

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Dirty Streets of Heaven

Written by Tad Williams

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

THE DIRTY STREETS OF HEAVEN



A Bobby Dollar Novel

TAD
WILLIAMS

H
HODDER

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

First published in paperback in 2013

I

Copyright © Beale Williams Enterprise 2012

The right of Tad Williams to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 4447 3857 5

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.hodder.co.uk

prologue

inhuman resources



I WAS JUST stepping out of the elevator on the 43rd floor of the Five Page Mill building when the alarms began going off—those nightmarish, clear-the-building kind like the screams of tortured robots—and I realized I’d pretty well lost any chance at the subtle approach.

Did I mention that when I’m under stress I tend to revert to old habits? And being chased by monsters (as well as being made the fall guy for the biggest fuck-up between Heaven and Hell in the last few thousand years) *will* produce some stress. So that was me right then—jumpy and in need of answers. And when I’m feeling that way I tend to push on things until something happens.

I didn’t calm down any when a husky security guard lurched out of the stairwell a few yards away, eyes adrenaline-wide, shoving his service pistol in my face. He shouted, “Get on the floor!” but instead of keeping the gun trained on me he started waving it to show me where to go, and I knew that I had him.

“Hold on, don’t . . . don’t you want to see my employee badge or something?” I was doing my best to sound like a confused and innocent corporate drone. “P-p-please don’t shoot me!”

“I want you down on the floor! There!” Again he jabbed the gun toward the discreetly expensive carpeting. The alarms were making it hard to hear so I went with that, screwing up my face in fear and confusion.

“What? I didn’t understand you! Don’t shoot . . . !”

"God damn it, get down!" He grabbed my arm with his free hand. I leaned away to get him off balance, then yanked his wrist so that he staggered toward me, waving his gun hand in a desperate attempt to keep his balance. It didn't matter much because I hit him square in the face with my forearm, jolting his head back and dropping him like a sack of laundry. Broke his nose, too, I'm pretty sure.

I didn't know whether Vald's security guards were normal people on a normal payroll or soldiers of the Opposition, and I didn't have time to search this guy for extra nipples or whatever. (To be honest, except for a few retro covens, extra nipples have pretty much fallen out of fashion as a sign of allegiance to Hell.) So I left him alive but unconscious on the floor and tossed his gun and walkie-talkie into a trash bin in case he woke up sooner than I expected.

Everything had gone ass-up now and I knew I would be better off just leaving before anyone got killed, but I do have that problem I mentioned—when I get agitated I just kind of put my head down and keep shoving. Like a rhino with an itch, as my old boss delicately put it. Anyway, I decided I might as well see where this whole thing was going to lead.

I knew I had about seven or eight minutes maximum before the building was completely overrun by people with guns who would be happy to use them on me, so I hurried up the stairs to the 44th floor where I paused for a second or two to admire the view of Stanford University's creepy Gothic towers through the picture window at the end of the hall. The master office suite clearly took up the entire floor, so I walked through the only door and found myself standing in front of the calmest woman I have ever pointed a gun at. She was good-looking, too—slender, with Eurasian features, short, dark hair, and extremely cold eyes. I was pretty certain she'd already pushed the silent alarm.

"Who are you?" she asked in the tone of a bored DMV clerk. She didn't even look down at the barrel of the .38, although it was only inches from her nose. "And what do you want?"

"I'm here to see your boss," I explained. "Shall I just go in?"

To her credit she didn't bother to argue with me or even threaten me, just came over the desk hissing and clawing like a methedrine ocelot, doing her best to tear off my face with her long Big Apple Red

fingernails. Within a few seconds of rolling around on the carpet with her I had determined that she was just as strong as I was, quite possibly a better fighter than I was, and—at least based on the weird things her eyes were doing as we rolled around on the floor and I struggled to keep her teeth away from my neck—almost certainly not a human being. I mean, the bitch was scary.

Demons don't like silver. It's one of the few old standbys that work, at least a bit. (Holy water, for instance, is about as much use against Hell's servants as Diet Pepsi.) Silver doesn't always kill them, but it almost always hurts them. Unfortunately, what with one thing and another that week I didn't have any silver bullets on me, so when I got my hand free for a moment, I just shoved the gun against her face and fired three of the ordinary kind. I had my silencer on so the .38 didn't make too much noise, but she sure as hell did. She reeled back, screeching like a power drill and clawing at the remains of her features like someone trying to get soapy water out of their eyes, then came after me again. Any normal demon in a real-world body would have gone down just from being shot in the face, but she was one of those stubbornly murderous ones—even if you cut off her arms and legs she'd be crawling across the floor like a snake, snapping at your ankles with her teeth.

