

HELL^{TO} PAY

ALSO BY LORA BETH JOHNSON

Goddess in the Machine

Devil in the Device

LORA BETH JOHNSON

HELL^{TO} PAY



HOT
KEY
BOOKS

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This book is dedicated to me,
because I worked really hard.



AFTERLIFE SYNDICATES

<u>SYNDICATE</u>	<u>TITAN</u>	<u>OBOL</u>	<u>MAGIC</u>	<u>INDUSTRY</u>
NIGHTSHADES	Nyx	The Star	Persuasion	Politics
PHANTOMS	Melinoë	The Devil	Telepathy	Entertainment
FERRYMEN	Charon	The Bull	Augury	Finance
THE COVEN	Hecate	The Moon	Illusion	Beauty
REAPERS	Thanatos	The Grim Reaper	Transmutation	Healthcare

DEFUNCT CULTS

<u>TITAN</u>	<u>OBOL</u>	<u>MAGIC</u>
CULT OF HADES	The Tower	Death
CULT OF PERSEPHONE	The Wheel	Resurrection



TYPES OF MAGIC

AFTERLIFE: can either be passed down through families, in which case the user inherits only the specific talent of their ancestor, or it can be brought back directly from the Afterlife, allowing the user to perform multiple types—some better than others

RUNIC: a way to imbue objects with magic using symbols

ALCHEMICAL: the adding of magic to chemical mixtures

DEMONIC: magic used by demons, very powerful and mysterious



THE GROUNDWORK





ONE

Today, the entrance to the Afterlife is a subway station.

That's not a metaphor. I'm literally standing in a communal psychic re-creation of a Boston T stop. It's musty and cool with a hint of burnt rubber and decay wafting down the tunnel. Fluorescent lights flicker above me, strobing the ad posters on the other side of the tracks. They're vague and generic, placeholders rendered from collective subconscious memories of the station.

COMING SOON!

SATISFY YOUR CRAVING WITH THE FOOD PLACE™.

IS ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION KEEPING YOU DOWN?

The platform is covered in dried gum and discarded cigarettes. Green concrete pillars line the tracks, and the sign above says BOYLSTON.

Ugh. Of course it would be.

I set up a cardboard box as a busker table and sit cross-legged behind it, just far enough into the shadows that I can't be seen clearly. I drape a black cloth across the box and then lay out three gold coins, all facing up. Two skulls and an eight-pointed star. There's a loud screech, and a whale floats past.

It's fine, don't worry about it. Whales happen here.

It makes that sad moan you hear on sleep apps, flicking its tail as it disappears down the tunnel. Across the tracks, the posters switch to ads for *Star Trek IV* and Alaskan cruises.

There's another shriek, and this time, an actual train careens

around the corner. It whistles to a stop, stray trash skittering across the platform. A disembodied voice mumbles something unintelligible as the doors slide open and people flood out of the cars.

If this were the real Green Line, the Beforedeath Green Line, people would be shoving past one another confidently, aggressively heading up the stairs to pour into Boston Common above. But just like me, this place is not what it seems.

All these people are Dead. *Newly* Dead. That can be pretty overwhelming, so the human consciousness tries to relate the transition to some familiar liminal space. For most people in Boston, it's the T. But it could be an airport or a bus station. I've seen movie theater hallways and amusement park queues and, one time, a Glamour Shots in an abandoned mall.

Today, there's only a small crowd on the platform, and while some people start to move toward the exit, most hover as though they're waiting for the next train. They don't realize what's happened to them. Not yet. If they don't figure it out soon, someone (or *something*) will be coming along to—well, not help, but at least get them out of the station. And I need to be wrapping this up when that happens.

But these things can't be rushed. I wait until I catch someone hovering.

"Wanna play?" I ask in my best Boston accent, making my voice a little rough. Not quite Kardashian vocal fry, more like Dunks-employee-at-the-end-of-their-eight-hour-drive-through-shift . . . fry. "First round's free."

