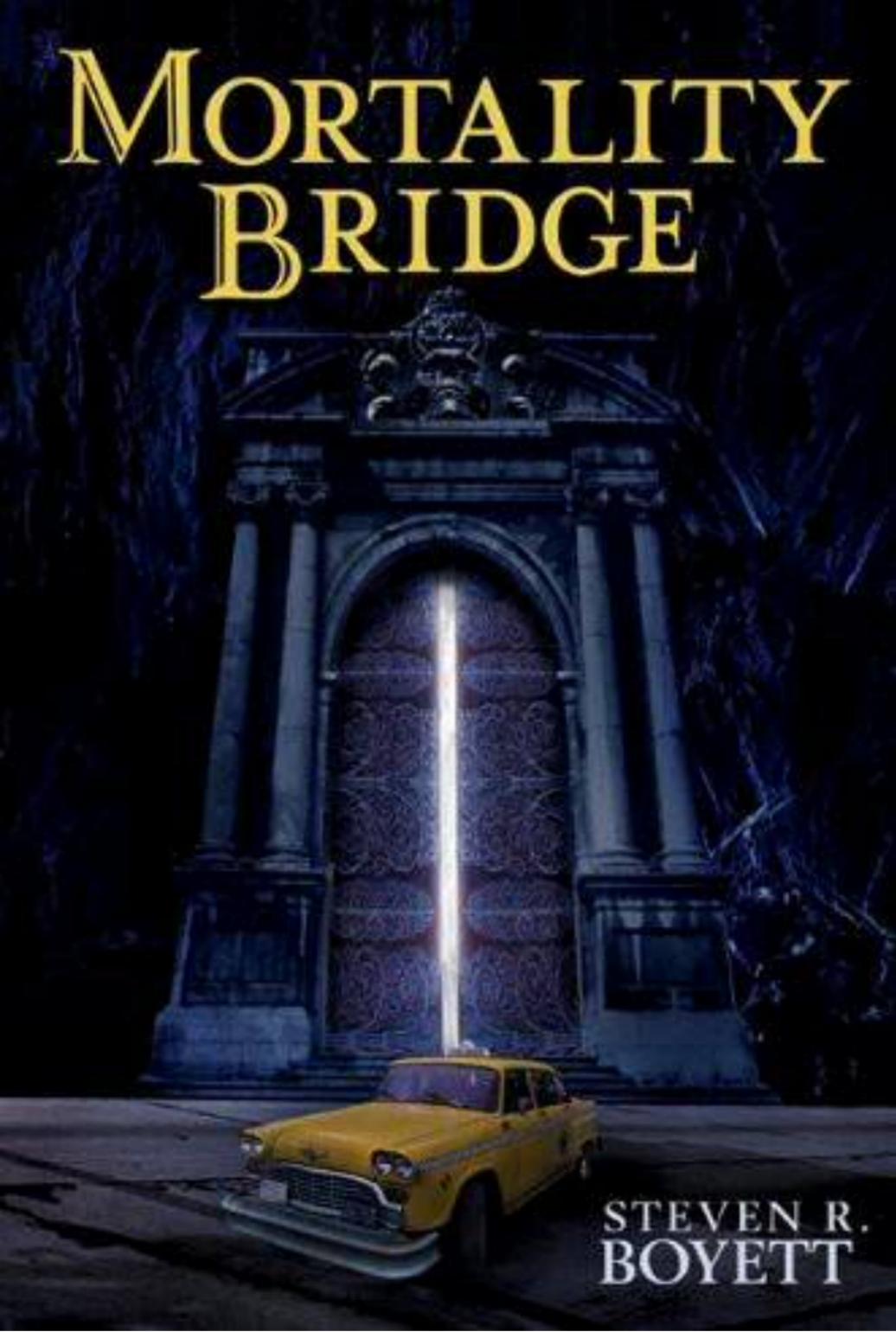


MORTALITY BRIDGE

The book cover features a dark, atmospheric scene. In the center, a classical stone archway is set within a larger, more ornate structure. A bright, vertical beam of light emanates from the center of the archway, illuminating the surrounding area. In the foreground, a yellow taxi is parked on the left side, facing towards the right. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

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MORTALITY BRIDGE



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BABY PLEASE DON'T GO

SHE LET GO HIS HAND as the pallet slid into the narrow tunnel. “Niko?”