I hate the stubborn ones.

As soon as she had rubbed the blood out of her remaining eye she leaped forward and did her best to wrap her arms around me, dragging me back down to the floor. I didn't want to use my last couple of bullets, so I did my best to beat her unconscious with the butt of my Smith & Wesson, but all I managed to do was push her jaw unnaturally far to the side of her face, which made her look like an extremely disturbing Popeye cosplay girl but didn't slow her down at all. She was on top of me again, slapping and slashing with her nails at my eyes so that all I could do was cover up. Meanwhile she was also doing her best to drive her knee up through my groin and into my chest, introducing my balls to my heart, a meeting that should never take place. This gal was serious bad news and any moment now the guards were going to come busting in and it would be all over for your new friend, Bobby Dollar.

It wasn't the first time I ever found myself with a howling, angry

she-creature on top of me—and God knows it probably wasn't going to be the last, either—but as the crooked, fanged mouth of Kenneth Vald's secretary snapped at my face, showering me with bloody froth, I couldn't help reflecting on how I had yet again wound up in such an extremely unpleasant situation.

And as usual, it had been my own stupid fault.

one

an old testament cinch



LET ME go back to the beginning. It'll make more sense then. Not a *lot* of sense, but more than it probably does right now.

Pretty much everybody was already in the bar the night it all started—Monica Naber, big old Sweetheart, Young Elvis, and all the rest of the Whole Sick Choir. Oh, except that because of recent changes in the local ordinances Kool Filter was stuck downstairs, smoking out on the sidewalk. Yes, some of us angels smoke. (I used to do it, but I don't anymore.) Our bodies are loaners, after all, and it's not like we're too worried about dying. Anyway, it was a pretty normal late February night in The Compasses until my friend Sam came in towing an overcoat full of new meat.

"Fuck the poor and all their excuses," he shouted to the room. "Somebody get me a drink!" He dragged over this young guy I've never seen before and shoved him into a chair beside me. "Here's someone you need to know, kid," he said. "Meet Bobby Dollar, king of the assholes." Sam dropped into a seat on the other side of him. The youngster was trapped, but he wasn't panicking yet. He grinned at me like he was glad to see me—big, stupid, slightly sickly grin. The rest of him was thin, white, and kind of bookish, with a haircut that on anyone but an angel would have screamed, "Mom did this!" A beginner with lots of theories, I guessed, but if he was hanging out with my pal Sam he'd be getting some rude lessons in Practical Theology.

"Who's your little chum, Sammy?" I knew the kid was one of us—we can recognize each other—but he sure looked uncomfortable wearing a body. "Amateur or visiting pro?"

Junior immediately put on what I think of as the Intelligent Dog look: *I don't know what you're saying, but I'm sure as hell trying to seem like I do.* It didn't impress me a whole lot more than his nervous smile.

"Go ahead, guess." Sam craned around. "Hey, Slowpoke Rodriguez," he yelled at Chico the bartender, "how come you'll gobble my knob for free, but you won't pour me a drink for money?"

"Shut up, Riley, you're boring me," Chico said, but he dropped his bar rag and turned to the glasses cabinet.

"Sammy boy, you're even more charming than usual," I observed. "So who's this? I'm guessing trainee."

"Of course he fuckin' is, B. Can't you just smell the House on him?" That's how Sam talks about what most people refer to as "Heaven"—"up at the House." As in, the rest of us work on the Plantation.

"Really?" Monica Naber stood up in the next booth so gracefully you probably wouldn't guess she'd been drinking tequila slams since sundown. "Did you hear that, folks? We've got a rookie!"

"Oh, yeah!" That from Young Elvis. He'd been the designated New Guy for two years now and he was obviously thrilled. "Kick his newbie ass!"

"Shut your talk-hole," said Walter Sanders without looking up from his glass. "Just because you were a stupid rookie doesn't mean they all are."

Sam's new kid squirmed in the chair beside me. "I'm not really a *total* rookie. . . ."

"Yeah?" Sanders looked up this time. He's kind of an intense guy, and he stared at the kid like he was going to dissect him. "Where did you guardian? How long?"

"Guardian? But . . . I didn't . . ." The kid blinked. "I was in the Records Halls . . ."