It's a middle-aged woman with an angled bob, and I see the disgust when she takes me in: a big girl in torn fishnets, black cutoffs, a worn leather jacket. An absurd amount of eye makeup, long brown hair held down by a holey knit hat. Street urchin chic. When the woman scoffs and scurries away, I'm not surprised.

It's fine—she's not my mark.

"I'll play," a reedy voice says. A guy in an ill-fitting plaid suit saunters up. Early twenties, dark hair with enough gel to put a 2000s boy band to shame, and a smirk that says he thinks he can win. These guys make the best marks.

"Know the rules?" I ask. A crowd starts to gather.

"I think I can figure it out." His voice is thick with condescension.

Ugh. I can't believe I have to let this guy win.

Because he's not my mark either.

I've been tracking my actual mark since he got off the train. He's leaning against a pillar, and even though he's pretending like he isn't, he's watching my every move. Because one of these coins isn't a coin at all, and it's the thing he wants most in the Afterlife.

I made sure of it.

I smile at Suit Guy and hold up the coin with the star on it. "Know what this is?"

"It's a coin." Scoffing, he shakes his head and looks around, making sure the others on the platform are watching.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Do you know what it's for?"

He shrugs. "Buying shit, I suppose."

That is definitely wrong, but I nod anyway.

"You would suppose right, *if* this were any other coin. But this coin"—I flick the coin into the air and catch it—"doesn't buy just anything. This coin . . ." I show both sides to the crowd, because now I have a proper audience. Most of the platform has moved at least within earshot. "This coin is your ticket to heaven."

Now I have the entire platform's attention. Especially my mark's, who's dying (ha ha) to get his hands on one of these. It won't be long until he approaches, and by the time I run out of Miracle Max, I'll have the information I'm looking for.

You see, you can't just smash and grab information. You have to lure it out: Entice it, make it feel safe and welcome. You have to be *given* information.

This is the first difference between me and my brother. He would call this a heist. While I, rightly, refer to it as a con. Any genius with an acrobat friend can pull off a heist. Conning takes finesse. Subtlety. A certain *je ne sais quoi*. With heists, you're just a fancy burglar—you take things when people aren't looking. With cons, the mark willingly gives you what you want. In front of god and everybody.

So to speak.

"It's called an obol," I say, placing the coin back on the table. "It gets you into a specific . . . neighborhood, if you will. And if you can keep track of where it lands, it's yours."

Okay, so you've probably heard of this game before. It has lots of different names. The shell game. Three-card monte. Thimblorig. It's the most basic of short cons. If there were a con artist university, this would be day-one shit. But today, this isn't the entire con. It's just the Rope.

No matter how simple or complex a con, it always follows the same general steps. First there's:

THE GROUNDWORK

This is where you do your research, make your plans, move the pieces into place. This is all before you even meet the mark. For instance, I've never met Infamous Pete, but because I've done my research, I know that he's the short balding man in the tan suit leaning against a pillar. I know Pete has a gambling habit and, more importantly, a losing habit and, most importantly, an embezzling habit. I know he works for the Ferrymen and that he stole a whole bunch of his boss's money. And I know his boss, Charon, found out and Infamous Pete is now Posthumous Pete.

Yes, Charon, Ferrymen, obols. There's a theme here—we'll get to that.

I learned a lot about Pete's habits during the Groundwork phase

of this con and watched him skim so much off the top of every job that there was no way he wasn't getting caught. But he just kept . . . *not* getting caught. Until Charon received an anonymous email with proof of Pete's embezzlement.

Look, I didn't kill the guy. And I didn't make him join a Titan syndicate and do morally questionable jobs for a boss with godlike powers and then steal from said boss. Point is, it was his choices that led him here.

It's just, sometimes the research isn't enough. Sometimes you have to give things a little nudge in the right direction.

Anyway.