“Right here, Jem.” He squeezed her foot beneath the cover pulled so tight she looked like a streamlined mummy.

“It’s really small in here.” Her voice muffled in that cramped space.

The technician’s voice came tinny from the intercom. “You okay?”

“Umm. Yeah. I think so.” Percocet thickening her tone. “It’s like wearing a knight helmet. Like a joust.”

Behind thick glass the technician nodded. “The regular CT unit is down for scheduled maintenance. Bessie here’s our backup. She hasn’t let us down yet. But we can try again another time if it’s bothering you too much right now.”

“No. We’ve come this far.”

“Okay. I’m going to activate the scan now, all right? I need you to hold perfectly still, okay? Try to keep your arms straight and don’t move. Can you do that?”

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"Do you have to close the door?"

"No, we'll keep it open for you."

The Muzak played some watered down song by Gerry and the Pacemakers. Niko squeezed Jem's foot to maintain contact as they listened in the nervous interlude.

A muffled laugh. "Just wait'll they do this to one of your songs." She began to hum a cheesy lounge act version of "Notes on Her Sleeping" and Niko smiled even as his face went tight and his eyes began to sting. "I think they already have," he said.

"Okay," said the intercom. "Here we go." There was a slight vibration.

"It smells like vanilla."

"There's some evidence it reduces stress," the intercom said.

The leaden laugh again. "Better use the whole can."

Niko patted her foot and felt the corn on her big toe. Countless gigs in high heeled shoes. He pressed and her foot kicked.

The intercom said Hold still please.

"Sorry."

"You're doing fine, Jem." Niko squeezed her foot again and bit his lower lip. He should get another Grammy for this. Or an Oscar. Best Vocal Performance by a Son of a Bitch in a Lead Role.

Hidden engines surged invisible energies through her head.

"I can't feel my arm." The fear in her voice tore a plug from his heart. They'd told her there was a slight chance of allergic reaction to the iodine. One in ten thousand, nothing to worry about. But she'd had to sign waivers.

The intercom said It's normal for limbs to get pins and needles when forced to hold still, nothing to be alarmed about, we'll massage them as soon as you're out.

But there had been that single moment of mortal dread, Jemma lying without moving in a tube with metal inches from her skin, iodine coursing alien in her veins and her limbs numbing. And Niko thinking o god is this it, can this be it.

When they got home the Percocet kicked in bigtime and Niko helped her sag upstairs and tucked her into their huge bed and kissed her brow and dialed down the light and crept out of the room and eased shut the door, stopping to look back at her through

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the narrow slit and feeling like a father peering in on a sleeping child. He left the door cracked open and the intercom on in case she woke disoriented.

THE WEST HALL was lined with framed concert posters, many of them decades old. Drippy letters and high contrast dayglow colors. Niko's name on all of them. Or the names of bands he'd played in long ago. Before the four letters of his shortened name alone became enough to fill arenas. Jemma'd put the posters up here. He had thought it much too vain. Decades of his pawned off life arrayed along these walls. Legendary days. Those early Perish Blues gigs, the fevered howling yearning. Fights broke out during his solos. He made the room crazy just by playing his guitar. Made the crowd want to fight or fuck or both. He just stood there playing. And somehow just standing there made the music stronger. Surrounded him with energy. Incredible such anger and such anguish could be wrung howling from the neck of a guitar throttled by a young man who just stood there like the center of a cyclone oblivious to its debris.