"Records?" Sanders scowled like he'd drunk curdled milk. "You were a file clerk? And now you're an advocate? Congratulations—that's quite a jump."

Right on cue, Chico banged the register closed—it went "*ting!*" "*Look, Daddy,*" said Sam in a squeaky little child voice. "*Teacher says every time a bell rings an angel gets his wings.*"

"Don't be mean," Monica Naber said. "It's not the kid's fault."

Junior looked grateful for her support, but there were things he didn't know. With Monica, you live by her logic but you die by her logic, too. Women, even female angels, can be colder than men in some really scary ways.

The uproar died away after a bit and most of the drinkers went back to their private conversations or solitary musings. Sam went off to pick up his drink order. I looked at the new kid, who was no longer grinning like everything was great. "So how *did* you wind up here?" I asked. "Who pulled strings for you?"

"I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Look, you know what we do, right?"

"Advocates? Sure." He nodded vigorously. "I'm really looking forward to—"

"Shut up and try to follow me. How did you get jumped into a position that takes most of us years to get into?"

Headlights, comma, deer in. "I . . . I don't know. They just told me . . ."

"Uh huh. So who's watching out for your career? *Somebody* must be. Think hard."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

Sam returned with his drinks, a shot glass full of bitters liberally dosed with Tabasco and a root beer to chase it with. Sam's been sober for a few years now. Doesn't keep him out of The Compasses. "Is he cryin' yet, B?"

"No, but I'm working on it. How did you pick up this wet sock, Sammy?"

"I was just up at the House. They dropped him on me." His pocket started to buzz. "Shit. A client already?" He scowled at his phone, then downed the bitters and sucked in air like someone had poured kerosene on his crotch. "Want to tag along?" he asked me. "A favor to me. You can explain things to little Clarence the Trainee Angel here."

"Clarence?" I drew back. "He's not really called that, is he?"

"That's not my name!" For the first time the youngster was showing a little back-the-fuck-up in his own defense. I liked him better, but that still didn't make for a whole lot.

"Yeah, but I don't remember the name they told me, so I'm calling you Clarence," Sam declared, finishing off his root beer and then wip-

ing his mouth hard with the back of his hand, just like in the old days before he drank his previous body to death. "Let's go."

"Stop that. My name isn't Clarence, it's Haraheliel." The new kid was being Very Brave—a regular little soldier. "My working name is Harrison Ely."

"Okay. Clarence it is, then," I said. "Sam, my chariot or yours?"

"I'm kind of parked halfway onto the sidewalk and no one's noticed it yet, so I guess we should take mine."

It wasn't easy getting Sam's boring, company-issue sedan off the sidewalk—some truck had come along and parked to unload, and by the time we squeezed out we had left more than a little of Sam's paint on the truck's bumper. If it had been my ride I would have been screaming, but Sam doesn't care about cars.

"Where is it?" I asked him as we turned onto Main, one of downtown Jude's busiest streets, meeting place of commerce, inept street performance, and world-class panhandling. The kid was struggling to pull the long-unused seatbelt out from between the back seats. Most of the well-known skyline was behind us, but the sparkling towers of the Shores stood a short distance to the north and the weird silhouettes of the harbor cranes loomed before us, lit from below, angular as a fleet of alien landing craft.

"The water," Sam said. "Pier 16, to be exact."

"Floater?"

"Floater, sorta. Only hit the water a few minutes ago. Probably just crossed over."

"Anyone I know?"

"Some old broad named Martino. Ring any bells?"

As I shook my head, the kid piped up from the back seat. "That's a terrible way to talk about a unique human soul."

Angels, I reminded myself. We're angels. And angels are patient.

The Port of San Judas covers about ten square miles along the southwestern shore of San Francisco Bay. The car was in the water at the public end, a broken wooden barrier marking where it had gone over into the empty slipway. Spotlights cut through the darkness, splashing the high port office walls and turning the bay water bright as jade.

Down on the ground the harbor police and the regular cops looked

like they had arrived in a hurry; a couple of tow trucks and a fire engine were also parked along the pier at odd angles. Below them a harbor diver had just surfaced after attaching cables to something; at his thumbs-up the winches on the tow trucks started turning. The cables went rigid, the motors whined, and after a long moment the back end of a large white vehicle broke the surface, but almost immediately one of the motors stuttered and died. The other strained and coughed for a few more seconds, then it gave up too. The tow truck drivers and several harbor police began to shout back and forth at each other as we climbed out of Sam's car.