After Groundwork comes:

THE ENCOUNTER

which is where we are now. Worth pointing out—I haven't approached Pete. But he's noticed me. You have to make the mark come to you or you've already lost. And the best way I can convince Posthumous Pete to come to me is to show him that the prize is worth the effort. Hence flashing these coins that I made damn sure his pockets aren't currently lined with.

This brings us to:

THE BUILDUP

Giving the mark confidence. In himself. In you. Convincing them you're trustworthy, or at least that interacting with you is their own idea.

I shuffle the coins—slow enough that Suit Guy can keep track but not so slow that it looks like I'm letting him win. When I come to a stop, I look up, expectant.

"Which obol has the star?" I ask.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Pete shift to the left, the direction of the correct coin.

Suit Guy points to the one on the right.

Son of a bitch. I could not have made it more obvious.

I flip the coin over, revealing a skull. "Sorry, man," I say. "Better luck next time."

Suit Guy shrugs and walks off, but before Pete can step forward, a line forms. They all know where the star was and want to prove it, and I have to play three more rounds before it's Pete's turn. He saunters up, sweat dotting his brow—that is, the metaphysical representation of sweat, if you want to get technical.

"Do you know the game?" I ask.

Pete nods. "Got any coins with a bull on them?"

I choke back a smirk because he's played right into my hands. This is:

THE ROPE

Pull the mark in but let them tie themselves up.

My eyebrows raise, and I make sure my glance over to my bag is brief but noticeable.

"I don't see any here." I nod to the coins in front of me.

Pete grunts and hikes up his pants. "First round free?"

I smile and start shuffling the coins. Pete's eyes are intent on my hands.

"Most people don't ask about the bull," I say.

Having a bull obol would get Pete into Ferryman territory, which, frankly, would be a stupid move on his part, given that they just killed him and made sure he wasn't buried with any on him. They can't kill him twice, but there are things in the Afterlife that will make him wish they could.

I clear my throat, and in the brief moment Pete's gaze flicks up to mine, I switch out the star obol with another skull coin. I've been practicing for almost a year and still only have a 95 percent success rate. With cards it's down to 80 percent. Anything bigger

than that is anyone's guess. My hands are small. Stubby fingers, short palms. I wasn't made for sleight of hand, but sometimes you've got to work with what you've got.

Fortunately, this attempt goes off without a hitch, and by the time Pete's eyes are back on my hands, I've already made the swap.

I pull back from the coins and nod to them. Pete points to where the star would have been if I hadn't changed it out. I flip the coin over, revealing the skull.

"Bad luck, sir," I say.

Sure, luck.

With most marks, I'd let them win the first one—get their confidence up a little. But I've taken a calculated risk based on what I know of Pete. He doesn't like to lose, but he also won't step away from a bad situation until he can prove he can win.

I pretend I'm not holding my breath as his face turns red and his jaw works. My gaze flicks past his shoulder, suggesting impatience. Really, I'm just keeping an eye out for the unwanted guests that should be showing up any minute.

Finally, Pete says, "Let me try again."

I shake my head. "Only first round's free. You'll have to put down a wager."

He pulls out his wallet from his front jacket pocket and flips through the cash inside. He puts down a twenty.

"Another round."

I give him a patronizing expression, a delicate balance between a scowl and a smirk. "Money's no good here."

He knows this. He was counting on me *not* knowing.

Pete pats down his pockets, but it appears Charon was thorough. He buried Pete with nothing but a few twenties and the clothes on his back.

And on his wrist. Pete pauses at his watch, and I let my eyes go out of focus, make my breath last for a count of ten. But he doesn't

remove it. Instead, he reaches into his jacket, snaps through the seams in the lining, and pulls out a human finger bone.

I did not see that coming.

My eyebrows raise, but I don't let myself hesitate before I say, "That'll do."

