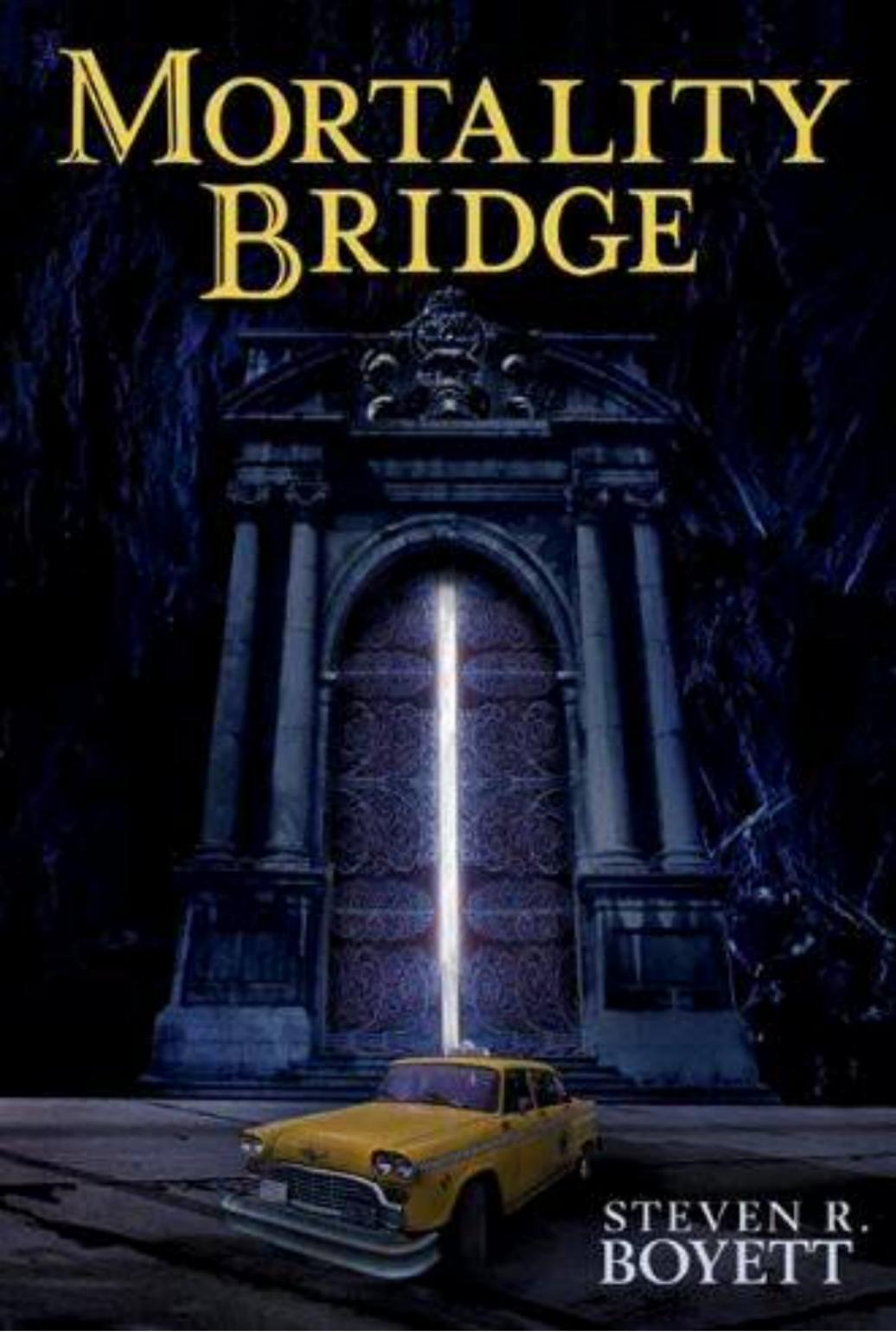


MORTALITY BRIDGE



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CROSSROAD BLUES

HE WENT DOWN TO THE Crossroads with his contract by his side. His burgundy Bentley Continental GT Speed sat idling in the empty lot while he stared through the sloped dark windshield at the restaurant.

Crossroads of the World had been built to look like a paddle-wheeler and it almost did. Driving along Sunset Boulevard near Paramount Studios Niko had passed it many times over the years and paid it little attention apart from noticing its ugliness and vain-glorious name displayed in bright blue neon on a retrofuturistic steeple. He never would have set foot in it were it not for his meeting here today.

