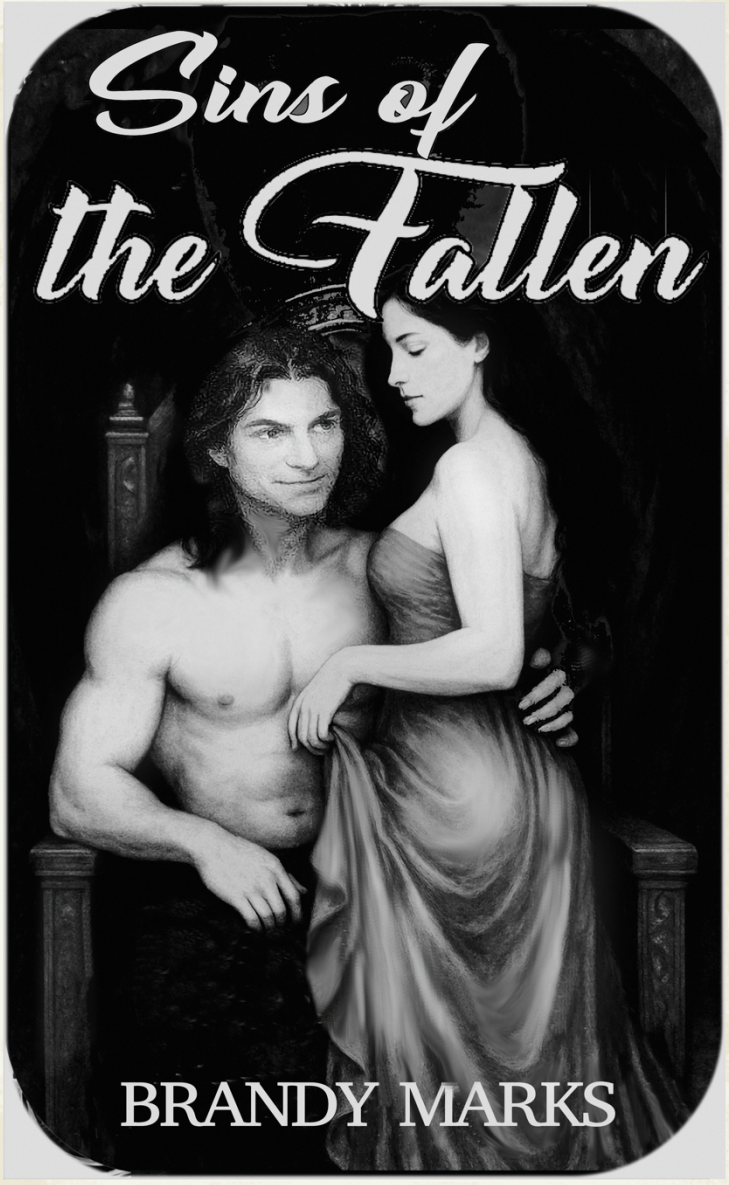
Sins of the Fallen

GOSPEL OF THE DAMNED

BRANDY MARKS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the Fallen
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For more about this book and others by the author, visit: **www.brandymarks.com**

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Sins of the Fallen

To the one who enters this story.

Within these pages lie temptations, shadows of the soul, and longing. While there is suffering: emotional, and existential, there is humor, so you don't take the demons and their exotic ways too seriously.

The story begins with angels who've fallen into desire, demons who are handsome devils who seduce for power, pleasure, and escapism, and Heaven's response after angels make their way out of hell.

You will meet characters who sin, some defiant, some in despair, and some because it is the only way to feel alive, or they simply enjoy sin. Then there are demons, some not too bright. There are scenes aching with intimacy and distorted longing, and the usual disasters. These are not to titillate without purpose. They are present because redemption walks through *hell* before it rises into light.

This is not just a highly spiced fantasy; it is a *hellish odyssey*.

No one truly knows what demons might look like but, if like Lucifer, they come disguised as angels of light, then handsome it is, and I've known my share of demons here on earth.

"Book of Ashes" and "Book of the Damned" exist only in my novels as far as I know anyway

Enter if you dare, but only if you are a hopeless romantic who believes whatever one's sin may be, it can be forgiven.

Brandy Marks

Writing about demons and desire.

Why I, as a Christian, Write About Demons and Desire

Some people ask how I can write about temptation, lust, and the darker realms of the spirit and still call myself a Christian.

Shouldn't my focus be on light, not shadow?

But the truth is—Scripture itself does not shy away from desire, betrayal, or the reality of evil. While the church may avoid, yet the Bible is filled with stories of human longing, holy and destructive.

David desired Bathsheba. Samson desired Delilah. Eve desired the fruit – whatever it was – a metaphor for lust? In every case, wrestling with temptation revealed something about the heart and about God.

I write about demons and desire because these forces are real. They are subtle, seductive, and speak in ways that echo our private struggles. If we never name them, never examine them, how can we understand the battles we're actually fighting?

For me, storytelling is a form of spiritual warfare. By my characters walking into the shadow, I can show the cost of surrendering to it, as well as the beauty of redemption when light breaks through.