Anyone would kill, metaphorically speaking, to get their hands on that much organic material in the Afterlife. I would be a fool not to jump at it, so I plaster on a grin and start to shuffle the coins, but Pete stops me.

"I'll only put this down for a chance at the bull."

I chew on the inside of my cheek, and here begins:

THE TALE

It's the part of the con where you tell the mark what they want to hear. It's easy to overplay this. Most people, especially guys like Pete here, know that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. They don't want a fantasy. There have to be strings attached for it to be believable. And the things is, there are. Just not the strings he's expecting.

"I guess I could let go of a bull," I say with a shrug. "It's not one of the more popular coins."

A fluorescent light above me flicks on, and for a moment, I lose the thread of the con. My heart is in my throat as I try to pull myself together, knowing that if Pete looks too closely, he'll notice there's something not quite right about me. Something not quite *all there*.

The light splutters out again and the tension in my body releases. Pete's eyes are still on the coins, not the translucent sheen to my skin, the fuzziness around my edges.

Internally, I'm breathing a sigh of relief. Externally, I keep a patronizing look on my face as I open my bag.

"But it's your call, pal," I say.

Here's the trick to lying believably: You have to first believe the lie in your body. The bull is the only real obol in the bunch. The rest are what's left over of the fakes Poppy made. But I've spent all week keeping my fakes in a safe and the real one just hanging out in my pocket. So it doesn't feel weird when I reach in my bag, fingers searching for cool hard metal among the crumbs and tampons and scrap paper, and pull out a coin worth more than anything I've ever owned. This is:

THE CONVINCER

Pete's attention snaps to the coin between my fingers, a hungry gleam in his eyes. I switch out the star and add the bull next to the other coins. If Pete looks close enough, he'll see the difference, the magical sheen on the bull that the skulls lack. But I'm betting on Pete's laser focus here, and humanity's habit of seeing only what they expect.

Pete lays the finger bone on the table, and we're now to my favorite part:

THE ALL-IN

As I shuffle the coins, his eyes are glued to my hands. There's a sudden chill in the station, but I'm expecting it. I don't let it throw me. I do, however, peek over Pete's shoulder and see the thing I've been dreading all along: a transit police officer. Time to wrap this up, with or without the score.

I stop the coins, and Pete hesitates. *Come on, come on.* It won't be long until I'm noticed. It takes everything in me to keep my leg from bouncing, my gaze focused on Pete. My fingers twitch, itching to fidget. It seems like an eternity, but I have to trust that my fear is slowing time. I can't snap at him to hurry, and I can't watch the progress of the thing hunting me. I can only breathe in a count of three and out a count of three.

Finally, Pete taps his finger on the middle coin. I fake a grimace as I flip it over, revealing the bull. And now I present to you:

THE HANDOFF

Trying not to rush, I offer him the coin, hand stretched out, fingers cupped down so I can drop one of the worthless coins in his hand. Pete's palm is facing up an inch and a half below mine. It's a quick drop, but just as I release the coin, a pair of narrowed eyes in the crowd lock onto mine, and my fingers slip. The worthless obol falls into Pete's hand, but now the real one is poking between my ring and middle finger. And he notices.

Pete and I share a single moment of shock. Then I grab the finger bone and make a run for it. At least, I try to.

His hand clamps around my wrist, and he pulls me close, his breath hot on my cheek. "Got ya, sweetheart."

Behind him, the crowd has parted around a dark figure, but Pete doesn't seem to notice. I do, though. Tall, lean, a yellow high-vis vest over a police uniform. At least, that's what it appears to be. It can shape-shift to match its surroundings, but I can sense it like prey senses a predator.

A hellhound. The white blood cells of the Afterlife, seeking and destroying any contaminant, anything that doesn't belong.

Like me.