"Why don't they pull it the rest of the way out?" Clarence asked, eyes wide. "That poor woman!"

"Because it's probably too heavy—full of water," I told him. "But the driver's already dead, or we wouldn't have got the call, so it doesn't matter how long she sits there. Do you know about going Outside?"

"Of course!" He was offended.

"Oh, he's a pistol, this one." Sam was already walking toward the shimmer in the air, like a vertical mirage, that announced a way out. The official term for them is "egress," but down here we call them Zip-pers. We make them when we need them, and we simple Earthbound angels don't really know how they work, just that they do.

As the kid and I fell in behind Sam, a couple of bystanders looked briefly in our direction but then sort of lost interest. We're not easy to notice when we're working, I've learned over the years. We're still *there*, if you know what I mean—we have real bodies—but if we don't want you to see us then you probably won't, or at least you won't remember it afterward.

Sam and the kid vanished into the shimmering line down the middle of the air and I stepped through after them.

As always, it was the quiet of Outside that struck me first, a great, heavy hush as if we had suddenly dropped into the biggest, most silent library in the universe. But in most ways we were still where we had begun—the docks, with the cop cars and safety vehicles burning the darkness with red and blue lights and the downtown skyline stretching skyward behind them like a mountain range. But the police spotlights weren't moving, nor were the cops' mouths, a helicopter over the Intel Tower, a diver floating on green jelly swells, or even the few

seagulls who had been startled off the pilings by all the activity and were now frozen in mid air like stuffed displays hung from a museum ceiling. Only one thing was different Outside: a woman with short gray hair and a dark raincoat stood in the midst of the petrified policemen, though none of them could see her.

"That's her," Sam said. "You want to walk the kid through meeting the client while I'm waiting for the guardian, B? That way he can learn from the best."

"Lying bastard," I said, but I got the facts I needed from him and then led the kid down to the puddle-glazed dock.

"We look the same here," the kid said, staring at his hands. "I mean, we do, don't we? Like our earth-bodies?"

"Pretty much."

"I thought we'd look more . . . angelic." He looked embarrassed. "Like in Heaven."

"This isn't Heaven—we're still on the plane of earthly existence, more or less. We just stepped out of Time. But we don't *have* to look the same here, it's just sort of a tradition. The Other Side folk prefer to make themselves more intimidating. You'll see."

As we approached our new client, she stared at us with an expression I had seen on a lot of faces in a lot of similar situations—total, utter confusion.

"Silvia Martino," I said. "God loves you."

"What's going on?" she asked. "Who are you?" She flapped her hands at the motionless cops and firefighters. "What's wrong with these people?"

"They're alive, Mrs. Martino. I'm afraid you're not." I've dumbed down my explanations over the years. I used to think breaking it to them slowly was the kindest way, but I learned differently. "You apparently drove your car into the bay. Any reason?"

She was more than a bit beyond sixty but no old lady. In fact, she looked like someone who might get old but would never really get old, if you know what I mean. Then I remembered that she would never get any older than this moment.

"Drove my car . . . ?" She looked at the white bulk of her SUV hanging at the end of the straining tow truck cables like Moby Dick, decorated with fantails of glassy, motionless water. "Oh, dear. That's *my* car, isn't it?" Her eyes widened. She was beginning to do the math. "I was

trying to turn around, and I guess I got . . . confused." She blinked. "Am I . . . am I really . . . ?"

"I'm afraid so."

Then the tears came. This is the part I hate most about my job. Sometimes your clients are so happy to be out of their sick, dying bodies that they practically dance. But those who get caught by surprise, who suddenly come to understand that there's no more, that's it, game over . . . well, those are tough. There's not much to say while they work it out, but if they need it you can put your arms around them and hold them when you're Outside, and that's just what I did. You would have, too.

After a while she was through the worst of it. She was a tough lady—I liked her. She pulled away from me and dried her eyes, then asked, "And who are you?" She looked at me more carefully now, as though I might be about to try some after-death marketing scam on her.

"My name is Doloriel. I'm an advocate angel of the Third House." I didn't bother to introduce Clarence because he would have only done something stupid like promised her that everything was going to turn out all right. (I could tell by his disappointed expression that was exactly what he'd planned to do.) Instead I pointed back at Sam, who was now talking to the lady's guardian, a wispy, half-transparent thing that gleamed in its folds like foxfire. "That fellow is Sammariel, another advocate angel. He'll speak for you."