The enemy is clever, but so is the Author of salvation.

Yes, I write about lust and soul darkness. I also write about grace, forgiveness, and the relentless pursuit of God for those who've fallen. If I only told the "safe" story, I'd be leaving out half of the gospel.

The Nine Realms of Descent

Chapter 1

Demon's Delight

We carved our names in fire and bone, drank from the cup no angel dared own. The stars recoiled when we kissed the flame, and Hell opened, whispering our name. –Book of the Damned 1:1

The mirror's surface rippled like water, as if disturbed by an unseen hand. My name is Asmodeus, and I'm known for my feline curiosity. Right now, I'm gazing at a warped reflection of a woman sitting alone, her brows drawn together in concentration, a writer whose words are like inked confessions: angels, demons, passions, and aching desires too holy to be spoken aloud. Oh yes…

I glance over as Astaroth arrives. "She toys with fire," he hissed, onyx eyes gleaming with mirth. "She writes of celestial thighs, demon sighs, and the ache of nearness. Damn, I'd enjoy taking her for a ride."

"Subtle, as always," I muttered, knowing he's a lusty one, more than most demons, while my finger traces the mirror's edge watching the silver darken beneath my touch like bruised moonlight. Her image wavers, stretched like taffy briefly, then it snapped back into place.

"She dreams of things she doesn't understand," my voice almost like a villain in a gothic opera. All but the evil laughter and I snicker. "Behind a closed door, and I so love breaking and entering."

Astaroth's chuckle rippled like heat off the lake of fire. "Indeed. She writes of resisting temptation, *yet tempts herself*. It's adorable, a lamb knitting its own sacrificial robe. How can an angel fall so far into sin, and not remember a thing?"

Here, the demons select their next soul for hell, and Seraphina had just become their favorite prey.

Once marked by light, her guardian had grown silent. Her prayers are texts still 'draft' version. Her writing glows faintly with power, but that too could be rewritten, in the veil of tears.

"She hasn't fallen," rasped Karabasan, as he sauntered in. "We must be cautious." He towered above, flame red hair, heavy-lidded eyes, and the kind of muscles you got from centuries of lifting stones and breaking bones after gnawing on the leftovers.

Asmodeus sniffed. "She writes the prelude: first is the sigh, then the slide, and then the *scandal,* not knowing it's her own."

He turned from the mirror, crimson robes brushing the stone floor like a funeral hymn off-key. Around him, the walls pulsed with ancient sin, faces frozen mid-moan, equal parts ecstasy and pain.

Karabasan's laugh is a knife unsheathed. "Oh, she's *so* doomed."

From the mirror's warped depths, a sliver of sound escaped. "Look at her, fingers flying like she's coding her own downfall."

"It's adorable, and she thinks it's fiction." They pause.

Seraphina stirred, her fingers stilled over the keys on her laptop, head tilts, brows furrowing, she wonders, *Was that a voice?*

Her eyes travel but, the room is exactly as it should be, the glow of her screen, the gentle hum of the desk lamp. But something felt… wrong, like warm breath on her skin. "No one is here," she spoke to herself.

"She writes of sin and salvation, only it's the three of us she conjures." The soft voice a whisper in the quiet, almost unheard.

Seraphina blinked. *What in the stars?* Her hands again hovered over the keyboard, motionless. She glances toward the mirror on the wall. nothing but her reflection, a little sleep-mussed. She chuckled softly. "Okay, brain," she whispered. "That's enough caffeine-fueled demon banter for one night."

Then she saw, a distortion or ripple in the reflection, like heat haze over water, like something moving beneath glass.

Seraphina stood, heart racing. Am I dreaming? *Stars no. I'm awake.* She almost slapped herself to make sure but instead, she rose from the chair, gave the mirror a wary look, cautiously walked over, took it off the wall and flipped it face-down on the bookshelf. "There."

Behind the Veil, Astaroth snorted. "She heard us."

"She thinks it's her imagination," said Asmodeus. "They *always* do. Until imagination becomes her reality."

Exhausted, Seraphina set her laptop aside, curled beneath the blanket, and was asleep within seconds, until, hours later, she jolted upright, heart pounding. The sound of soft music lingered in the air, unearthly and beautiful. Ash of fallen suns, what is going on? Head tilted I tried to listen, but it was like an echo in a dream, now forgotten.

My eyes dart to the candle on the side table, burning low. "When did I light that?" I muttered, feeling my pulse racing. "Great way to start a fire." Shoving the blanket aside, I got to my feet, headed for the desk and turned on my laptop.

The screen glowed softly in the dark, casting blue light over the desk. One line on the page, the cursor blinking at its end:

He stepped through the fire and did not burn, eyes sorrowful.

She blinked. "Flame and ashes! When did I write that?" Grabbing the laptop, fingers move to the keys, trembling. A chill passed feeling like the breath of winter wind. I shivered and flipped the lid down on my laptop, crossed the room, and checked the window. It was closed and locked. Outside, the night was still.