He took a deep breath and let it out and switched off the ignition and grabbed his vintage Hermes valise and got out into what passed for winter in Los Angeles. The car door shut with a reassuring and expensive sound and Niko headed for the restaurant. Behind him the Bentley chirped like a fat contented budgie.

THE CROSSROADS WAS crowded and bustling and loud. Glasswalled and sunny. Waitresses older than the architecture

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hurried about bearing unreasonable burdens on serving trays to men in designer jackets and two hundred dollar T-shirts sitting proprietarily in their booths and at the counter and gesturing violently at no one as they argued into cellphones or ignored their boothmates while they texted.

Niko glanced outside. But for his car the lot was empty. He frowned at the crowded restaurant and clutched the valise tighter.

A waitress hurrying by with an armload of steaming food nodded at the sign near the register that said PLEASE SEAT YOURSELF. Niko walked to a booth as if moving in some whitewashed dream. A waitress with shellacked hair and librarian glasses and a name badge that read MADGE gave him a menu and took his order for coffee.

The two men in the booth in front of his scribbled in red ink on a yellow legal pad they passed back and forth. "No no no no," said the one facing him. Sallow and cadaverous with perfect hair and trim black coat, white arrowcollar shirt, dark wraparounds. He jabbed his lit cigarette at the legal pad. "You can't put it like that. What's in it for us if you put it like that?"

Niko tuned them out. L.A. coffeeshops see more deals than a Vegas blackjack table.

The man with his back to Niko looked like some Sunset Boulevard glamrock throwback. Longhaired and strongjawed and skinny. Black boots with silver caps and heels and chains and everything but chrome exhaust pipes. Once upon a time Niko had looked like this guy's second cousin.

While Hair Boy spoke, Trim Coat nodded and smoked and looked as if he had better things to do. Niko considered moving to another booth. Like a lot of former smokers, drinkers, catholics, and whores, being near the source of previous pleasure could be a royal pain in the ass.

But damn near everyone else in here was smoking too. Gouts of it rose above the booths. Behind the counter two ancient waitresses faced each other with unfiltered cigarettes pinched in their fisted fingers like Gestapo interrogators, their makeup straying outside the lines like kindergarten coloringbook drawings. L.A. restaurants had long been smokefree zones.

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Niko fidgeted in the booth and Madge brought his coffee and said Ready to order hon?

“Just coffee for now. I’m waiting for someone.”

“Aren’t we all.” Madge pocketed her order pad.

The scalding coffee tasted even worse than he’d expected and he almost dumped in a load of cream but then stopped himself and lifted the lid on the little metal pitcher and sniffed and put it back. He drummed his fingers on the seatback and stared at the empty seat across from him. Conscious of the valise beside him. As if it held a coiled viper.

The lunch rush picked up and the Crossroads got crowded. Madge headed toward him with a determined look. Niko wondered if he were vain and foolish enough to leave without the meeting taking place.

The waitress reached his booth with pad in hand and opened her bright red mouth to tell him Sorry hon but I can’t hold the booth any longer but a figure stepped in front of her and eased into the seat across from him and adjusted the cuffs of his cream-colored raw silk jacket and beamed at Niko from behind dark sunglasses. “Mexican omelette, beautiful. Rye toast burnt, hash browns extra crispy. Coffee of course. If it’s the bottom inch of the pot and it’s been on the burner at least an hour you’ll make me one happy camper—” he glanced up at her name badge “—Madge.”

The waitress smiled. “And you sir?”

“I’m fine.”

“Fine.” The trendy retro shades looked him over. “Nick-o, look at you. You’re wasting away.” And smiled up at the waitress. “You make an outstanding chicken fried steak as I recall.”

“Best in town.”

“He’ll have that.”

She scribbled and nodded smartly and left.

The man watched her go. “I do love waitresses. Always pamper you, always have that cash on hand. It’s that mom thing I suppose.” The smile turned on full wattage. “So.” Flatware rattled as he paradiddled the table. “What brings us here before our appointed time, Niko-teen?”

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Niko sized him up. The precise scruff of hair. The uniform tan with not a zit or freckle to be seen. Retro shades perched on a model nose. White linen shirt not too pressed and not too ruffled. A Rolex Oyster Perpetual Daytona Cosmograph occupied his left wrist. The outfit had changed with the times but Phil had not aged a day in the quarter century since they'd first met.