"Speak for me? How? When?"

"At judgement," I said. "Very soon."

"Judgement . . . ?" Eyes suddenly wide and fearful.

"Just wait here, please." I pulled the kid aside and gave him some fairly harsh warnings about what he was allowed to do and say, then left him with the recently departed. He and the dead woman stared at the half-submerged car as though wishing someone would leap out of it and help the conversation along. I was glad he was keeping his mouth shut. People deal faster (and better, I think) with that terrible, ultimate realization when you let them work it out for themselves. Besides, what are you going to tell them? "Just fooling, you're not really dead! This is just a wake-up call for you to fix your life!" Because it's not. It's the end, at least of their time on Earth, and no cheerful chitchat is going to change that.

The guardian angel had just finished briefing Sam when I joined the

party. “Briefing” isn’t as much like the real world as it sounds: The guardians kind of make their knowledge available to us, and for the entirety of the proceedings it’s just *there*, at our mental fingertips, as though the memories were our own. Thank goodness that ends again after the sentence—it would be overwhelming to carry the details of every life you’ve argued for, all the time. It’s tough enough sometimes just dealing with the stuff that sticks.

Anyway, the guardian gave me what I guess was an interested look, although it’s hard to tell with them because they’re far less human in appearance than we are—a lot less corporeal, too. They don’t use actual meat bodies, of course, otherwise people would be wondering why some kind of shiny human jellyfish was always floating along next to them. “You’re Doloriel,” it said. “I’ve heard of you.”

“Can’t say the same about you until I know your name.”

“Iphaeus.” It stared at me, twinkling a little. “Heard you like to piss people off.”

“Wouldn’t go so far as to say I like it.”

“Look,” interrupted Sam, “if the two of you want to get to know each other better you can always arrange a romantic dinner. Right now . . .”

The guardian gave a sort of shiver and its glow dwindled. “He’s here.”

Something had just stepped through a red-lit portal from the Other Place (their equivalent of the Zipper was less like a shimmering white line and more like a fiery wound) and now stood brushing imaginary lint from its immaculate, blood-colored suit.

“Grasswax,” said Sam. “Shit. They’re going to make me work for this one.”

I heard Mrs. Martino gasp when she saw the demon, and I was sorry I’d left her with the kid. It’s pretty nasty when a client realizes Hell is real. I hoped she’d make it through the actual trial without breaking down—some judges are real assholes about that. The quality of mercy may droppeth as a gentle rain from Heaven, but sometimes you’d swear there was a drought.

Another shape stepped out of the wound a few moments after Prosecutor Grasswax, a muscular, hairy demon in a cheap suit with a wolfish snout and an attitude to match. I’d seen him before, though I couldn’t remember where—a nasty piece of work named Howlingfell. Bodyguards didn’t usually show up for this kind of routine work on

neutral turf. I wondered why the prosecutor felt he needed protection. From the way Howlingfell sniffed the air, he looked like he was working. Didn't really make much sense. His boss was ignoring him.

From a distance Grasswax the prosecutor looked pretty much like a man, but as he drew closer you could see that the shadows under his cheekbones were actually gaps in the skin like gills that showed the muscle working beneath, and his close-cropped hair was something more like bristles or even scales. Also, nobody would have mistaken those serpentine eyes for human. Like I told the kid, our opponents like to intimidate.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Grasswax, showing his extremely long, extremely even teeth. "Who is against me? Doloriel?" The smile twisted up just a little at one corner. "That will be a treat."

"It's me," Sam said.

"Ah, Sammariel." He nodded. "Haven't seen you since Thanksgiving. That was you, wasn't it? The man with the knife?"

"Electric carving knife," Sam explained to me and the kid, who had wandered over to see his first real demons, or at least that's what his wide-eyed stare suggested. "Did his whole family."

"Very thorough." Grasswax rubbed his hands together. "Shall we get on with it?"

"Have you been advised yet?" I asked.

"Oh, quite." The prosecutor reached into his pocket and pulled out something the size of a fat little spider, but much less attractive, which he dangled in the air by one scaly leg—Hell's version of a guardian angel. "Mrs. Martino's account executive has filled me in on all the particulars."

I pulled Clarence to one side while Sam and the prosecutor called for a judge so I could review the rules of engagement for him (mostly to make sure he didn't do anything stupid.) "Okay, stand over here and listen close. This is for this lady's soul, and that's our most important job, you understand? If you do anything to compromise that I'm going to tear your halo off and beat you bloody with it. Got it?"