"Frost and flame," I whispered, rubbing my arms. "This is getting too weird, even for me. I'm going to bed." Wearily I trudged down the hall into my bedroom. Seconds later, covers pulled up, again I'm asleep.

But far above, on a rooftop cloaked in shadow, a winged figure stood watching—silent, still, and waiting.

Chapter 2

SERAPHINA

She fell with a kiss on her lips and fire in her veins, not knowing it was the first note in a song she'd never forget. –Book of Ashes 1:1

I slipped into a short red-sequined dress. It was my friend's soiree' and I'd agreed to go when she invited me last week. Grabbing a wrap, out the door I flew, my taxi waiting. I could have walked but in these heels, no way, not unless I wanted a twisted ankle.

The butler opened the door without a word. His gloved hands were surprisingly warm as he slipped the wrap from my shoulders and hung it in the coat closet with a care that felt almost ceremonial. Then he stepped aside, and I moved into the spill of golden light, chandeliers glittering above, laughter and music spilling through the air.

The moment I entered, I saw him—and at the same time, his gaze swept over me like the slow draw of a hand across silk, lingering long enough to set my pulse racing. He was tall, his strength plain in the breadth of his shoulders tapering to lean hips. His mouth was full, sculpted, a study in temptation, and I found myself wondering how it might taste. Light caught in his dark hair, setting it aglow like fire on black glass.

Then, with the faintest curve of his lips—too slight to be a smile—he turned away. Not dismissing me, but leaving me with the sting of his absence, as if daring me to follow the pull he'd left behind. I was almost up for the challenge, and before I had the chance to take him up on it…

Andrea, my friend and hostess, must have caught my look. Her lips curved into a knowing smirk as she rushed over, all grace and mischief, and swept me across the floor.

The next thing I knew, Mister Gorgeous stood in front of me. I smiled. Up close, his presence struck like a tidal wave, but my gaze barely had time to drink him in before I noticed the blonde at his side.

Sexy, sleek, and polished—sharp heels and a sharper glare—she practically shouted disdain. If looks could smite, I'd have been a smoldering crater on the floor. Her lips pressed into a tight line, perfectly arched brows drawn into a scowl that made it painfully clear: she was not thrilled about our intrusion. Too bad. She was a curse in silk, and I thought, *let her unravel.*

I straightened my spine, arched a brow, and met her cold gaze with defiance. After all, I wasn't the one clinging to a man who carried the scent of sin poured into one beautiful sculpture.

But I wanted to be.

"Xavier, this is Serah," Andrea said, with a nod toward the woman. "Silvia." Then, with a flicker of amusement, she turned away, leaving me in the wake of an introduction that felt like a dare.

He turned, and his gaze landed on me, slow, deliberate, trailing over me as if he could read my thoughts in the shape of my body. A corner of his mouth curved upward, and heat coiled low in my belly before I could stop it.

"So… is it Seraphina?" he asked, voice smooth as cream, rich enough to drown in. Beside him, Silvia, the sleek blonde stiffened, her scowl sharpening to venom she spun on her heel and stalked away.

"Serah will do," I said, my lips tugging into a faint smirk, though my eyes followed her retreat. My tone carried a flicker of challenge—light enough to pass as flirtation, sharp enough to mean something else. I had no idea who—or what—I was toying with. If I had, I might have run screaming from that room.

"Dance?" he murmured, stepping into my space, his hand sliding to my waist as though it belonged there. Before I could summon a reason to say no, we were already moving across the floor, the world narrowing to the rhythm between us.

“Do you mind?” he whispered in my ear—warm breath skating over my skin—offering no clue what he meant, only the undeniable truth that whatever it was, I wanted it.

"No, I love to dance." It was all I could conjure in reply.

He moved with liquid ease onto the dance floor, spinning me in perfect rhythm, his breath warm against my skin. Around us, the room blurred into a haze of color and light. Suddenly, he dipped me low, his dark gaze locked onto mine. For a moment, the world stopped.

My heart raced, thundering as his intensity wrapped around me, drowning out everything but the pulsing between my legs.

Stars and galaxies, what am I doing?

Then he began recounting stories of one of his exploits. All I could do was shake my head to orient myself; it felt strangely practiced, yet captivating. His voice carried me to a distant land I’d only dreamed of, weaving a tale of adventure I knew I’d never experience.

Little did I know but then, I was no oracle.

His voice painted a picture so vivid it felt as though I were living it myself from the cliffs of the Emerald Coast, where the wind howled like some ancient creature, threatening to cast him into the swirling sea below, or to another equally exotic land.

And I was ready to dive right in with him, only not into the sea. And when he pulled me close, I felt a hardness and not his wallet. I had to drag myself back to his words because my body was elsewhere and he knew it, pulling me even tighter to him, as the story continued.

“As I stood on the ledge, heart pounding,” his voice tense. “I reached into a crevice and retrieved the egg of a legendary falcon; it’s said to bring good fortune to its bearer. You wouldn’t believe what happened next,” he said, eyes full of excitement. “As I climbed down, the mother falcon dove in, her wings nearly as wide as I am tall."