In its hand is what looks like a gun, except it's not a gun. My brain only thinks it is because it's a weapon. I have to get the hell out of here. Time for:

THE BLOW-OFF

Pete's grip on me is strong, and even though neither of us is technically *matter* right now, his belief that he can keep hold of my wrist is stronger than my belief that I can break free. I hold the finger bone just out of his reach as he grapples for it and notice

belatedly that we've moved under a fluorescent light. My hand has become translucent. His eyes light with understanding, and he goes for my throat. I dart back.

It's too late, though. The hellhound blurs and is suddenly next to us. It points its gun that's not a gun at me. Unfortunately, this is:

THE FIX

Unfortunate for Pete, that is.

I grab on to his wrist and pull him into the line of fire. A bullet that's not a bullet hits Pete in the back of the head. There's no blood. No viscera. No jerk of movement as a small metal bead hits his skull at twice the speed of sound. Because it's not a bullet. It's some kind of magic? spell? curse?

Pete vanishes from the outside in, curling in on himself like a burning piece of paper, until he's nothing more than a tiny ball of light. In the span of seconds, he's gone.

And I'm next.

I can't outrun a hellhound, but I run anyway.

TWO

I may not be able to outrun a hellhound, but I can outsmart it. Two paces away is a narrow maintenance tunnel that doesn't actually exist. I dart in and slam the door behind me, believing with whatever I have that passes for a heart that the door is locked.

Said heart is pounding, and I don't recognize the ragged sound of my breathing. I rest my head against the door for a moment, but the image of a soul disintegrating burns behind my eyelids. Except it's not Pete's soul I see when I close my eyes.

Get it together, Elle.

The disintegration's not the important part. It's what happened after. I'm sure I saw it this time. Right before the last of Pete vanished, there was a tiny ball of light right where his sternum had been. And then it went . . . somewhere. Into the "gun"? Point is, it existed. Still exists, somewhere.

I tuck that realization away, turning my focus back on the present.

As long as no one on the subway platform imagines this maintenance tunnel, which doesn't actually exist in the real Boylston station, I should be good. Sure, the hellhound would have seen me disappear, but as far as I know, they can't influence the surroundings in the Afterlife. I concentrate on turning the lights on, but it takes me several seconds to convince myself they exist. Once they flicker to life, I pull my jacket close around me and start heading briskly down the tunnel.

Physics are weird here. The best we can figure, it's a psychic creation of collective consciousness. It's the whole *people see what they*

expect to see thing, but here, what people see is a mélange of all the Dead's memories. Underneath all that is a layer of surreality, and sometimes bits of it creep through the construct. And that's how you end up with whales swimming down a subway platform. If I were to go up into Boston Common, it would be recognizable but off, because it's been unconsciously re-created by people from different times and ages and points of view. And then something weird might pop up, like a giant potato in the sky or a swan with human legs, but they usually pass fairly quickly, because people disbelieve them away.

One person can't usually change much on purpose, but I'm thinking *really* hard about how there's a maintenance tunnel here, and lights to illuminate my way back to the basement of an unassuming building one block over.

Plus, I'm not the only one imagining it to life.

Footsteps pick up pace behind me.

"Well, that sucks." Suit Guy, a.k.a. Vinny, a.k.a. my shill, falls into step beside me.

"You were supposed to win the first one," I say.

Vinny's not my favorite person, personally speaking, but in the absence of a crew, he'll do in a pinch. He has the necessary attributes: the ability to lie convincingly and the willingness to do so for a price.

Oh, and he's Dead.

"I was distracted," he responds to my accusation.

I roll my eyes. "Was there a hot guy on the platform?"

There's a pause before he mutters, "There was a hot guy on the platform."

I smirk. "Blue button-down and locs?"

He just grins.

"Second pocket," I say, nodding to the messenger bag slung over Vinny's shoulder—the one I left behind in the T stop when I fled.

He rips open the Velcro flap and pulls out a baby tooth. *My* baby tooth. I don't tell him it's the last one, that I've already bartered away the rest of them.