Clarence nodded, still wide-eyed.

"Because this is Hell we're up against, and they're going to lie and cheat and stretch every truth to the screaming point. That's why we have procedures. We can't afford to get angry, because then we don't do a good job. Got it?"

Another nod and a hint of impatience. I hate rookies.

"But most importantly, kid, *never* trust the Opposition."

"Trust them? Are you kidding . . . ?"

"It's not always this obvious. Just remember what Uncle Bobby tells you and you'll be fine." Because Uncle B. had already made all those rookie mistakes and had been lucky to survive some painful lessons. "When a demon opens his mouth, he's lying. Period. Assume anything else and your final paycheck will have to be printed on asbestos, because you'll be somewhere *very* hot."

Then Xathanatron the judge appeared like silent lightning.

It's a bit intense the first time you see a Principality manifest, which is one reason I had moved the kid out of the way. My ears rang for a week after I met my first judge up close, not to mention those floating spots of light. The important angels are . . . bright. Overwhelming. Beautiful, but with a lot of scary in it. Enough to give even the most devout second thoughts about wanting to see the Highest someday.

You couldn't really make out a face in that fierce glare or even much of a shape, as if someone had constructed a Christmas tree angel out of burning magnesium wire, but I knew it was Xathanatron because . . . well, I just knew. When you're in their presences you perceive whatever the Principalities want you to perceive about them—and nothing more. From my own experience I knew Xathanatron was severe in an old-school kind of way but rigorously fair. Sam wouldn't get cheated, but he wasn't going to get any surprise breaks either.

I put myself between Clarence and Howlingfell—the kid looked as if he was going to wet himself if he had to stand next to the demon. Mrs. Martino joined us, eyes dry now and face solemn, making an audience of four for the proceedings, but I could tell she was fighting hard for composure. I couldn't help admiring her again. I hoped we could help her.

"How come there's so many of you holy-rollers here?" Howlingfell snarled in my ear. "That ain't right."

"We heard a rumor you were going to sing 'Ave Maria.'"

"A rumor I was gonna eat your face, you mean." Usually Hell has the best writers—but not always, obviously.

"What's going to happen now?" our rookie whispered in my other ear.

"What do you think? Prosecutor Grasswax is going to try to con-

vince the judge that Mrs. Martino here should go straight to Hell, do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Our boy Sam is going to argue that she should be gathered unto the bosom of the Highest instead." I glanced toward the frightened, quiet soul in question. "That's how it works. Didn't they give you any prep at all?"

"I didn't get much warning." Clarence stared with the kind of sickened fascination secret Christians must have felt watching their exposed fellows being gobbled by Roman lions. "They just . . . sent me."

Sent him to fill what was supposedly Heaven's most important job—protecting human souls from the Opposition—without much of any training. Odd, you say? No kidding. I filed this bit of weirdness away for later.

Grasswax was already in full swing, pacing along the dock before the coruscating judge like a goblin dancing in front of a fireplace, jabbing his long, pointy fingers as he described in lurid detail what seemed like every petty thought, unkind word, or social misdemeanor poor old Mrs. Martino had ever made. The prosecutor didn't seem to have much in the way of ammunition, but he did mention that she had been arrested for driving while intoxicated.

"Her husband left her at a party and took off somewhere," Sam said. "Probably with a broad, Your Honor. Come on, that's clearly just a mistake in judgement on her part."

"Ah, yes. Mistakes in judgement." Grasswax offered a significant glance to the nearly featureless gleam of Xathanatron. "We'll talk more about such things."

"This could go on for hours," I said quietly to Clarence. "Are you sure you want to be here? We could go get a cup of coffee." I saw him looking at Mrs. Martino. "Not her, stupid. She's dead. She's not getting coffee with us."

He shook his head stubbornly. "I want to see."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself."

It did in fact go on for hours. You'd want it to if it was *your* judgement, wouldn't you? Your entire life being summed up, your eternal fate settled on the coin-flip of guilty or not guilty?

"It seems like a pretty basic system . . ." the kid said as he watched Sam work. Grasswax had begun to pull out his bigger ammunition, things like cruel words, religious hypocrisy, even petty theft. (She'd

stolen twenty dollars from her church fundraiser once, because she didn't have the cash to get home otherwise.) Grasswax then added a string of petty sins going back to her childhood. Sam took each allegation as it came and made it clear with a shake of the head or a snort of disgust that he didn't think much of such small beer. My pal's always been a bit of a country lawyer, unhurried and deliberate. I honestly think it's the best approach with a prosecutor like Grasswax, who has been known to overplay his hand.