My eyes glanced up and he smirked, knowing the effect he had on me, and I felt a frisson of irritation. "She screeched, dove straight at me,

talons aiming for my face. I threw myself off the cliff into the water to escape, feeling the brush of feathers, she came so close."

Heart in my throat, I imagined myself falling with him into the warm waters, slipping off my clothes but before my thoughts could take him between my legs where my excitement built, he laughed and brought me back to the present and his arms around me.

"The fall should've killed me, but I managed to land feet first and sank into the deep waters, then I surfaced with the egg still in my hand. It was a miracle both of us were still in one piece."

"Then what happened?" I whispered, look up into his eyes of cobalt blue, I feel the depth of his gaze, and the invitation. I'm ready to fall into bed with him. *What in the stars is happening to me?*

He chuckled softly, a casual grin. "I returned the egg, of course. She watched, hovering as I climbed, egg in hand. Why she let me live I'll never know." He paused, "Some treasures aren't meant to be taken." His tongue moved to lick his lips, "only if offered." And I was willing to offer myself, of which he was doubtless aware.

His words stirred in me, a yearning for the thrill of the unknown and a quiet ache for the kind of freedom he seemed to carry in his stories. My tales by comparison were tame. I wanted to experience everything with him, to quell the ache, an ache my stories hadn't quenched. And hearing his was a delight, so different.

As the music came to an end, he looked down into my eyes and asked, "Want to take a ride?" His smile intriguing. "Get away from the noise and all these people. I'd like to get to know you better."

I barely hesitated. "Sounds like a grand idea," I said, flashing hopefully a winsome smile. I wanted to know every single part of him I could see and all those parts I could imagine.

His grin widened, and my pulse quickened. "Let's take a drive in my new car. I think you'll like it. It's a dream and a first for me."

On the way out, he stepped into the coat room to fetch a wrap for me—and pulled me in with him. The move was unexpected, but not

unwanted. His hand slid down my thigh, gathering my dress inch by inch until the hem rose high. Anticipation tightened in my belly, heat rising as he pushed past hesitation. Fingers slipped beneath the lace of my panties, teasing, then they slid down to the floor.

His mouth found mine, lips gliding, devouring. A moan escaped me as I arched into him, breathless, just as his finger pressed deep into my holy of holies. His kisses trailed lower, neck to collarbone, a nip that sent shivers scattering through me.

Then I felt him. Hard, ready. He thrust into me slowly at first, a languid invasion that made my pulse race, then harder, faster, until each movement stole my breath. My nails curled into his jacket, trembling, caught between surrender and the desperate need to hold on.

Outside, a woman's voice pierced the haze. "Where could they have gone?"

I barely heard the muffled response—his thumb had found my clit, circling, pressing, sending me spiraling. The door cracked open just as I shattered around him, spasming, my body clenching. His hand sealed over my mouth, catching the scream of ecstasy before it spilled out.

"Come on, Silvia," a man's voice answered dryly. "They're not hiding in a coat closet."

The door shut. I slumped against him, breathless, shuddering. *Thank heavens,* I thought, though I knew Heaven had nothing to do with the sin we'd just committed.

"More to come later," he whispered with a wicked grin, settling the wrap around my shoulders. My knees still weak, he steadied me with a hand at my elbow, then eased the door open. After a cautious glance into the now-empty foyer, he led me out swiftly into the night.

The sky stretched, dark and endless above, moon full and luminous. A billion stars shimmered overhead, scattering their light like whispered secrets across the heavens. I could hardly believe what I'd done with him in a coat closet of all places. Exciting didn't begin to cover it.

As we walked, his voice dropped low, private—meant only for me. “Are you sorry?” he asked.

I looked up at him and smiled. *I’m definitely going to hell for this,* I thought, wavering, I still reached for Heaven. Its memory was faint, like a dream slipping through my fingers, enough to remind me - I was treading dangerous ground then I pushed the thought aside.

“I’ve never tried it that way, but you were so damn sexy, I couldn’t help myself. Though, I would have stopped if you had asked.”

“Still,” I said, a teasing lilt in my voice, “a coat closet with a man I don’t know? It’s a first for me.”

“I believe we’ll know each other a lot better before the night’s over,” he said, pulling me in with a broad grin—and it felt right.

His voice burned with excitement, and my cheeks flushed hot, his energy wrapping around me like fire, leaving me breathless, my body betraying me with another rising wave of heat.

He seemed to sense it. “I usually leave alone,” he murmured, voice a velvet promise, “but I’d love for you to come home with me tonight… if you’re willing.”

He looked down at me, smile tugging at his lips—eyes darkening. His mouth crashed against mine, urgent, claiming, until he pulled back just enough to tease me with absence.

One brow arched, lips curling in a slow, wicked smile, he leaned close, voice dropping to a dare. “You into a little adventure tonight? Maybe even… a dangerous one?”

My laugh was shaky, breathless. “I love adventures—and trying new things. I don’t do dangerous… but I guess there’s always a first time.”

The grin that broke across my face was reckless, but after that coat room encounter, I felt untouchable. Ready for anything.

