

HEARTACHE AND THE CENTURY OF PROGRESS

PART THREE OF THE JOHN HARROD TRILOGY

FIRST CHAPTER

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CHAPTER 1

FROM THE MOMENT she clasped my hand and led me on a night of enduring love in a remote bordello called the Tiger Ranch in the Las Vegas desert almost fifteen years ago, I knew Caroline Carmichael was what the romantics called, the one.

My love for Caroline set like cement when she told me about her pregnancy and my heart soared at the prospect of starting a family with her. I wanted to spend my life with Caroline and watch our daughter, Vicki, grow up and one day start a family of her own.

I'd die for the loves of my life. With all the angel crap I went through over the years, the angels treated my loves as afterthoughts. I hated the angels' callousness with a passion, and I resented them clear back to when they first entered my life over twenty years ago. Angels sucked.

No angels appeared during the fourteen years we raised Vicki, who was growing to become a bright, intelligent, fun-loving young woman. However, they always managed to tip me off that they were around and that kept me on edge.

I told Vicki about the angels, the angelic world known as Hali, time travel, and the evils of the world. However, some nightmares were too terrifying for young kids, so I chose my moments carefully. I wasn't sure how much she believed my stories, but one day she'd understand.

Caroline never approved of my educating Vicki about my experiences with angels, but she knew as well as I what possible horrors loomed ahead. I didn't like the idea of getting my fourteen-year-old daughter involved in my trials, especially not with the fallen angel Turel and Chicago gangster Joe 'Delmo' Delmonico, in the picture. Despite my supposed divine help, there were no guarantees of success nor that would I even survive.

The angels owned my life. With all the fuss they made about the Redemption Moon since my Vegas days, I thought they'd show me the way to victory in blazing neon. Their endless patience with me was what I hated the most since I never knew when they'd pop into my life. However, looming pressure from those on the unpleasant side of the good-evil line permeated my soul like a raw Chicago winter chill.

Caroline's love for me emanated from her spirit like a sweet spring breeze. Her soothing Southern accent held my attention like a vise grip. Her compassion and undying loyalty were the kinds of traits I expected from an angel. However, over time the angels had alienated her from me when they excluded her from any of my training sessions. Her resentment came to a head a few months ago while we attended a play at the Auditorium Theater in downtown Chicago. Since then, the rift between us widened, and like a ship leaving port, Caroline drifted from my heart.

I didn't care if Caroline manipulated me or even lied to me in the past. The heart revealed everything. All I wanted or needed was for

her to be at my side. I was a classic sap. That's how simple love was to me.

Today, my heart sunk with an unexplainable sorrow after I left our apartment earlier this morning. I knew Caroline, and I knew I had to get her back if we were going to survive my involvement with the angels. Every marriage had its problems. I knew we weren't immune from tough times either, but how many other couples had to contend with angels in their lives? I often retreated to the only place I found solace and could drown my exhausted spirit.

The Tire Barn Brewery on Clark Street, a few blocks from our Wrigleyville apartment, became my sanctuary from the daily grind of living among angels and my to-be-determined date with destiny. With some of the inheritance money I received from my grandfather Ray Eldridge, I invested in the Tire Barn and named some of the various beers brewed in-house. I wasn't a brewmaster, but I loved the business.

The former Depression-era auto repair shop, with its exposed yellow brick walls and heavy timbered ceiling, now served as a popular watering hole for the Chicago Cubs faithful.

The Tire Barn was a quiet place until a Cubs game ended. I used to love the atmosphere of Wrigleyville during baseball season. Any hints of postseason play made things much more exciting. I'd love to feel that good again.

The Tire Barn had its usual group of regulars like any other tap, right down to an old man who always sat alone at a table off to the side. The old man looked to be in his seventies and never removed his black wide-brimmed hat. He was a relatively new arrival to the bar and, like always, he ordered a beer and sat quietly.

