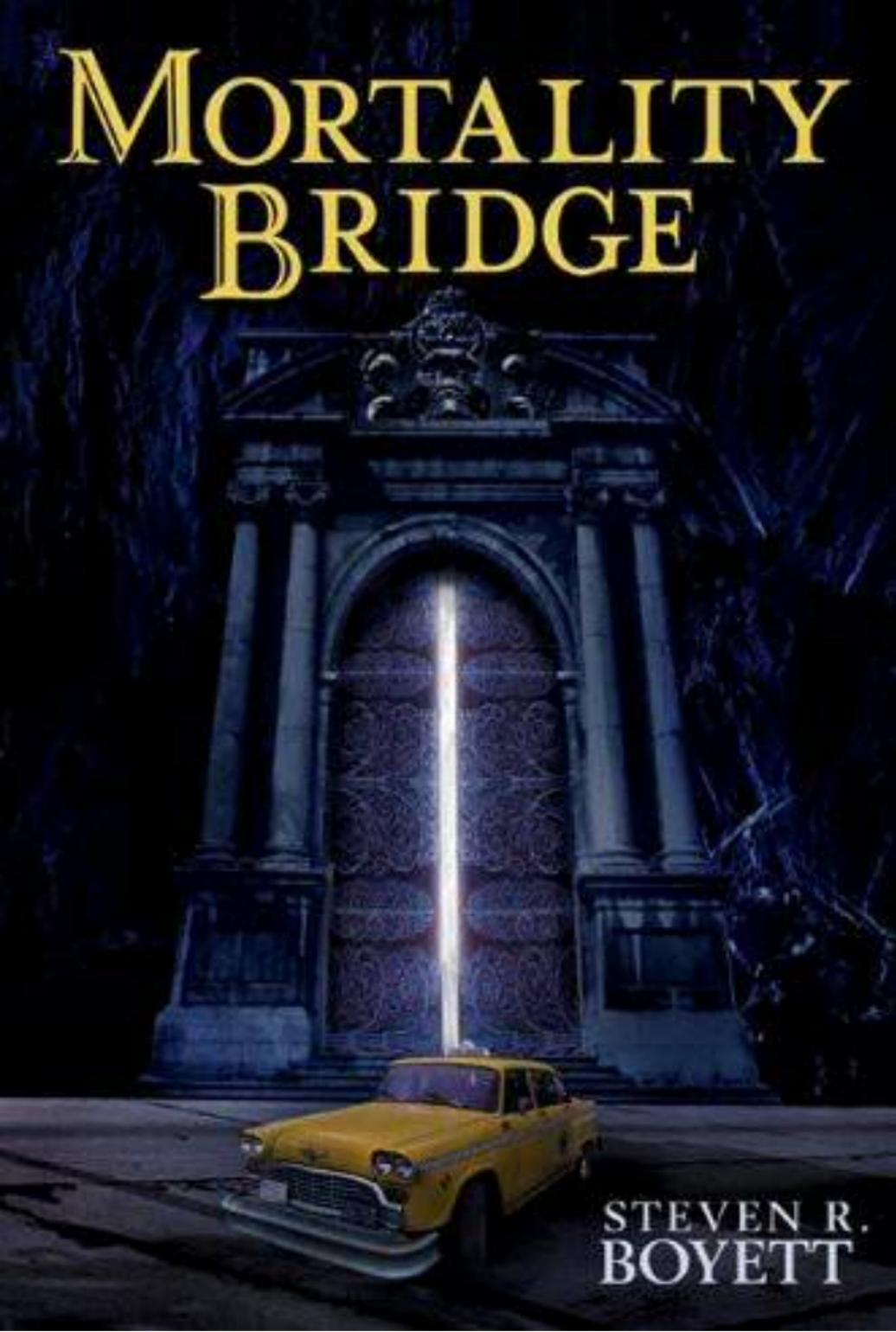


MORTALITY BRIDGE

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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XVI

FLOATING BRIDGE

THE BLACK LINE Niko has been heading toward is definitely a bridge. There's something odd about it though he can't quite figure out what just yet. Something about it he doesn't like.

BEFORE TOO LONG the air before the bridge seems to shimmer like a road on a hot day. Niko's socks squish in his shoes as he navigates the hadeartic waste. Across the broken reach he hears the flattened groan of straining ice, a sound a bit like leather stretching. Small flat icebergs dot the river. With the rising temperature the shore of ice has begun to calve in places, causing cracks and upthrusts in and on the plain.