Temptation makes fools of us all.

One word whispered through me, carrying both exhilaration and unease. *Dangerous.* It thrilled me, unsettled me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to lean in—or run.

But when he stopped beside a gold BMW sedan, I followed without hesitation. He bent to open the door, his hand guiding me inside. The leather seat cradled me, smooth and luxurious, warmth blooming beneath me as though the car itself approved.

He walked around to the other side, opened the door and slid inside, and, with the push of a button, and started the car. I barely know the guy and here I am, running off on some wild adventure. As if sensing my hesitation, his face turned towards me. "Tell me about yourself," he urged, gaze softening as his eyes returned to the road.

I told him what I do, as a writer. "I don't travel like you," I admitted. "I write. It lets me explore different realities I might never be part of—with characters I've never met, doing things I'd never dare. I love to write about demons and angels."

My face heated. I could only imagine what he must think. "I've been mocked for it, though my stories aren't so different from Dekker's or Peretti's." I laughed softly. "I enjoy my characters, talking with them. They help me tell the stories, bring me ideas."

A grin curved his lips, his glance toward me both curious and amused. "You never know what characters you might meet tonight," he said, looking away, then back. "What kind of adventure might be waiting for you?" He leaned closer, his hand brushing my cheek.

"I write romance," I confessed, my cheeks burning. "Supernatural… erotic. With angels and demons." Great. I was admitting to smut with a man who looked like he'd stepped out of a stained-glass window.

"Not monsters," I added quickly. "Beings distinct from humans. Angels—beautiful, powerful, terrifying in their majesty. And demons—dark, masterful. I believe they're real, in some sense."

His eyes glinted with humor. "What do you mean by 'sort-of erotic'? Do you imagine yourself having an affair with angels or demons—if such a thing were possible?"

“Not sort-of erotic. Supernatural,” I corrected. “And I don’t write the graphic stuff. I hate reading it, and I’ll skip whole chapters to avoid it. The idea of demons is… kind of hot. But angels? They’re too tame.”

I bit my lip, wondering what he thought of that answer. “Still, the idea of sex with demons—even if they were real—is too terrifying.”

Yeah… but exciting too, I couldn’t help musing.

Just then, he turned off the highway. A shard of fear lanced through me. All that talk of demons suddenly felt too close, too real. The forest loomed, thick with shadows, the moon smothered by clouds.

My heart raced as he pulled up in front of a manor. Elegant was too mild a word—it rose against the night like something carved out of foreboding itself, like a vampire movie setting.

“Is this your home?” I asked, “I thought that’s where we were going,” my voice sharper than intended, edged with unease.

“We are,” he replied, laying a reassuring hand on my shoulder. A wave of calm washed over me at his touch.

“Wait in the car,” he said, his smile disarming, almost tender. “Our adventure will continue soon.”

Then he stepped out into the night and vanished from sight.

Chapter 3

SERAPHINA

"Shadows tempt with fleeting flame, yet truth endures, not the same. The night may bid you to stay, dawn will break and show the way." – Book of Ashes 4:16

Why had Xavier brought me here? I wondered*. Is this some test?* The thought came unbidden as I sat in the car, with my wrap snug around my shoulders, waiting. The manor had grown still. Even the air seemed to watch quietly. My curiosity, once comforting, curdled into unease as I glanced out the car window.

Enough. I opened the car door and stepped into the night. Leaves dry and crackling whispered beneath her feet. The moon filtered down through the canopy. My breath caught. A shadow moved. And then, he stepped forward. Piercing eyes that gleamed like polished onyx. Zephar. I froze, Remembering…

The sight of him, slickly familiar, my stomach twisted. And I wanted nothing to do with this sleazy specter who reminded me of every evil character I'd ever written.

"Seraphina," he purred, smiling like a snake who'd found a warm stone to sun on. "So nice to see you." His tone dripped with sarcasm. "I see you came with *Xavier*, the guardian," he added, giving mockery to the title. "You don't need guarding from me, do you?"

I stepped back. "Why are you here and what do you want?"

Zephar shrugged. "I'm a guest, like you, just here to observe. Maybe participate. Depends on how open you're feeling."

"You mean to play games?" My voice harsh, heart pounding. .

He grinned. “Oh, sweetie. This *is* the game. We’re just the multiple-choice section.” Before I could reply, I heard a rustle behind me, then stilled. Zephar’s smile dropped a fraction. When I turned to see who was there. Nothing but empty space and trees.

Turning back, knowing if this were a game, there were two paths and if I was meant to choose or be chosen, somehow, I sensed the answer. “XYZ,” I said. “Xavier and Zephar. So, who’s the Y?”

“How astute. It’s *You* sweetie.” His grin lascivious, nearly charming. He might’ve been handsome, if not for the darkness flickering like smoke in stained glass. Unless, I was reading too much into it. Still, caution is a wise companion, even when dressed in silk and cashmere.

Caution. I nearly laughed, remembering Xavier and the coat closet. So much for caution. I blushed, and turned toward the car, then his hand caught my shoulder and guided me gently back.

