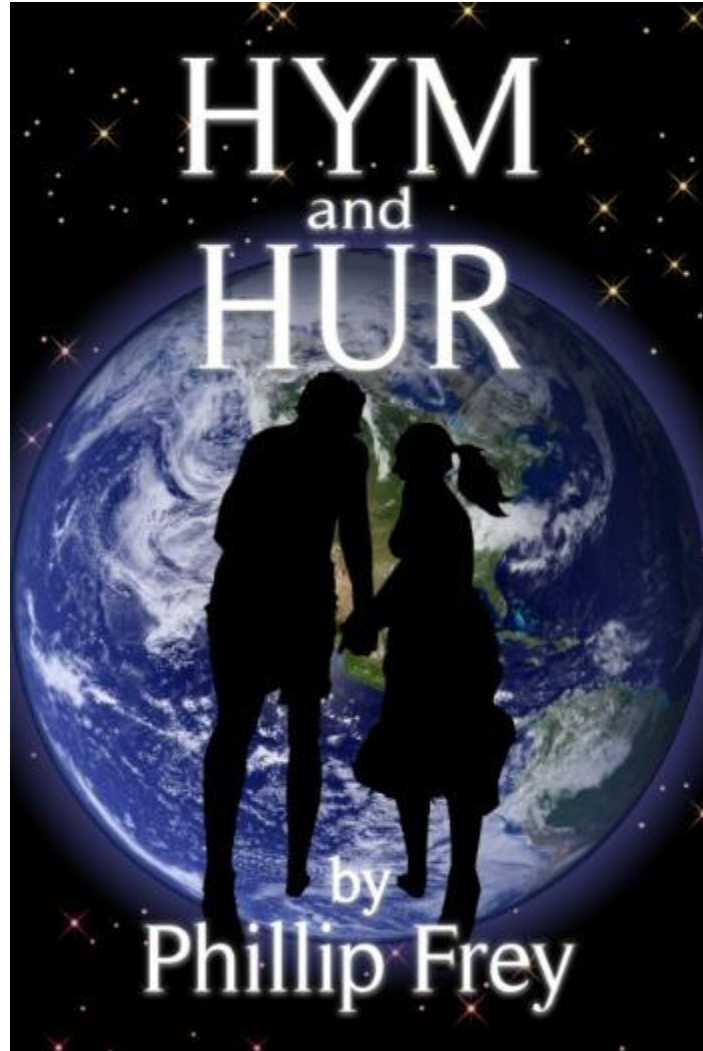




Chapter 1

A bright flash lit up the restaurant window. The waitress snapped her eyes shut, thinking it was the sun bouncing off a windshield. Blinking her eyes open, she noticed the booth alongside the window was occupied. A booth she could have sworn had just been empty, and she made her way over to it.

Hym set the breakfast menu down. "Coffee," he said to the waitress, "and can I get a hot fudge sundae at this hour?"

"No problem," she told him. "And for you, ma'am?"

"Hot tea," Hur said, "and a slice of cherry pie with two scoops of vanilla ice cream."

"Sounds great," the waitress smiled, and she left them.

"What'll we do today?" Hur asked Hym.

Searching for an answer, his hazel eyes filled with mischief. "How about this?" he whispered. "For twenty-four hours we give everyone in Los Angeles bad luck."

"But most of them already have bad luck," Hur said. "And it would be a negative. Why not give everybody good luck?"

"Not really my kind of fun," he slouched.

In the silence that followed, each tried to come up with something.

"Breakfast time," the waitress announced. She served the drinks and desserts, then was off to the next booth.

Hur's blue eyes brightened. "I got it," she said, and it was her turn to whisper. "For a day or two, no one in Los Angeles dies."

Hym slapped his forehead. "That is great!"

"Oh-darn," she said. "We'll have to get you-know-who to go along with it."

"Why wouldn't he?" Hym said as he dug happily into his sundae. "It'll give him a chance to shorten his list."

Hur nodded skeptically as she took a big bite of her dessert.

Chapter 2

Barney's Beanery had just opened. There were only two customers at the bar. A chubby old woman sipped a beer at one end. At the other sat Death tossing back a shot of Jim Beam.