Niko was trying to be mister cool but he wanted to throw up. Van's head was still against the steering wheel, the eyes so like his own still stared at nothing, and he still laughed when he first saw it. The bloodrose still bloomed in one dulled eye. No time had passed in that tableau.

He wiped his palms on his thighs. "Jemma got a CAT scan last week."

Phil shook his head. "All this time and this is how you say hello." From somewhere he brought forth an iPhone in a beige leather case monogrammed with a single letter M. He tapped the screen and frowned. "Jemma, that's the wife, right?"

"We're not married."

A wide smile. "For purposes of conversation."

Madge arrived with Phil's coffee.

"She started getting headaches. Having dizzy spells, short term memory lapses, problems concentrating."

Phil spooned sugar and dumped clotted creamer into his coffee and stirred it with a finger.

"Sometimes blurred vision."

Phil blew across his coffeecup and sipped and toasted Madge who had already left them. "A month ago it started getting worse. She'd stare at nothing for twenty minutes and then pop out of it without being aware the time had gone by. Like a little epileptic fit." Phil drained his coffee in one gulp and looked around for their waitress. "Two weeks ago she fell down when we were out shopping. She didn't even reach out to stop her fall. Just fell. She nearly broke her nose on the concrete."

The empty coffeecup pushed away and the iPhone went back into a pocket. "Well we all have our little problems, Niko-lodeon."

"Her doctor thinks it could be some kind of cerebral virus. But you know what it is. Don't you."

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A hand spread across the linen shirt. "Me? I'm just a gobetween, Niko-rama. A glorified mailman. I pick up and I deliver."

"Then deliver this."

The smile vanished and the man grew absolutely still. "Careful, Niko-san."

"Just one word."

"I'm all ears."

"Don't."

"Don't? Not even please don't?"

Madge returned and refilled their cups.

"Thanks, beautiful. I'll bet you'll make some guy very happy someday."

"I've made too many guys happy already."

He brayed like a mule. "Bam! Let me shake your hand. You can call me Phil for short."

She avoided his hand like an Aikido master. "I wouldn't call you Phil for long."

Phil watched her go and shook his head. "That's so great. These girls. They've seen everything. You gotta love em." He saw Niko reaching into his valise and grew annoyed. "Oh have a heart, will you? Have some selfrespect."

Their food arrived and Phil looked up wide eyed at Madge. "Madge my darling dear, I am going to devour this fine meal as if you prepared it with your own loving hands."

"Don't blame me for it."

Phil dug in and talked to Niko with his mouth full while he gestured with his dirty fork. "Trust me when I tell you that we have the best lawyers ever born. A lot of them. And they've been over our boilerplate about a million times each. But you and every other armchair Daniel Webster think you're going to be the one to find the loophole and beat the rap. Well you're not." Egg sprayed from Phil's mouth. Niko watched him devour his omelette like a man who had not seen food for a long time.

The son of a bitch was right about the contract. In the bad old days after Niko had cleaned up but before he'd owned a nice big house in the Hollywood Hills he'd once taken the contract to a lawyer named Carlton Howard, whom Niko's manager Avery

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Kramer had recommended. Howard was thin and graysuited and gold cufflinked, round spectacled and baldspotted. For all that he had the same leonine largesse and sleepyeyed look Niko would later learn to recognize in sparring partners who could kick his ass at will. Niko gave him the contract with much trepidation. It had never been out of his possession. He told the lawyer that the document was part of an elaborate prank and that he wanted to be sure it read like the real thing.

Howard called him back a few days later. "I've read your little prank, Mr. Popoudopolos, and I must tell you that what Shakespeare is to the stage this contract is to law."

"That's bad?"

"Hardly. It contains some of the most effective contractual language it has been my fearful pleasure to read. I'd rather fight the law of gravity than go up against this thing. Did you know it won't photocopy?"

"No kidding."

"I tried to make a Xerox of it to show some associates. I've never seen anything like it."

"Me neither." Niko closed his eyes. "So if it were real would you sign it?"

"I personally would not wipe my ass with this thing. But it's a masterpiece." Howard chuckled. "Sign it hell. I'd frame it."