“No need to run off,” he said smoothly. “I won’t do anything you don’t want.” He leaned in, his breath warm against my cheek, lips brushed my neck. “Xavier’s already been in your garden.” His tongue slid down my neck. “Are you open to adventure?” *What is he talking about?*

“What with someone better acquainted with the dark side? Surely not you,” my voice scornful but he shrugged.

“The last time, you threw me out. Care to try again?” He moved to me, hand lands on my arm and he pulls me in close against his hard body. I froze. Shocked, found it hard to breathe. What startled me more than his boldness was an aching need low in my belly. My body betrayed me. That terrified me more than his touch. *What is he doing to me?*

Breathless, I stepped back, away. “You’re taking liberties.”

His grin widened. “Uninvited, perhaps,” he said, “but not unwanted for I can scent arousal, Serah.” He stepped in, eyes gleaming. I moved, retreating. Then a shrug. “Very well.” That was all he said. But the way he said it promised this was not the end.

His presence had unsettled me the first time I met him, and now, it sent only fear coursed through me. But I refused to be intimidated. “What game are you playing?” I asked, voice trembling.

Zephar smiled, “No game.” When his eyes slid over me, yuk. Xavier didn’t leave the car keys so I’m stuck until he returns.

"Would you like to come inside? Xavier is taking longer than expected and no doubt he'd like us to take care of you." A smirk twisted his lips, tongue flicked out like a snake’s.

What in the stars is going on? I knew the kind of care he meant and it was not on my menu. Then, he turned and strode up the stone steps. “If you’d like to come inside, nothing will happen you don’t want.” And I know exactly what you want, he mused silently.

I hesitated, knew this was a bad idea, took a deep breath and followed him up and through the door into the house. When the door closed on its own, surprised, I glanced back.

Noticing, he reassured me. "No worries. The door will open whenever you want to leave." I felt a crawling sensation in my stomach and not from my earlier dinner. I was out of my depth, whatever was going on I was sure as hell I wanted no part of it.

So, I kept a healthy distance from him as he spoke. "Are you so anxious on all your nightly adventures?" He asked lightly.

“We just met tonight at Angela’s.” I look around, limestone flooring, the mansion was stunning with its sweeping staircase, and a balcony overlooking the entry.

“Impressive isn’t it? It’s Angela’s family home. She visited all the time as a child. You might have met Xavier then?”

He didn’t wait for an answer at my puzzled look, but strode forth, pulled open a door, then stood and waited for me.

I stepped into what appeared to be a sitting room, I paused, awestruck by the grandeur. The room breathed history, its ancient elegance as enduring as time itself. Rich silks adorned the space in flowing curtains and woven tapestries, their vibrant hues catching the golden glow of the low-burning candelabras.

The walls were a masterpiece, carved with intricate floral patterns and celestial motifs that seemed to come alive in the flickering light. My gaze lingered on a hand-painted mural covers, a breathtaking landscape of rolling hills, serene waters, and distant mountains shrouded in mist.

It wasn't just the decor that held me captive. The people, a few, seemed equally magnificent, opulent as their surroundings. They moved with an effortless grace, draped in fine garments that shimmered like water in moonlight, a testament to their wealth. Where was Xavier?

Each face, flawless and serene, bore an expression of quiet confidence, as though they were entirely at ease in this luxurious world. Eyebrows hiked slightly seeing me, and their laughter had a melodic quality, yet captivating, like the delicate chime of crystal. Their eyes landed briefly on me then turned away as if I held no interest for them.

And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling, something dark hid beneath the surface, mysterious yet tantalizing. Then Zephar spoke.

"I cannot believe he had you waiting in the car when all this beauty was here for you to enjoy. I'd imagined he'd want to share your astonishing beauty as well with his friends." He smirked again, and I wondered at what seemed like a double entendre.

A glance into his brown eyes, no longer soft they seem to darken and flicker with fire. "Have a seat while we wait for Xavier. He does love the ladies, as we can tell by observing you." A finger trailed down my arm, sensuous, before pulling back. "Yes, only what you want and I'm sure of what it is." His voice soft, seductive.

My brows draw together in a frown. I remain silent and sit in a chair of rose silk damask. He glides more than walks as he goes over to speak with one of the women. She glances my way, brows drawn together, irritation on her face. She's the blond Xavier had been speaking with when Angela had interrupted.

To say she was not happy with me would be an understatement. She must have left the gathering before we did.

"What is she doing here?" She whispered loudly, eyes flicked at me, tone sharp, and I heard every word clearly.

Eyes blazing with anger she spat out venomous words, “He was intended to be mine - and now he brings her!”

“You are not his, Silvia, since you made your choice long ago.” Zephar reminded her as she again looked my way.

“And you forget your place!” The deep baritone voice did not come from either of their mouths. I’d not sensed another presence until then and my gaze flew up to meet searing olive green eyes on a hard face framed by tousled black hair that softened the effect, lips flush and so kissable, panty melting.

His lips twitched with amusement as he gazed down at me. “Calm down, angel girl.” Voice velvet-wrapped cruelty.

