides, leaving nothing around their ears or the back of their heads but precise stubble. They looked military, but if so they must have been from the Northern Finnish Irregulars or something, because they didn't have a square inch of tan between them. The pair looked like fanatics—and that was the problem. The more I watched them, the more I got the sense they weren't going to tell me anything useful until the pain got very intense. After spending a long stretch in Hell, I wasn't sure I wanted to do that, even to these deserving shit-stains. But what else could I do? Just shoot them? Yeah, and then have to get rid of three bodies in downtown St. Jude. I could have called the cops, but these guys weren't ordinary criminals, and I might attract more attention than I wanted if I tried to have them arrested for burglary. Maybe I could have called the Compasses to see if anyone there wanted to help me find out who these guys were, but at the moment I was even less willing to share my private business with my co-workers than with the police. The more I thought about it, the more I could see only one practical solution.

While I still had the gun next to his eye, I quickly pat-searched the dark-haired guy, whom I decided to call "Timon," and then did the same to his fair-haired partner, "Pumbaa." To my surprise, neither had a gun or any other weapons to speak of, although one had a can of pepper spray in his pocket. I impounded it, then gestured the two of them toward the front door.

"Go, and just keep going. Get the fuck out of my place. I'm going to have a little chat here with your friend." I waved the gun toward Bald Thug, who was watching with the cold, calculating eye of an ambush predator. "When I'm done, there won't be much left of him, so don't bother hanging around. And if I see either of you again *ever*, I won't waste time with another of these informative chats. I'll just blow your brains out."

Timon and Pumbaa both looked at me, then at each other. It was obvious what they were thinking.

"Yeah, you could try it," I told them. "But I promise I'll blow at least one sucking hole in each of you before you get near me. You may be some kind of fanatics, but no matter what you think, you're not superheroes. You go anywhere other than out that door, and you'll be carrying your intestines with you."

They didn't turn fast enough for me, so I pepper-sprayed them both lightly in the face and shoved them out the door with my foot as they gagged and gasped. As I turned my attention back to Bald Thug, I heard them stumbling in the hall and then clattering down the stairwell, still choking and cursing.

B-Thug stared at me as the noise of their exit slowly died away. He shook his head. "Big play. But you're not going to get anything more out of me, so you might as well just shoot."

"Look, chummy, I let them go because you're right—they're obviously crazy. The kind who'd rather be martyrs. But you're not." I stepped a little closer, still not getting too near him; I never let my gun waver from the center of his torso. The .38 was loaded with some of my gunsmith friend Orban's special handloads, good for a close-up weapon with a short barrel. They'd make a mess of him if he tried to jump me. "I'm betting you're just earning some money. You're a pro—you've got no loyalty to those guys."

He actually smiled. It was weird to see, since it obviously didn't mean the same thing as when an ordinary person smiled. "Don't lecture me. You don't know shit about me—or about them." His mouth twisted. "You have no fucking idea who they work for, or what those people can do. They are into some totally sick shit, and it's all *real*. I would rather have you shoot me any day than have them come after me for talking out of

school.”

At that moment, I heard footsteps in the hallway outside. When the door suddenly swung open I was already turning toward it, certain that the Happiness Twins had nerved themselves to come back and try again.

Sam stood in the open doorway, confusion on his big, familiar face, waving his hand vigorously to fan away the last of the pepper spray.

“Hey, B, my eyes are burning—” was all he had time to say, then Bald Thug swept my legs right out from under me with some kind of kick, dropped me on my ass like it was the first day of karate practice. Then he was up and running. He hit Sam like a fullback on a dive play, and even though my buddy was taller and at least the same weight, he was staggered by the sudden impact and fell back into the hallway. B-Thug was out the door past him and down the hall while Sam was still trying to pull his gun, and although I got up and made the doorway a second or so later, B-Thug was already in the stairwell, so I had to let him go. If I missed him I might wind up putting a bullet into one of my neighbors’ apartments, or even into one of my actual neighbors.

Not that they were going to be my neighbors much longer, I felt pretty sure—some tenant must have called the police by now. Even in this part of Jude, indoor gunshots were unusual. Sorry, Temuel, but it looked like I was about to be driven out of another shitty apartment by work-related mayhem, whether the folk Upstairs liked it or not.

“What the genuine fuck . . . ?” said Sam. He grabbed me and kept me from collapsing. I seemed to be dribbling blood everywhere.

“Oh, yeah.” I paused to listen. Our Bald Thug was not a small man, and I could hear him caroming down the stairs like a two-hundred-fifty pound pachinko ball. “Yeah, you definitely took the words right out of my mouth, Sammy-boy.”

• • •

Sam opened the windows to ease the lingering sting of the pepper spray, then kindly filled a towel with some ice for me. Since I didn’t have a towel big enough to cover all the bruised areas, I concentrated on my face. While I lay on the couch, revolver still in hand in case any of my new friends came back, Sam scavenged the pantry for something non-alcoholic to drink and finally found one of the warm cans of Vernors that I kept around just for him.

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