When I was cleaning out the house, I'd found them in a small tin in the attic, my name scrawled across the top in Dad's handwriting, three layers of spells protecting them. There was one with Dante's name on it too, but I can't bring myself to trade those.

Organic material is the only currency here, and none of it is more valuable than bones.

"No possession," I say sternly to Vinny.

He scoffs. "What do you take me for?" He cradles the tooth. "I'm gonna use this baby to haunt my ex-boyf."

"Nobody says 'boyf' anymore."

Vinny shrugs. "They did when I was alive."

"Yeah, well. They also said 'YOLO,' and look how that turned out."

He cuts me a sideways glance. "You're in a good mood for someone who just lost their payout."

"Did I?"

Vinny points in the direction of the subway platform. "Yeah, you fumbled the switch and dropped the bone. I couldn't grab it, by the way. Someone had already nabbed it."

I cluck my tongue, shoving my hands into my jacket pockets. "Oh, Vinny, my sweet, dumb Jacob Marley. How little you've learned."

Raising one hand, I flick my wrist, and the fake star obol appears between my fingers. It's a little shaky, because, again, small hands. Another flick of the wrist and the star is replaced with the bull. And then, because I'm not skilled enough to palm a third item, I raise Pete's watch with my other hand.

"The job went off exactly as planned," I say.

"Minus the almost getting reaped," Vinny points out.

I hum noncommittally. “Even that ended up in my favor. Now Pete won’t be missing his watch.”

“All that for a watch?”

I grin. “Poor Infamous Pete is infamous for his poor memory and computer skills. Rumor has it, he keeps his PINs scratched into the band of the watch.”

The botched coin switch was just a cover for me to get close enough to Pete. Light pressure on the wrist while his focus was on the bone in my other hand. A slip of the clasp with my thumb, a pinch of the band between middle and ring fingers, and the watch is now mine.

I flip it over and sure enough, several lines of letters and numbers are scratched clumsily into the leather.

“You can’t take the watch back with you,” Vinny points out. “You can only take back what you brought yourself, and that watch hitched a ride on the Dead guy.”

I shoot Vinny a flat look. “I’m going to memorize the numbers, Casper.”

“Oh.”

We reach a door at the end of the tunnel, and just like I’ve convinced myself, there’s a room beyond with a hive of Orpheus chambers built into the wall on the far side. They’re little more than bunks, like train sleeping compartments, with a tank above them and tubing leading to a mist mask. A light flashes on a monitor in one of the bunks.

I take my bag from Vinny and stuff my knit hat into it. “Well, gotta go.”

Vinny leans against the nearest chamber. “How long have you got?”

I flip over and shake my hair out, even though it doesn’t matter in the slightest. It’ll look how it looks when I get back to my body. “No idea.”

Alchemy and magical gadgets aren't my forte, so the technical part of this con has been all guesswork. I'm betting I have only a few minutes left, so I'll have to do my memorizing quick. I lie down in the lit chamber.

This is the second difference between me and my brother. He never would have done a job like this alone. It was one of his rules.

Rule #4: Never do anything without your crew.

Dante lived by that rule, until he didn't, and that's what got him killed.

I'm halfway through another recitation of the passwords when I catch a shift in the air. The scent of rotten meat and garlic that's been following me begins to fade. The world around me starts to shimmer. This is it.

Clouds fill the space, starting as a translucent fog, then growing more real until I can feel the cold and damp cling to my skin. My vision fills with a bright light, and suddenly I'm zooming away from it. Faster and faster, the entire universe spinning around me.

And then I suck in a breath.

A real one.

With my real lungs in my real body.

My real eyes fly open.

I'm in a chamber like the one I'd just lain down in, a silicone mask strapped to my face. My body feels drained and sore, though I haven't moved in at least an hour. I just want to lie there, but it looks like I might have to start running. The lights are flashing, and an alarm is blaring.

I'm not supposed to be here, and I'm about to get caught.