On the strength of their live gigs Perish Blues recorded Say Hey on the Decca label. A single got decent local airplay but the band just never caught. The feeling was they had something live that recordings could not capture. Niko's playing was ferocious but he was bagged half the time, he forgot playlists, missed rehearsals and even gigs, tiraded incoherently. He felt restless and the band was discontent.

Perish Blues disbanded and their lead guitarist felt bad about it and felt good about it too. He sat around his apartment and drank and thought about getting another band together and didn't. He played sessions with a few wellknown bands but didn't get around to much else.

He'd met Jemma around the beginning of his fiery arc. She'd sung backup in some now forgotten band that opened for his, at one point trading call and response with their lead guitar. He simply couldn't believe her voice. The beautiful pain of it. Niko so broke he had to borrow money to get his Fender out of hock to play the gig and still he asked her out. Then the long series of attempts to be together. Our staccato love, he'd joked.

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Jemma left him after one of his more mundane binges. Though by then it was more correct to say that Niko was on one long bender that ebbed and flowed. This time out was not as spectacular as the time he'd thrown their furniture and clothes out on the curb, the time he'd hurled a paperweight into a blacksmoked mirror, the time he'd doused his Fender with butane and torched it on the balcony of their matchbox apartment off of Gower. This was just another drunk, a sad and stinking unshaved weekday drunk where Jemma had come home to find him crying incoherently about what a nogood shit he was, emptying himself until he slept and then awoke alone all wound in sour sheets like a corpse within a shroud. A C-clamp hangover tightened on his temples as he waited and waited for Jemma to bring him morning coffee the way she always did rain or shine, pleased with him or mad, a little ritual enacted in their daily life together. And when the coffee didn't come he knew that she was gone. He called her name regardless but of course there was no answer. A hollow silence lay about the place that was precisely her subtracted measure. She had finally had enough. Last night just the final night in the parade of nights spent waiting for him to come home, sweeping broken glass from tile floors, bringing him a basin to throw up in, trying to convince him he was not the demon he imagined himself, holding him through his senseless crying jags and patiently thinking she could fix him. For Jemma was a fixer. She could not bear to see potential squandered. Which had sparked her interest in him in the first place and kept her with him past the point of any reason. At least until she'd understood she couldn't fix what wanted to be broken.

However bad he got he always seemed to come through whole while those around him lost some unseen thing. You always land on your feet, she told him. And the ones who catch you fall.

With Jemma gone there'd been little to stop him slowly drowning in a whiskey river. He told himself he was only dulling the pain and the pain was pretty bad. Better put me under, doc, a local anesthetic just won't do.

But when he slept his callused fingers clutched a pillow and caressed her absent contours like a phantom limb. She fired his brain like a lovely fever and throughout his long descent he felt her

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burning out there in the world apart from him. He'd lie drunk and crying in the bed just big enough to hold them both or howl the Strat he'd borrowed after torching his own, two a.m. and another whiskey bottle consigned to the graveyard of failed consolations. He'd lie on the thin worn carpet and stare up at the waterstained ceiling and make pictures out of earthquake cracks, fissures on some vast and endless plain, or he would cruise the empty glitter of latenight Sunset in a blurred and weaving stupor with the puttering station wagon's radio cranked until the music left no room for thought. Niko driving down the unabating night and knowing she was awake in the shabby North Hollywood house she'd rented with her friend Bonnie. Knowing her bedside light was on beside her. Knowing she could feel him out here burning too.

For months he dieted on trashy novels and tv and stayed indoors. Reading the same paragraph over and over he would wonder Where are you tonight Jem, are you thinking of me, are you alone?

Friends told him he was crazy to punish himself like this. They told him to put it behind him. But he kept Jem alive in his mind precisely because he wanted to feel the pain. The pain cut through the haze as proof that he could feel at all.

One day there was a knock on his apartment door and he opened it and blinked in the bright afternoon sunshine bleary and hungover and already getting drunk again. A tall thin man dressed like some kind of psychedelic drum major with a bushy afro stood holding a guitar case and grinning as if he'd just told a really good joke and was waiting for the laugh. "Hey," he said. "Can Niko come out and play?"