Everywhere the ice has parted Niko sees remnants of embedded frozen bodies ripped apart by glacial motion, torn off at leg or waist or neck and even lengthwise. Redcored bodies float like flies in amber all about him, distorted by pale ice.

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When he looks up again the bridge has his complete attention.

What he had taken for wavering air is the writhing of the bridge itself. The bridge is built of bodies. Thousands of them naked and freezing and huddled against the icy current forever breaking against them and crying moans so terrible they sound like pleasure. Some of those who clutch along the outside mass fight off the clammy grip that binds them to the others and they roll into the river to swim furiously toward the frozen bank. But however hard they swim the current brings them thrashing back where they are gripped and reabsorbed into the coruscating mass. It reminds Niko nauseatingly of ants swarming a dead animal. But these aren't ants, they're people. Human beings.

Half a mile later they aren't just people. They're people Niko knows. The bridge is built of the bodies of people he has met throughout his life. Out there on the water they're a living groping bridge and Niko knows them, knows every damned one. Friends lovers partners. Producers critics roadies. Groupies dealers bandmates. Managers clubowners bartenders. Waiters waitresses restaurateurs. Schoolmates teachers playground bullies. Lawyers doctors deejays shrinks. And if Niko is the thing they have in common then Niko is the reason for their present suffering. There are so many.

Niko thinks about looking for another way across but knows there will be none. He considers moving on and trying to swim across but no. If he doesn't freeze and drown he'll end up as an hors d'oeuvre for the black leviathan or the current will sweep him to the clutch and press of those he knew who may not wish him well. And if that doesn't happen, well, Niko has a funny feeling about the water itself. He knows the story of the river Lethe. Or perhaps remembers it.

Damn you Geryon. If only you had flown a little farther. But of course you left me there so I could make this trek. What you said about crossing the ice. "If you survive the walk across it, well then. You will cross that bridge when you come to it." It's all a kind of trial isn't it? Or maybe just an entertainment. But one man's trials are another's entertainment, yes? Were you warning me then? Not against Hell but against myself? That if I fail it will not be due to obstacles but as a consequence of my own insufficiency? Who I am is my undoing. We are what we have done.

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Geryon you are arrogant and cruel but there is something about you I cannot help but like. You—showed me something? Took me—somewhere? I can't quite remember. I think within the confines of your unforgiving laws that you were trying to help me.

But there's the ice and there's the water and there's the farther bank. And between the two are piled contorted and screaming all of those I've ever known who died.

Niko looks up at the cavern sky. You bastards. How I despise you.

But in this old drama playing out inexorably as a spring unwinding metaphors are manifest and traditions and rules inviolate as natural law. So Niko picks up his guitar case and heads out to walk across the bodies of those he has known.

FROM THE FIRST rubbery step it is horrible. Their flesh yielding as they writhe beneath him. Some grab his ankle to restrain him. The grip always feeble but just strong enough to make him shake it off and then feel shamed. As he knows it is meant to. But still he casts them off and staggers across their terrible mass with his guitar case held high out of their reach. If he falls they will surely drag him under.

All of them moan his name.

Niko cannot meet their eyes. Cannot give them what they want. Acknowledgement and recognition. But he has no choice. If he looks stonily ahead he can't see where to step and he will surely fall. And to fall here is to stay here. He has to look down and in looking down must meet the desperate jealousy and need in the eyes of those he barely knew, the recognition in the eyes of many he was familiar with but hardly would call friends, the regret in the eyes of those few to whom he has felt close. Some of those he walks across he does not recognize. They're much older than when he knew them, they're naked, they're gruesomely out of context, their acquaintance was too fleeting.

But they're people, Niko! You can't ignore them, you knew them! There to one side is Ray, his bus driver through most of junior high school, batting aside the outstretched arm of a woman who looks just like a grownup version of Anne Ellison, the freckled girl with braces who vied with him for the spelling bee championship

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throughout all of elementary school and for whom he'd harbored a secret painful crush. Anne reaches out for Niko and Niko makes himself look away from her woman's face which even agonized and crying out his name contains a ghost of the girl she was. He forces himself farther onto the nightmare bridge and steps on the reaching arm of Mrs. Bouduin, his first housekeeper, who died of a heart attack after working for him for a year. Overweight and slow but thorough and always nice and thoughtful she had stolen thousands of dollars' worth of silver and Jemma's jewelry over the course of her employment.