Despite his occasional appearances last winter, I never learned his name, and I wasn't going to pry. His shoulder length white wavy hair

veiled his weathered face from the world while he pondered over his glass.

The broad-shouldered fellow sat there again today, seemingly miserable. He wore a long black lightweight overcoat, blue jeans, and heavy boots. I don't know where he came from, but he was unique. Everyone lived with some form of pain so I left him to his lonesome.

He removed an object from his overcoat pocket and set it on the table. He gave it a gentle nudge and watched as it rolled across the tabletop in front of him. It was an antique toy truck with a silver cab and red bed. The paint was shiny as if it were new. The molded art deco style was stylish and non-existent in toys of today. With its simple white tires, I recognized it as a rubber toy similar to what I saw at antique malls over the years. First made during the 1930s when steel was scarce, the tough little toys were indestructible and spared untold damage to wooden furniture by rough playing kids in homes across the country.

Something about that little rubber truck captivated him. He studied it longingly with glossy eyes, as though he lost something dear to him. I'll never know what it was, but I had enough problems of my own.

Caroline never liked me coming here, especially when Vicki was younger, so I shied away much of the time. However, having no purpose in life was the worst feeling a man could have. That despair was right up there with losing a child. The thought of losing Vicki scared the crap out of me more than fighting a pissed off angel.

Caroline and I suffered through our struggles over the past couple years, more so when Vicki hit puberty. I wasn't the cool, fun dad anymore. I was a parent in the way of her discovering the world sooner than I wanted.

On this day, I hid out in the Tire Barn's brewhouse as I tried to get a new beer recipe ready for an Oktoberfest celebration at Navy

Pier. The brewhouse occupied a building next to the main seating area and a frequently occupied red brick patio.

I gave the sample of the dark brown brew a strong sniff. The stench of rotten skunk wouldn't sell. Maybe I didn't sterilize the tank or the copper lines properly. Maybe I sucked at making beer. I hurled the small sample glass at the garbage can where it missed and shattered against the brick wall. I hung my head, looked up at the ten-barrel fermentation tank, then reached for the drain valve lever.

The sound of a woman's dress pumps struck the concrete floor angrily, which only meant one thing, Caroline was here. I never saw a man look away from her. She was gorgeous in every sense of the word. Her blemish-free skin required minimal makeup, and she went everywhere impeccably dressed.

She marched into the brew house, and her face cringed at the ever-present malty aroma. She stared at me as she crossed her arms.

"Where's Vicki?" Caroline asked in her Southern accent while I wiped my hands with a rag.

I rubbed my hands slower and avoided eye contact. "I don't know. I've been here all day," I said.

I didn't want to argue with her. I wasn't afraid of her, but I wasn't going to let myself get caught up in another one of her circular arguments.

"Didn't you notice she wasn't home when you snuck out this morning?" she asked.

I took a deep breath, but I wasn't going to take the bait this time.

"No, and I didn't sneak out. I didn't want to wake you since I had to check the latest batch."

"That's no excuse, John. She's fourteen for God's sake! She didn't come home at all last night. Aren't you the least bit concerned?"

"She was with her friend Samantha. Didn't she tell you?"

I yanked the valve open and listened as the spoiled beer sloshed down the drainpipe. Caroline shuffled back, careful not to let any skunky beer splash on her sensational legs.

“You pay more attention to this fall-apart brewpub and your little angel friends than your own family,” she continued.

“Hey, the angels picked me, remember? I think we’ve done great considering the situation. Besides, they’ve left us alone to raise Vicki and—”

“It hasn’t been great, John. Can’t you see that?”

Caroline took a deep breath. I never saw her so upset. I sensed she had a lot more on her mind than discussing Vicki’s newly discovered rebellious side.

“Don’t you remember when you were fourteen?” I asked.

“This is different,” she snapped back at me.

“How? She’s a teenager. It’s not like she’s going around looking for trouble. She’s a good girl.”