Niko stepped back into the house. "Naw. But you can come play with him."

And so they jammed long into the night. They had never met before but they had common influences and mutual admiration. Niko played his new Dobro while Jimi played his beatup Gibson and they howled at the moon and raised the devil and drank like fish and laughed like thieves and cried the blues. It never occurred to either of them to record the session. Its frail unwitnessed evanescence made it all the better in a way. Lost in pure creation without a thought about the world without. Before the night was over Jimi

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dug out his rig and asked if Niko indulged and Niko said yeah sure why not, old Mr. Daniel's isn't getting the job done anymore.

He would only snort. Injecting was hardcore. Injecting was for junkies. It made him itch and it made him sleepy and it made him float a half an inch above the floor but best of all it made him just plain go away. He dove into a river of oblivion and lay contented in the bottom mud. Jimi staggered off sometime near dawn, leaving Niko with a little powder present in a cellophane twist. The gift that kept on giving.

Soon the rush just wouldn't happen when he snorted so he started shooting. He became a kind of alchemist. Into his veins went china white and out his hands came sorrow and pain and terrible beauty. He fronted shortlived bands and couldn't get a deal and played some of the best guitar of his or anyone's career. And all the while out there somewhere shining faintly in his battlemented heart was Jemma. She was doing well he knew. Background vocals for successful acts. On the road half the year, studio time in L.A.

Niko would imagine showing up backstage at some gig of hers. He catches her eye as she sings off to the side, she falters at the mic. The tearful backstage reunion. But he knew it wouldn't happen because he hadn't really changed.

He shot up alone, he shot up with friends. Celebrities, strangers, people he didn't much like. If he wasn't playing a gig he was lying down at home or crashed on someone's couch. He lived on junk food and whatever else was in arm's reach. Sometimes after gigs he brought women home and failed miserably in the sack. If he cared enough to try at all. But they helped to fill the howling silence waiting for him every time his footsteps echoed in his new apartment in the hills beneath the Hollywood sign. He lived on tv dinners and spent bleary afternoons unshaven and unbathed with his new soap opera friends, blathered for hours on the phone to people he didn't even like just to hear a voice, hired managers, fired managers, contracted hepatitis, trashed a contract meeting by showing up drunk and telling a major producer to go fuck himself, drove someone else's manager's Cadillac into someone else's swimming pool, frisbeed someone else's gold record out the window of a VP's office at a

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friend's record label, watched someone OD at a party that got raided not five minutes after he stumbled away.

He had felt her out there all that awful lost and forlorn time, quietly burning, and knew that she would not come back until he came back to himself. And that didn't happen till he signed away the most fundamental part of himself and killed his brother Van.

ALL THESE HALLWAY posters. All this past. Niko looked away. Jemma couldn't have known what kind of awful scrapbook she had put together in this hall. Let it go.

He left Jemma to her medicated sleep and hurried down the hall and down the sweeping curve of staircase. Through the cavernous living room and into the study. The house was open and airy and Mediterranean but the study was Victorian and dark, brass and polished woods. Tracklights highlighted gold and platinum records in plain wooden frames between pilasters on one wall. On the mantel three gold phonographs on wooden trapezoids, a Lucite pyramid on a black block base, a silver astronaut planting an MTV flag. Him and Jemma hugging Goofy at Disneyland. Jemma with her eyes closed singing background at the mic, blobs of Vari-lite rig behind her. Her portraits of sleeping people, murky acrylics distorting shapes like funhouse mirrors. Newly inaugurated president shaking his hand there on one end of a maple bookcase. Etta James hugging Jemma on the other. On the battlements of maple bookshelves stone gargoyles vigilant before mystery and horror and occult. Her doll collection spaced out among cookbooks, selfhelp books, art monographs. Floppy ragdolls dangling stuffed legs over the wooden precipice like overseeing patchwork angels.