Now among the voices crying out his name is that of Erin Farrell, a whiskeyvoiced singer he had dated once and slept with twice and never called again though he had later worked with her on several gigs. He hears her voice but does not see her as he jerks his leg away from Mrs. Thompson, his firstgrade teacher, plump woman with a broken blood vessel worming one eye that he had stared at whenever she came close. She had seemed the very picture of an upright moral Godfearing woman, what was she doing here? Niko's leg as it jerks from her hand kicks the jaw of Stevie Dane, his old drug buddy and high school bandmate in *The Spanish Flies*. Stevie Dane who rode a needle right into the ground.

"I'm sorry," Niko calls out to them all. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." But his cries are lost within the manythroated imprecation of his name.

Keep moving. You can do that can't you? Can you do that? What are you if you can?

Which of course is why they're doing this to him.

Niko sidesteps Gary Calvin Watson, who could twohand tap *Two-Part Invention* in D Minor on his Rickenbacker bass. Watson had got sick of the business and bought a ranch in Wyoming and got gored to death by one of his own bulls if you can believe that. Niko stumbles past Watson and brings his foot down on some half-remembered interviewer's shoulder. Rearing from the awful seething now is Bobby Harris, more Jem's friend than his but Niko had always respected and admired him. Bobby died of AIDS ten years ago. He'd been a good man, what was he doing here, Bobby was a good man.

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Bobby's knocked down by a woman Niko would have known no matter how much older she became because she has the reddest hair he's ever seen. "Betty," Niko calls. "Cousin Betty." Her name unuttered for how long now. Betty's batted aside and buried in the undertow of crawling damned. He had lost his virginity to Betty Towers, Cousin Betty because they were distantly related and they'd taken secret pleasure in the forbidden nature of that fact. He still wondered about her sometimes. Where she was, how she was, who she was now. And now he knows. She's dead, she's damned, she's doomed to unending persecution here, used as a pawn to be used by him.

Niko screams a wordless howl. This is more than he can bear. More than can be borne. He risks a backward glance and sees he's barely come a hundred yards. The bridge must be a quartermile long.

Harden your heart Niko. They're dead and damned and it doesn't matter any more. But Geryon's words keep cycling in his anguished mind. Your armor is the very weapon they will use against you.

As Niko heaves and tears his way along the population of his life his scream becomes a wordless curse against the forces that have led him here to walk across the living corpses of those he has known. All to save one of their number venerated by his heart. He sobs his rage against whatever mind could send good people into Hell and punish them forever for the arbitrary sins of an eyeblink mortal life, a mind that could use their own humiliation just to show one man what travesty and selfish desperation he'll commit.

Thrust against him now is a baldheaded girl whose name he can't remember. She was young, twelve or thirteen, the Make A Wish Foundation had forwarded to his management a letter she had written. She was dying of leukemia and wanted to hear him play. He'd sat beside her hospital bed surrounded by newscameras and hospital staff, an acoustic guitar on his lap. Chemotherapy had left her bald and she had seemed a homesick fallen angel propped by pillows there. He'd asked her what she wanted to hear and she'd said she didn't really know, whatever he wanted to play was great. Her mother and father were there and she had glanced at the cameras and reporters and at Niko, nervous and starstruck, and Niko

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had asked everyone but her parents to leave and nearly pushed the media from the room, and then he'd sat and played for her and her alone. As if sound waves from vibrating strings could save her. As if whatever tore its way from Niko's core could enter her and make her anything but worse. Unbelievably she had asked him if he knew "Aint Misbehavin'" and he'd laughed and picked his way through it like a beginner, remembering it really but asking her to hum the melody for him anyway so that he could pick it out and gradually perform a duet with the poor sad dying pale bruised and hollow-eyed gaunt girl tubefed and smiling there on the whitesheeted bed. He tried to play upbeat but he was saddened she was going to die, sad and angry that she would never make love, never be a mother, never toast a happy couple, wear a prom corsage, hold hands in a movie theater, pay her own electric bill, fret over what to name her baby. Never grow up.

And here she is still twelve or thirteen, dead these many years and damned for reasons he and probably she doesn't know and doubtless would not understand, a naked thin baldheaded girl who clutches at his feet as if he is some bogus prophet come to trample his deluded flock and give them nothing but his reluctant and unhealing touch.