PHIL POINTED HIS fork at Niko's valise. "Really, Niko-polis. I expected more from you." He dabbed his mouth with a paper napkin. His plate now spotless. "So what exactly is the purpose of this meeting? To tell us Don't, like Jimmy Cagney? Keep ya mitts offa my goyl?"

"Jem has nothing to do with this. She's not part of—"

"Read the fine print, Niko-saurus. Section three sub a little i. Valued chattels attached." Phil leaned back on the seat and drummed his fingers.

"Your business is with me. Leave her alone."

Phil slid his shades down his nose and leaned forward and looked at Niko over the frames. Bald eyes wanting iris or pupil, eggwhite sclera redwormed and dull. "Or else what, you pusfilled maggotfeast?"

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You're meat, asshole. And you've been our meat ever since you signed on the dotted line. What part of Sell did you not understand?"

Niko quailed beneath that cueball gaze. A look around the restaurant showed the diners tending to their own affairs. One of the oddest things here in fact was that he'd not been recognized. Nobody seemed to know him, everybody passed him by.

Phil slid his shades back up and resumed his former velvet tone. "What you've got there in your dorky lawyer bag is a receipt, shitbag. With your signature guaranteeing delivery. We can run a DNA test on the ink if you want." He smiled. "So get off your high horse and listen up, Niko-sabe." He pointed a pinky at Niko and his tone allowed no contravention. Niko smelled burnt matches on his breath. "Our business, as you put it, is with what the philosophers like to call your irreducible self. Such as it is. And guess who's part of that now." The hand lowered to the table. "What, you thought you had a get out of jail free card if you didn't marry her?" The braying laugh again. "You're the one who fell in love, Don Juan. Maybe you should have kept your pecker in your pocket." He moved his plate aside and slid Niko's untouched chicken fried steak in its place. He picked up knife and fork and dug in like a dire wolf while Niko tried to think of what to say or do. Phil glanced up at Niko and held his knife and fork before him in a cross. "Here comes the whiny beggy part. I hate that as much as I hate coming up this way, so spare me before I choke on my lunch here." The utensils turned outward with his shrug. "You signed and we delivered and now it's your turn and you want to welsh. I've heard this song so many times it gives me a headache." He chugged his coffee in one gulp again and slammed the empty cup on the table. "Every damned one of you tries to renege. You've even tried before."

"How could I have? I haven't even seen you since—"

"Not now, pinhead. Different times, different guises, different means. You don't remember because that birth thing fucks you guys up something awful. And I end up meeting you in the woods or in some cheapo movie graveyard at midnight or in some artery clogging choke and puke—" he indicated at the restaurant with the knife and fork "—and I sit there listening while every one of you maggot banquets tries to cheat his way out of a binding contract

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freely entered into. But somehow we're the bad guys. Well piss on that." Phil abandoned the utensils and picked up the gravyclotted slab of batterfried meat with his bare hands and his mouth opened impossibly wide and he dangled the steak obscenely over it like a rat held by the tail and he dropped it into his gullet and swallowed loudly without chewing and then picked up the plate and licked it clean. He wiped his fingers with his napkin and pulled another from the dispenser to pat his lips. Then he dropped the napkin to his plate and leaned forward again to tick off points on his slender fingers. "Now here's the straight dope, Niko-lette. You don't make demands. You don't ask favors. You don't even call me up again. Are the clouds parting here?"

"You have no right. She didn't—"

"Tell a lawyer. Tell your priest. But don't tell me. We signed you and you went and made it a package deal. Buy one get one free."

"Don't do it to her. Do it—"

"—to me." Phil slapped his own forehead. "Doubleplus no, Niko-loser. Get it? Is it the fuck or the you that isn't coming through here?"

Niko only stared and felt a soft collapse inside.

Phil toyed with the ice in his drinking glass and it began to quickly melt. "You poor things." He drummed the table. "Well, there's nothing more to—" Phil's iPhone rang and half the men in the restaurant patted their pockets and glanced around. Phil produced the phone from nowhere and glanced at it and frowned. "My three o'clock." He flagged their waitress and drew a big checkmark in the air.

Niko got up from the booth and tossed a twenty on the table. Phil's hand shot out and clamped Niko's wrist like a shackle and he grabbed the twenty with his other hand and curled Niko's wrist up and pried open his fingers and pushed the money back into his hand. "My treat," he said and let him go.

IN THE PARKING lot the Bentley shook with Niko's trembling.