A flush of shame burned my cheeks as I realized, he’d been listening. Not with ears, but something deeper. He’d been inside my thoughts.

“We’ll see each other again,” he added, licking his lips with slow, practiced sensuality. I had no idea what he meant, but the way he said it chilled me. He turned and strode toward the woman nearby, Silvia. His presence seemed to dwarf her, an overwhelming beauty that twisted into something oppressive.

“Do you imagine you belong to anyone but me?” The name landed like a blow as he stroked her face with deceptive tenderness, finger trail over her lips, then down to her throat. The gesture looked gentle, but the threat pulsed beneath it like a heartbeat.

Silvia’s eyes flicked downward, flooded with terror.

His voice dropped to a low growl. “Go to your chamber. Remain until I come to you.” She fled, nearly stumbling, as if she couldn’t move fast enough. Yet, she glanced back before the door closed, saw him with a blonde, curved like a fantasy, wrapped in a dress that barely covered her. His arm slipped around her waist.

Zephar glanced at me with a smirk. “She enjoys being watched,” he said. “You enjoy watching. Stay and he’ll be pleased. You might even learn something.” I didn’t know if he meant her or me.

He stepped closer. “I know what you imagine. I’ve read your novels.” His smile dark. “You have quite the imagination.” His breath brushed my cheek. “So do you want to fornicate with a demon for real?”

I forced myself to look up, and froze seeing fire in his eyes, smoldering freaking fire. My breath caught, Oh stars. I have to get out of here. But my feet wouldn’t move.

His hand brushed my hair behind my ear. “You don’t have to run, Serah. You’ve imagined worse and far more exciting. haven't you?”

His lips hovering, not touching. “Chapter seventeen, paragraph four. The priest. The candlewax. The angel who begged. And then she fell down before the demon.”

“What is going on here?” I was mortified. Why? They’re stories and nothing to be ashamed of, I tried to convince myself. Sex was not a shameful thing but what he wanted, maybe it was.

“I can taste your fear?” he whispered. “Because it’s laced with want.”

“You wish,” I snarled, knowing he was exactly right, as the low moans of the blond woman on the sofa echoed, the scent of heat and smoke, something burning. I swayed, caught between revulsion and a hum of arousal as his hand traced my collarbone.

I thought he might kiss me and I might let him though it’s the last thing I wanted to do. Who am I kidding? I’d never been tempted by a demon before, not to my knowledge, and yet, something about him suddenly I found enticing, more so than Xavier had been.

A shriek of wind and the lights went out. The demon’s smile faltered, his eye twitched as he turned. “No,” he growled. From the side of the room, out of the shadows, a voice cold as ice on snow sliced the heat like a blade through silk.

“Step away from her,” he said. “Loosen your power, Zephar.”

I turned. My breath hitched. A shadow moved. Xavier? No, whoever it was, he glowed. “Great haloes and holy scrolls, what now?”

The demon hissed, stepping in front of me, not protectively either, more possessive. “Xavier didn’t invite you. I *was* invited.”

“Perhaps, but it’s time your invitation was voided and you to leave.” His voice soft yet menacing and certain. “It was not a request.” But no one moved, then the demon laughed. “She was about to say yes.”

“Except she didn’t. And without using your demonic powers, Zephar she never would have. Astaroth, you know better.”

Astaroth. I knew that name. He’s a demon, in my stories, if what I’m seeing is even real. This is way too weird. Still, I watch as they stare at each other, Zephar in defiance, the air heavy.

The other, angel or? Astaroth looked at me, burning fire in his eyes. “We’ll meet again sweetheart. In the place prepared for the fallen.” He nods at Zephar who relaxes.

All of them vanish. No smoke and ash, just gone.

Chapter 4

ZEPHAR

We carved our names in fire and bone, drank from the cup no angel dared own. The stars recoiled when we kissed the flame - Hell opened, whispering our name. –Book of the Damned 1:2

"I remembered her, and she remembered me," he chuckled relating the previous night's events. "Before the party at Xavier's, that night, as planned I had gone to her place. She had fallen asleep. I quickly typed in the agreed upon words. When she woke up, I'd left her laptop open the scene blinking on the screen. Then, I watched from the shadows, the cursor pulsed like a heartbeat."

He laughed in delight.

"She scrolled back and frowned. You recall what we'd written for her? She won't know her guardian when he comes. She'll ache for him, and think he's the hero. In the aching absence, the longing, she will open herself to him… then to us." We know she nearly opened to him, in the coat closet, and did later, after she left me at his manor house.

The four chuckled as his narrative continued. "Earlier, when she met Xavier at her friend's soiree, he was exactly who she desired, then. But back to the scene at her home the night before:

"Seraphina stared, wondering, Did I write those words? I watched as she read, slowly, then faster. Our dialogue contrived was sharp, sultry, intelligent, exactly the tone she loved but rarely hit upon herself. And I could tell, those words itched within her. She couldn't sit still. It's was erotic, watching her ass move, excited by what she saw. I could have taken her then but we wanted her willing.