Caroline’s chin quivered. She looked off to the side while she dug a tissue out of her black leather Coach purse. I glanced at the beer flowing down the clear drainpipe. I was on a real cold streak with everything these days.

“Caroline?” I asked softly as she blew her delicate nose.

I swallowed hard then fidgeted with a roll of unopened foil-backed beer labels while she stared at me.

“All I wanted was a normal life,” she said. “I can’t do this anymore, John.”

“Come on, baby. Just hang in there a little while longer.”

“It’s over, John. Here.”

Caroline handed me an envelope, large enough to hold legal documents. I removed the documents then stopped reading after I saw *Dissolution of Marriage* in large letters at the top of the page. I shoved the papers back into the envelope.

“Wait a second,” I said. “You want a divorce? Now?”

The steel back door of the brewhouse slammed closed, and Vicki walked up. Her face deadpanned and her lips parted, as she seemed to sense the tension in the room. She paused beside the fermentation tank wearing her favorite blue Cubs T-shirt, torn blue denim capris and set down her Nike backpack with dozens of keychains dangling off a side loop. She eyed us as she carefully tied her long blonde hair into a ponytail with an elastic band. I knew her well enough to know the cautious expression on her face. She did something, something she was likely hesitant to bring up.

“Is everything okay?” Vicki asked as she set down her backpack and studied us carefully. She turned her head to the splashing, draining fermentation tank. “The beer went bad again?” she asked.

I nodded glumly.

Caroline lowered her head in frustration.

“What’s that?” Caroline asked as she pointed at Vicki’s feet.

Vicki looked at the artwork on her ankle, and then her face got red.

“It’s a Cubs tattoo,” Vicki said meekly. “Samantha and I both got one.”

Caroline stormed out of the room, her heels clicked louder than when she entered.

Vicki looked at me like a caught crook. Sure, I could’ve chewed her out for marring her body without asking us first, but one thing I learned about teenagers, they viciously hated criticism.

I got a closer look at the little Cubbie bear logo, about the size of a silver dollar. Many people got tattoos, which became more mainstream with each passing day.

“Bad timing, kiddo,” I said.

The work was exceptional, only unexpected. I grabbed a box cutter and sliced open the roll of beer labels.

“Dad, I’m not a baby anymore, you know?” Vicki asked.

I conceded that she was right. She grew up fast and, like most fathers, I dreaded this day. However, we had fun together as father and daughter, but times were changing.

“I know,” I said.

Vicki slowly stepped to my desk, rotated the roll of beer bottle labels for a better look.

“Are these the new labels?” Vicki asked.

“Yes.”

Vicki studied the image of the Hall of Science from the Century of Progress Exposition. She gazed at the image intensely, much as I did. The Carillon Tower stood proudly off-center with puffy clouds in the background. An original poster from the Fair with a similar image hung in my living room. The image drew me in, spiritually perhaps, every time I looked at it. Regardless of the reason, it was important in some cosmic way.

Vicki ran her finger around the outline of the foil-backed label. “This is cool. I wonder what it was like to go there,” Vicki said.

“Me too. You know my grandparents went there,” I said.

“They did?”

I gave Vicki a hug.

“Oh-kay, what’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s your mom. Look, I’ve told you about the last page and some of the things I did in the past,” I said.

“You mean the time traveling?”

I nodded.

“I don’t care what your mother says, I can’t wait anymore,” I said.

“Wait for what?”

I took a breath as I caressed her blonde hair. I missed the days when she was a toddler and I'd brush her hair while we watched old movies together.

"It's easier to show you," I said.

My hands emitted a slight greenish glow, a new oddity with the divine endorsement abilities, which surfaced when I visited the times of my youth.

I opened a circular ring, a time window. The clear, rippling, watery-like loops rolled outward in a billowing, silent, hypnotic fashion. Vicki stepped back and looked on with wonder at the undulating rings. I freaked out when I saw my first time window too.

"Wow! What is that?" she asked with widened eyes.

"That's a time window," I said.

"How'd you do that?"