She calls out Mr. Niko. Mr. Niko.

Her name, what was her name? You don't remember do you asshole? You played her some songs and joked in a hospital room and all it cost you was a day and a plane ticket, and when you left you were sad but still given some cold comfort that at least you were able to fulfill her wish and make her happy for some little while. And then she died and you forgot her.

Whatever flimsy truce of old he forged with his own inner demon shatters at the touch of her small hand upon his ankle. The old ebb tide of self destruction washes through him with an awful and familiar surge. I won't do this. I can't do this. I will not partake in their humiliation. Will not degrade these people for your own amusement. You win. Fuck you, you win. I want no victory if the cost is this. I'm done. I surrender.

Niko stops his forward struggle. Hands claw at him. Cover him. The bald girl reaches up toward his face and his hand intercepts

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hers. Their fingers touch entwine and clench. She says Mr. Niko. Niko weeps but doesn't know it. He feels a tug on the guitar case long clutched in his hand and lets it go. Feels a tugging on his foundering soul and lets it go as well and is dragged down.

THE COLD TOUCH of the dead swarms all about him. Jem I'm sorry. I tried, I tried my best. It wasn't good enough because I wasn't good enough. Will it hurt when they tear into me. Will I drown freezing in the water below. Will there be a sleep and a forgetting. And after I am husked and my flayed soul is thrown out like a rind into this awful universe of garbage will I see you ever Jem. And will you forgive me if you do. A part of me hopes you don't. I carry that hell with me as I live and breathe.

Niko's body turns and turns. His hair is pulled as he is passed among them. He swims amid the cacophony of his name. Will they crush him, will they tear him apart like mad Bacchantes? Will he drown beneath the press of cold and naked bodies? What are they waiting for?

He opens his eyes and there is only blackness. He stares upward at the cavern ceiling. All beneath him is a jostle.

They're carrying him. He is borne aloft atop a coruscating sea of reaching hands. Passing him overhead like a concert stagediver. Delivering him across the bridge of themselves.

For a panicked moment Niko thinks they mean to bring him to the gaping maw of some mad chewing thing that will devour him and so commit him here forever. But look at their faces. Look in their eyes. Even in the midst of such despair there is a kindled spark of gleeful rebellion, possibly the first joy or defiance they have felt or shown beyond the closure of their mortal lives.

Turning now in their collective grip he faces downward. A man he doesn't recognize, with a split brow and a missing eye, smiles piratic up at Niko as his hands raise up to take their share of Niko's weight. My God, there below him now is Andy Brand, his favorite session drummer, dead in a motorcycle accident how long ago now. Andy holds his hands up with the rest of them and gives Niko a look that is only reassuring and somehow conspiratorial. And now he sees, it can't be, it's Ave, Avery Kramer, his old manager, bald

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and fat and wearing the shiteating grin Niko always pictures when he thinks of him, the grin that implied he was getting away with something because he usually was. Too far away to hold him up but reaching for him anyway. Avery, Niko shouts. Avery. He forces a hand through the forest of upthrust arms and reaches out to Avery. Their fingers touch and their hands clasp. A brief squeeze and then the current carries him away.

Joy floods Niko's heart. It hurts, it fills him with a trembling exultation. It makes him want to die. He lives within its fleeting heat like a moth dived headlong into consummating flame. Joy.

How his friends have managed this rebellion Niko doesn't know. But manage it they have, for this brief moment in their endless suffering, and they carry Niko across a patchwork history of his peopled life. Can he really have known so many who have died? In fleeting glimpses and brief touches he encounters glad remembrances and sorrows, and passed along and past.

Now he sees the far shore nearing, sees his guitar case handed off across to it like a bucket in a fire brigade. Niko himself is being delivered like a hometown hero.

A figure stands upon the farther shore. Niko strains for a second sight of it as he is jostled and bumped and turned about, and in his narrowed focus misses many calling figures from the stages of his life. His brief joy now stained by sudden doubt. It had looked like. It couldn't have been. They wouldn't.

His buoyed spirits sink now in a morass of premonitory fear. Of course they would. Of course they have. Of course they saved the best for last.

Standing on the far shore just beyond the bridge, past Eddie the ice cream truck man who used to give him credit and Jake the club owner who had paid off Niko's gigs in drugs, there with hands held out to welcome him, with the face so like his own, the face that Niko last saw sightless and unmoving against a steering wheel in a crumpled wreck.

Van.



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