He grimaced with delight, slammed his glass down and said, "Barkeep — I'll have another."

Pouring the drink, the bartender eyed Death's black coat and fedora, the pale skin and long gnarled fingers. "Perfect weather for a coat," he cracked, "must be only about 80 out there."

Death took hold of his fresh drink. "You're too young to be a real barkeep," he said. "You're a standup comic, just trying to make ends meet."

"Got me pegged," said the bartender. "Which club you see me at?"

"None," Death grinned. He downed the Jim Beam, burped and said, "I'm a real whiz when it comes to people-insight."

The Beanery's door opened. Hym and Hur stepped in and gazed at the far end of the bar, at Death ordering one more for the road.

Death saw them and arose tall and lanky from his stool. "It's Hym and Hur," he said leaning in toward the bartender. "Pair of beauties, wouldn't you say?" Then turning toward the pair, he hollered over the distance: "Pair of troublemakers is more like it!"

The bartender said, "Hey, take it easy or I'll have to ask you to leave."

"It's them who ought to leave," Death said. He backed away from the bar, knocked his stool over, danced in a circle and sang out, "Pretty pair will smash your bottles and glasses, put the shards on all your chairs and everybody will end up with bleeding asses!"

The chubby old woman at the near end of the bar put her money down and left.

"Geez," Hym said quietly to Hur, "does Death need a vacation or what?"

Death stopped dancing, pointed a long finger at them and shouted, "Secrets — dirty little secrets!"

The bouncer came over to Death and said, "You're outta here, buddy!" He grabbed Death's

coat sleeve and yanked him toward the back exit.

Suddenly, as if struck by lightning, the bouncer let go of the sleeve, reeled and hit the floor with a hard thud.

"He'll wake up after I leave," Death told the fearful bartender. "Now, now," Death said to him, "everything's fine." Picking his stool up off the floor, Death sat and threw back his one for the road, Hym and Hur on the approach.

"I'm feeling much better now," Death said to the bartender. "So good in fact, I'll have another for the road while I give these two a moment of my time, over there in that booth."

"And for us," Hym ordered, "two root beer floats."

"Heavy on the ice cream," Hur smiled brightly.

Death stepped over the bouncer and said to the bartender, "No use in trying to use the phone. Landlines and cells have been temporarily brought down by an unusually large sun spot."

Chapter 3

"Oh, no-no-no," Death said to Hym and Hur, "I don't want to lighten my load." He gazed into his shot glass and drifted into thought. Working on their floats, Hym and Hur kept their eyes on him, hopeful that he was reconsidering.

Death looked out from under the brim of his hat. He stared into Hym's hazel eyes, then shifted his stare to the blue of Hur's. "Tell you what," he said finally, "I know how much fun the two of you would get out of wreaking havoc over a zero death rate in this city, but it doesn't suit me."

"Why are you being so difficult?" Hym asked.

"Patience," Death said. "I'm not done."

"Sorry," Hym apologized.

"Here's the best I can do," Death said. "Instead of the whole city, how about the two of you picking someone, one person who would save a small random number of appointed deaths from my grasp?"

Hym and Hur weighed the offer, then exchanged a look of approval. "Okay," Hym said, "the chosen person will have the ability to reverse an arbitrary number of appointed deaths — by touch?"

"Correct," Death said. "By the touch of his hand, someone who unknowingly saves lives, no matter who or what — human, ant, spider or plant."

Hur said, "But sooner or later, the one we pick would have to figure out what he's capable of."

"Maybe, maybe not," Death shrugged. "We try it for a while; see how it goes. And if he should figure it out, think of what fun it would be to watch him try to come to grips with it." He said, "The timing will be your decision. You may come to me and cancel anytime you want, as long as you tell me during the day, between sunup and sundown," he told them. "My nights are full, between collections and preparing the next day's list."

"At the moment we cancel," Hur asked, "our chosen person would immediately lose the ability to save lives?"

"Absolutely," Death answered.

"Sounds good," Hym and Hur said at the same time.

"Yes, it certainly does," Death replied happily. "It pleases me to give you both the chance to

pull off a prank that has only good attached to it. Have we got a deal?"