"Through a means called divine endorsement. Angels gave it to me. Come on."

To this day, I still didn't know specifically how I made time windows take me to different times. I merely thought about going to a place, the window opened, and I was on my way. The window even changed my clothes to match the year I went to. I reached for Vicki's hand and walked her into the window.

A slight tingle radiated through my body when I crossed through the dividing point that separated the times the window bridged. However, clothing changes felt rough, as though a scratchy wool blanket dragged across my bare skin. Both sensations occurred faster than I could blink.

When I visited the days of my youth, my clothes never changed as they did when I went to other times. It was unusual, but I wasn't one to question the authorities who gave me the ability. They usually didn't answer my questions completely anyway.

We emerged from the time window beside a massive willow tree in a park in my boyhood town of Hoffman Estates. I viewed a spirited little league game in action while I leaned against the tree.

I scanned the area while the time window closed. We were far enough away from the action that nobody cared about our presence. The small retention pond, Lakeview Lake, sat close by. I spent my entire childhood here, and I found great peace in the memories.

“I smell oranges,” Vicki said.

“It always smells like that on these kinds of trips.”

Like the other times I came here, the sweet fragrance of orange blossoms filled the air.

Parents and kids cheered as the metallic clink of a baseball hitting an aluminum bat pierced the field a hundred yards from us.

The sky felt like it usually did when I went to the past to relive youthful joys.

“Why does everything look shaded?” Vicki asked.

“I’m not sure. Partial Eclipses and sunglasses have the same tinted effect. I think it’s because I’m in a time where I already exist. Nobody can see or hear me, as far as I can tell. Anyway, do you see the right fielder with the red glove?” I asked and pointed.

“Yeah.”

“That’s me. I’m nine years old.”

Vicki’s jaw dropped.

“This is the first real baseball game I ever played. My team was the Black Pirates, and boy did I stink.”

The ball sailed toward the outfield and over the head of my younger self. I watched as my youthful self, chased down the ball like a cat after a mouse. I was a fast runner.

“Why did we come here?” Vicki asked.

“I love coming here and it reminds me of what I’m fighting for.”

I caressed Vicki’s head as I smiled.

“Fighting?” she asked.

“You see, I’m what the angels call an Interceptor. I’m supposed to kill a real bad angel.”

Vicki crossed her arms defiantly. “People can’t kill angels, Dad,” she said.

“The good angels seem to think I can.”

“Does Mom know about this?”

“More than she cares to.”

I turned away from the game and headed toward the pond. The stagnant smell of fresh algae wasn’t a deterrent to my picking up a fallen willow branch to probe the muck for frogs. When I was a kid, this was the biggest body of water I knew, until my parents took me to Lake Michigan. I even took third place in a three-kid ice-skating race on this pond in the winter of 1972 when I was eight years old. Sure, I came in last because I kept falling down, but I never had so much fun. The memories rushed my heart and tears formed in my eyes.

“Is there something going on I should know about?” Vicki asked.

I put my arm around her then wiped my eyes. I opened another time window, and we entered it.

We emerged in the Tire Barn brewhouse. I closed the valve as the last drops of the spoiled beer dripped from the fermenter. I then opened another valve of hot water and started a rinsing process on the tank.

“Dad? Are you mad about the tattoo?” Vicki asked.

“No. I think you’re a little young for tattoos, but it doesn’t change the big picture. Your mom and I love you very much, Vicki.”

“I love you too, but sometimes she gets all crazy.”

“She’s only trying to protect you.”

“I guess so,” Vicki said with a sigh.

“She’s rather mad right now, so let her cool off for a while. Then go see if you two can make nice,” I said.

“She never listens to me.”

Vicki let out a frustrated sigh and pursed her lips. I knew exactly what she meant.

“Try to keep your emotions in check. Whatever you do, don’t argue. Sometimes you have to be patient with her. I’ll be home in a little while.”

“Okay, Dad.”