"Yeah, it's basic," I agreed. "Because the problem is pretty basic." I tugged him a couple of paces away from the deceased. "Only two choices, see? You're going one way or the other—even Purgatory is a win for our side, because it means you can work your way to Heaven eventually. So each time somebody wins and somebody loses, and it happens thousands and thousands of times a day. The best systems are simple ones—and after all, this one worked for us, right? You, me, Sam—we all wound up on Team Heaven. And if this lady deserves to be there, she'll be there."

I was lying, of course. It's nowhere near that simple, and one of the reasons is because a lot of what is commonly thought of as sinful is just being human. I don't know how things used to be, but the judges don't tend to put people away for minor infractions—they seem to be more interested in intent, although they can sometimes be sticklers for some of the classic old-school stuff; killing, adultery, like that. But what they'll stick on and what they'll let slide is a gray area as big as Heaven itself, and it takes years to learn how to maximize a soul's chances at judgement. But I wasn't even sure why the kid was here—I wasn't going to try to teach him everything in one night.

Howlingfell had been eavesdropping on our conversation. He laughed and swiped a long red tongue along his lips, showing a lot of pointy teeth. "You just watch, Dollar—Grasswax has got this bitch's number. She'll be flapping in the dark wind before you know it."

The kid flinched but he still wouldn't look at the demon. "But some things are more complicated than that, aren't they, Bobby? And she really hasn't done anything wrong . . . !"

"That's not for you to decide," I said, holding up a hand to silence him. "And to be honest, I'm not certain I'd trust the judgement of someone who's never argued a case before. I had an Eagle Scout once who was run over while helping a man in a wheelchair across a busy

street. Open and shut, right? Fit him for a halo. Except it turned out at judgement that when he was eight years old he smothered his baby brother with a pillow. Nice-looking kid. Youth pastor at his church. No reason we ever learned. Just didn't like his little brother." It had been another weird, complicated case that didn't sum up easily, but I wasn't going to talk strategy in front of our opponents—like I said, there's a lot of gray area, and you have to learn it the hard way. Instead I cocked a thumb toward the recently deceased Mrs. Martino. "Don't fall in love with a client, kid."

"In love . . . !" He looked horrified.

"You know what I mean. Don't make it personal." Those were the most important words I knew—words that could save your afterlife.

"Adultery," announced Grasswax. "Repeatedly, and without confession. For years."

"Oh, shit," said Sam. Actually he only mouthed the words, but I could read his lips.

"A grave, grave sin against the Law of Moses," Grasswax continued. "And no repentance, either. In fact, she had just met the lover for drinks before her accident tonight, so she died . . . unshriven, as we used to say. Am I wrong?"

Sam hastily conferred with the woman's guardian. "Mitigated!" Sam said. "Her husband has a mistress."

"Oh, but surely two wrongs don't make a right, Master Sammariel." Grasswax smiled. It looked like he had horse's teeth crammed in his mouth. Wasn't pretty. "This is not the husband's judgement. As you know, she stands before a representative of God the Highest," he said, gesturing toward the burning presence of Xathanatron. "She is not being judged by the kind receivers of the Children's Host. She sinned and kept on sinning. Only death stopped it." The prosecutor grinned even wider. The conviction was beginning to look, as my old mentor Leo used to say, like an Old Testament Cinch.

"But I didn't . . . !" Silvia Martino only got out the first few words before Grasswax turned on her and flicked his taloned fingers. The sound stopped coming. She struggled on for a moment before she realized the gift of speech had been taken from her.

"No one asked you, whore," spat the prosecutor, then turned back to Sam with a grin. "Well, Advocate? Any final words of summation?"

The new kid was twitching beside me as if something was biting him. "Stop," I told him. "Don't attract attention. You won't like it." But it was no use.

"*How about Thou Shalt Not Steal?*" the kid shouted. "Doesn't that count?"

"Oh, shit." This time it was me saying it. Everybody turned to look at Clarence. Even Xathanatron the Principality seemed to pause, his fires darkening just a fraction.