And Jemma's pencil sketch of him. Seated on a rude stool in his studio with the Strat high on his thigh, eyes closed and fingers poised and a length of ash on the burning cigarette pinched on the guitar head. Shock of hair obscuring one eye as his head inclines. Historical artifacts, ladies and gentlemen. Note the longlost days of this immortal youth when cigarettes were the least of many vices, when the hair was jet and hanging in the unkempt fashion of the day, not thin and flecked with gray. He'd looked as old back then as he is now. Older.

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The day Jem gave him that portrait. So tentative. They'd been together only a few months. He'd looked from his drawn face to hers so worried and in his heart he'd felt a driven nail of terror because she already loved him more than ever he would her. No one owned a key to that deep place. He would not allow it.

Niko looked away. This panoply of static things. Totems in some pharaoh's tomb. Jemma upstairs fading.

On a marble pedestal in the form of an ionic column stood the weathered remnant of a lyre under glass. Its tortoise shell beneath the dust-shouldered belljar. The mystery of it. He'd bid ruthlessly through intermediaries when it came up at Sotheby's. He had to have it, he didn't know why. It brought him close to something old and deep. What hands now dust had plucked forth what notes long carried away?

Niko pulled a volume from the bookcase by the lyre and pressed a button and the bookcase opened inward.

Many mansions harbor hidden rooms and tunnels. Panic rooms and getaways, dungeons and shrines. Used with great solemnity and rarely secret at all. But Niko's little room was truly secret. The woman he had shared his life with never knew about it. Perhaps she had her own such rooms. Perhaps she kept them hidden in her heart.

Niko stepped through the bookcase like a storybook child.

The tiny room contained a single chair behind a little walnut desk carved with sleeping faces on the corners and the legs. A laptop incongruous amid fountain pens in display holders, a blotter and a crystal inkwell and a green bankers light. A framed photograph of Niko with his brother Van. Here is Niko eighteen or nineteen, thickly bearded, hair long ringlets. His little brother tall and gangly, closecut hair a cap of curls, sixteen or seventeen if he's a day. Both of them smiling as they pretend to punch each other, playing at a rivalry that really did exist. Van how many times have I awakened screaming because I saw you there unseeing? And to think I laughed at first. Watched the red bloom unfold in your eyes and slow blood trickle out your nose. My brother I was mean to and played army with and rode a bike beside, whose underwear I threw out in the rain once at the municipal pool, and this is the picture I am left of

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you. Van what would you say if you could see where all that spun forth from that awful day has led? You were there at the start of it all. You were the start of it all. The horrible bloodflower in your eye. I didn't kill you but I was why you died and all my life I've been ashamed. Driven, driven down. Are you waiting for me there across some bridge of penance? I will find out soon enough.

Niko sat at the desk and slid out a drawer and removed a document. Sixteen yellowed stapled pages. Courier tenpitch type, floating caps archaic evidence of a manual typewriter, every lowercase e gummed in at the top. Every word of it tattooed upon his mortgaged heart.

He glanced at the date and shook his head. A life ago yet only yesterday as well. He turned to the last page. His signature still there of course, scrawled in red gone russet over time. He still owned the pen he'd signed it with. A 1920 J.G. Rider pearl and abalone pump action fountain pen with a 22-karat gold medium nib. The contract's lower right side smudged brown where his hand wet with blood not his had rested when he signed.

His nervous fingers riffed the contract pages. Should I bring it? To what end? I know every word of it by heart and still am not sure what my options are.

But he took the contract with him when he left his secret room.

Back in the study he called Jemma's father. The CAT scan went fine, Hank. She's sleeping now, they gave her Percoset. We won't have the results for a couple of days but I'll call you soon as we do. No reason to panic yet. You bet. I'll tell her. Take care. Talk soon. Then he stared at his phone and thought about who he had to call up next.



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