I hugged Vicki and kissed her head. A whiff of her strawberry-scented hair filled my nose and thoughts of Caroline popped in my head. Vicki walked out the back door and headed home.

I grabbed a beer bottle from a mini fridge beside the fermentation tank, twisted off the cap, and swigged.

The rusty hinges of the steel back door screeched as I pushed it open to find a place to gather my thoughts.

I loved Vicki more than life itself. She was the only reason I never voluntarily went back in time to 1934 to face my, or rather the world’s, fate. Angels settled fights with swords, God-forged, kickass swords. Human weapons were useless against angels, although any angel on Earth in human form was vulnerable to human pains including death. If their human shell dies, the angel returns to Hali. If needed, the angel may return through a feature unique to angels called turnaround.

The main drawback of turnaround was the angel suffered memory loss. To require its purpose after returning to the human realm, the angel would need a lot of time. Turel was the perfect example.

Despite my efforts to kill Turel, he kept coming back. The last page of the *Book of Ancients* was all Turel wanted. I could give it to him, but if Turel won and recreated humanity in an evil image, I

didn't want any part of it. I'd give up anything or die trying to make sure it didn't become a reality. Good was better than evil regardless of the cost.

I sat beneath the overhang of the loading dock and scanned the alley while I nursed my beer. The shade didn't do much to stop the radiant heat from the asphalt alley or halt the smell of rotting waste from a nearby dumpster.

Everything about my involvement with angels stunk to high heaven, which embittered me to the otherwise glory of even working with them. However, my primitive heart couldn't let go of the feeling that the angels royally screwed me out of a life of my own. The only good thing that came out of my strenuous relationship with angels was Caroline and Vicki. My cell phone rang, but when Caroline's name appeared, I groaned. I flipped open the phone and took a breath as she continued her tirade.

"Caroline we've been through this," I said. "Come on, give Vicki a break. Hello?"

I angrily snapped the flip phone shut then chugged my beer. It burned me up when people hung up the phone without saying goodbye.

In front of me, a watery blur appeared. I didn't know who was coming through that time window, but it was an angel. Time windows became as ordinary to me as passing clouds were to everyone else.

The window fully opened then my best friend, Dave Sowell, emerged. For years, I thought he was a regular human man, but he turned out to be an archangel in disguise. I hurled the bottle across the alley where it crashed beside an open dumpster.

Dave's visits were all business once I found out he was an angel. I watched as he clapped his hands sarcastically at my missed shot, and a grin appeared under his groomed longhorn mustache. Since I

learned the truth about him, our friendship changed. These days, he never stopped by simply to chat.

Dave's wings faded out behind him. I put away my cell phone and watched him as he stood there with his arms crossed. He looked as brawny as I remembered, and I missed the friendship we had before he told me of his divine origins.

"You missed," Dave said in his thick Texas accent.

"Hey," I said with little enthusiasm.

Dave's presence usually meant he wanted something.

"Why are you so blue? You got trouble on the home front?" Dave asked with a soft smile.

"Caroline hit me with divorce papers, so you might as well come back later."

Dave leered at me.

"Sorry, big guy, you know the drill. When we call, you answer."

"Well, the line's busy. Call later."

"Come on, let's go."

"What about Vicki?" I asked.

"Enough with the excuses. We can't blow it off this time. You have to be prepared."

"What's the big emergency now?" I asked.

"We have a runaway angel problem."

"What's it to me?"

"You have to find him, or this lovely world of yours is finished."

That wasn't anything new to me. A runaway angel ran amok in the world, and no other being in all of existence could do anything about it except me. I knew that was nothing but a fresh, steaming pile of dog crap.

Dave opened a time window and stood in front of it waiting for me. As well as I knew Dave, the critical look on his face caused a faint alarm inside my soured brain.

I approached the time window, if anything, to get this damn trip out the way.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Hali. I have to fill you in on a few things first, but I have to warn you, this trip is going to suck,” Dave said.

“Wonderful. I can hardly wait,” I said and entered the time window.