"*He's not supposed to talk!*" barked Howlingfell, the ugly, coarse hairs on his neck and shoulders bristling. He started his move—he would have been all over the rookie with talons and fangs—but I kicked him hard in the back of the knee, then when his leg buckled I helped him to lie down with a swift jerk on his suit collar. The demon hit the ground hard—Outside is a real, physical place, it's just outside Time—then I dropped to a crouch beside him to make sure he was all right. Okay, I might have kneeled on his windpipe a little.

"Down, Fido," I told him quietly, crimping his neck until he stopped struggling so hard. "Let the big boys settle this."

"Here!" Suddenly rough, clawed hands were pulling at me. I wasn't going to start a brawl in front of a heavenly judge so I let myself be tugged back onto my feet, although by the time I had my balance Grasswax had pulled my jacket most of the way off. "How dare you!" he snarled, but he didn't sound entirely convincing—I think he was playing it up for the judge.

"Easy, everybody," said Sam, getting into the middle. He helped me get my jacket back over my shoulders, then patted me back into shape with a care that was almost fatherly. We've been through a lot, Sam and me. "Just a misunderstanding," he said, glaring at the kid.

Howlingfell was getting up now, too. He looked like he thought he understood everything *just fine*: his murderous scowl could have bubbled paint.

"Misunderstanding?" Grasswax surveyed us all, a look of calculated outrage twisting his unpleasant features into something even less charming. "Did I *misunderstand* when I thought I heard an *apprentice*, unsworn and unnamed before this judge, interrupting an officer of prosecution? Or did it really happen . . .?"

What Did He Mean? This from the judge, each word like a silver bell in a church tower, loud and vibrant, silencing Grasswax just as he was

getting worked up to a grand, oratorical flourish. Xathanatron turned his faceless gaze toward Clarence. *Speak, Child. I Give You Leave.*

"Her husband—he . . . he s-stole from her!" To his credit, the kid at least looked properly terrified at what he'd got himself into. "He stole her youth."

"What rubbish." Grasswax wore the expression of a man forced to watch a long elementary school performance while standing outside in foul weather.

Clarence turned to face the judge. "From the day they were married, her husband only made love to her one night a month, like . . . like it was a job. Without . . . foreplay, without kissing. Rolled off and went to watch television." The youngster was scarlet, embarrassed. "Then, after their fourth child, he just stopped. Told her she'd let herself go. That she sickened him." He looked over to the deceased, but Silvia Martino seemed lost in a memory or even a dream, her eyes unfocused. "That's stealing, right?" he said at last.

I knew I shouldn't have let the kid talk to her. I felt like punching myself in the nuts for letting it happen. When did he get all that out of her? Even Sam looked as if it had caught him by surprise, and he'd talked to the guardian angel.

When Clarence was not immediately changed into hot steam it seemed pretty clear the judge was going to allow his evidence. Sam knew better than to look this gift horse in the mouth any longer than he needed to. He quickly added a strong theme of tragic suffering to his summation and rode that nag all the way home.

I still wouldn't have wanted to put money on which way Xathanatron was going to go, but when a column of lavender light surrounded the late Mrs. Silvia Martino, and a look crept over Grasswax's face that suggested some paralegal in Hell was going to get a horrible bollocking, I knew it was over and Sam had won.

Suddenly the deceased was gone. Grasswax took off a moment later, silent and very unpleasantly angry. Howlingfell pointed a shaking, clawed finger at me. "You're dead, Dollar!" he growled, but his voice was still a bit weak from my knee crushing his trachea. A moment later he followed Grasswax through the shimmering wound and then, except for the judge, it was just angels standing around in the frozen moment.

"Congrats," I told Clarence. "You've made your first batch of enemies today."

"What?"

"And not just on the other team," Sam said. "If you ever do that to me again, kid, they'll never find all the different pieces."

"Pieces . . . ?"

"Of you." He shook his head in disgust. "You get any more bright ideas, try 'em out on me or Bobby first."

I was watching Xathanatron, who to my discomfort seemed to be staring in my direction. I'd kind of hoped that scuffle with Howlingfell would have been beneath the high angel's notice.

You Are Wanted In The Celestial City, Angel Doloriel, the pillar of light told me. Sam and the kid didn't hear it, but for me it came loud enough to make my cheekbones ache. *Your Archangel Wishes To Speak With You*. Then the big glow was gone.

"C'mon," Sam said to me. "Time to go back. I'm going to buy Clarence an ice cream. I mean, we did win the case."

Me, I was feeling thirsty—that's just how I react to happy endings. But then I react to unhappy ones pretty much the same way.