So Jem had fallen sick with something doctors couldn't diagnose. Something they had said might be a virus in the hope that giving it a name would provide a target for their weaponry. But it had no name. Was not something you could look at through a

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microscope. Niko knew this in his bargained heart. The thing Jem hosted uninvited somewhere in her brain was going to eat at her till she was gone. And it was all his fault. Undeniably all his fault. The gold nib that had traced in red the unique glyph of his own name so long ago had infected her as sure as if they had been hepatic junkies sharing needles.

How could you do this? To Jemma. To Jem.

His loathsome demon whispered But you couldn't have known. No one told you it applied to her. Love's not something you control, buddy pal. You didn't sell her. They're taking her. You got done in by the fine print. You got lawyered.

Niko punched the center console. Fuck that. Fuck that. You can't sit here and try to spread this blame around. You own this one, cowboy. You have a bill of sale to prove it.

And what about Jem, asshole? Just who the fuck are you really crying for here? Poor Niko, him's girlfiendums go bye bye and he'll be aww awone.

More than once he had decided he would start a fight with her and drive her away, be such a prick that she gladly packed and left without a backward glance, the way she had those many years ago. And many times he had resolved instead to tell her everything. The accident. The Deal. The whole enchilada. Tell her what happened that day with his brother Van and show her the secret room and let her read the contract and then stand back and take his medicine. But then he would think about the day that she came back to him. An offseason weekend in separate cabins on Lake Arrowhead. His strength recovered and his life on track. The trip had started off like some negotiation and ended up the best day of his life. The memory of it sapped his strength to set in motion the machinery that would send her off again. He was a weak and selfish man. That's what addicts are, Niko, weak and selfish people. That view kept you safe inside a bottle or a needle for a good long time, didn't it?

What he'd done instead was try to keep the status quo. He'd told himself as long as you don't marry Jem she's safe. Keep her hidden in a camouflage of unimportance and the retribution that is rightly yours will pass her by. It's your name on the line, not hers.

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And now outside the Crossroads of the World where he had begged for Jemma's life and failed he gripped the leatherwrapped wheel of his expensive car and understood at last that he had only fooled himself. Had hung her fate on technicalities and semantics. As if to get away with this through turn of phrase. But in truth he knew his contract to the comma and there was no escaping that, spoken vows or not, the union of their souls itself had set Jem's path indelibly with his.

Ah god. Ah god. He'd been so sure. So certain he would get away with this. Scam his way through and land on his feet the way he got through everything else. But it just didn't work out that way did it old boy? And there's nothing you can do about it now and nowhere else to shift the blame. Jemma's sickness is the very confirmation of your love. And it will kill her. And more than merely kill her will consign her to some unknown awful and eternal punishment against which mere oblivion is a mercy.

The enormity of what he'd done towered before him. The arrogance of it. The unequivocal truth was unbearable. How do you like hitting the wall of the immutable, asshole? How's it feel to know that you can't charm your way out of this one? What's the next lie you'll tell yourself? Your king's surrounded and your pieces are gone and still you sit here planning your next move. Nobody would give a good goddamn if it was just you dying here. Who'll miss one more alcoholic junky guitar player? There's no lack of washed-out rockstars in this town. You could form a union. But you've got Jem's blood on you now. And you still don't even have the stones to tell her why she's really dying.

And now at last he was afraid, mortally afraid.

He started the car. Some old song was on the radio and he poked it off. He massaged his face.

But even so. Even so. I won't just give her up without a fight. I won't give up until I've nothing left to give. Until I've truly lost instead of merely stopped. Now will I draw careful plans and strategies and place myself upon the stage to act against the power that is taking what it has no right to take.

There's nothing I can do while Jem's alive. Okay. Fine. But after that?

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After that.

Niko clenched the steering wheel and felt a desperate notion born. If I can call them up then I can hunt them down. If I can't stop them taking her then I'll pursue her. I will find her and I'll bring her back. However far it takes me. Whatever price it costs.

Seen from outside he was a man woolgathering in his car a few minutes after lunch before returning to his busy world. The unsuspected battles within each of us.

Niko banged a fist upon the steering wheel. A plan then. An objective. Some faint hope. He put the car in gear and then he stopped. Gawking through the windshield like some mislabeled astronaut. In front of him lay broken glass and boarded windows. Sagging beams and peeling handbills over dirty stucco tagged with spraypaint. Crossroads of the World was long abandoned and well fallen into ruin.



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