"Her fingers trembled as she typed the next line. It came easily, after the start we'd given her." He chuckled again, along with the others.

He had eyes like candlelight, voice a velvet promise you didn't know you'd already agreed to then, you did. He was dangerous yet soothing, until you forget the dark is there.

"She was still typing and I knew it was time to meet and to seduce her. Knock, knock. I know she hates interruptions. Too bad. She opened the door anyway, a frown on her face."

All three sets of eyes were glued on him now. Waiting.

"I had dressed the part: dark slacks, casual, open shirt to let skin show. The classic temptation wardrobe. I formed into an image pulled from her page: broad-shouldered, moonlit skin, tousled dark hair, and an expression that said I knew exactly what she wanted but was afraid to admit. My eyes glowed, quite literally, candlelight reflected in wine. The image I portrayed was striking.

"'Seraphina,' I said, voice sliding over her like silk dipped in smoke, and Lucifer help me, I was eager for my hands to do the same. But she didn't melt. Not like we imagined. Rigid, she blinked once, twice. "Do I. know you?" she asked, with a sharp edge.

I nearly laughed. Instead, I murmured, 'You will.' I stepped inside as if invited, and, in a way, I had been. Just not as imagined. 'You've written me. Different names. But always the same ache.'

She backed up like I'd pulled a knife, not fear exactly, but instinct, self-preservation. Her pupils dilated. Pulse thumped hard, I could've set a rhythm to it. 'Okay. No. This is *too* meta,' she said. 'Who *are* you?'

'Zephar,' I replied, smiling just enough to be remembered. 'Surely you remember your guardian.' That line sparked something. I could see it, the recognition flickering behind her eyes.

She won't know her guardian when he comes. She'll ache for him.

"Her knees buckled slightly, and I moved to catch her, fingers brushing skin that felt so soft in a world cruel.

“This is a dream,” she muttered. “A dream.” I almost pulled her into my arms right then and there. And I should have when I tell you the rest. It would’ve made the story shorter.

But I waited, gave her a breath, the illusion of control. Reached out, fingertips to her cheek, electric. “Does it feel like a dream?”

“I. ” she choked, shoved my hand away like it burned. “It feels like something I *should* want. Which means I *shouldn’t.*” Did she melt into me? No, she *moved away*. No gasp of recognition. No demon-on-girl cinematic climax with us having dynamite sex on the rug. Damn.

“She walked to the window, sucked in air like she was drowning, and said nothing. And I, I did a dangerous thing. I was silent. Silence is much louder than temptation. In the corner of the room, the mirror she’d rehung whispered faintly, *It’s him.* I thought the voice had saved my ass, and I grinned. Too soon.

“That’s when she turned. Eyes like flint. She opened the door. “I don’t know who you are,” she said, “but I have *no* guardian. And you need to leave. Get the hell out, *now*.” And I did and she slammed the door on me. I stood there blinking wondering, what the hell happened?

Then I stepped back into the fold of shadow, and you know the rest.

Astaroth blinked slowly. “So. no sex with the writer?”

Karabasan snorted. “Speak for yourself. I’m still trying to process the part where she *quoted us* back to him. That’s practically plagiarism.”

Asmodeus stared at the cracked mirror the image distorted. “Where,” he said evenly, “did we go wrong?”.

Zephar muttered darkly, “She wants to want it. But she doesn’t trust her want. She’s trying to save herself *from* herself.”

“Well, that’s just rude,” said Astaroth, legs crossed like a bored lounge singer. “She fantasizes about redemption *and* damnation, and we show up to provide *options,* and suddenly we’re the villains?”

Karabasan folded his arms, flames licking up his biceps. “Maybe we overshot it. Too much seduction, not enough mystery or adventure. Humans are always suspicious when it’s too easy.” .

Zephar annoyed said. “I don’t know. She *fell for him* right off. So, what did he do that we missed as a clue?”

Astaroth perked up. “Exactly! *He* didn’t seduce her. Well, he did, with stories, pulled her into a closet and had sex with her. No candlelight, no poetry. Just... closet theology.” .

“And she seemed to *love* it,” Zephar grumbled.

Asmodeus nods thoughtfully. “Fine. Let’s play Angels versus Demons, a game of chance. Adonai *loves* testing His chosen.

“Let’s see how little Inkheart holds up to the challenge.”

Chapter 5

SERAPHINA

He set her soul boldly on fire. But she only noticed the ash after desire had melted her bones and then left her alone. –Book of Ashes 1:15

My heart stuttered. Feathers and damnation! A jolt of fear crashed through me. At last, my legs obeyed. I shot up from the chair, bolted from the room, and didn't stop until I reached the door. It opened and slammed shut behind me the moment I stepped through.

I wasn't going back in there. Not ever again.

Outside, the cold bit straight through me. I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering, wishing for a coat, or a plan. Then, headlights, and a sleek gold BMW glided to a stop. The passenger window hummed and rolled down. Xavier leaned over the console, his ice-blue eyes catching the moonlight like cold fire.

"Ready to go?" he asked, lips twitching with that crooked smile.

"Hell yeah," I wanted to shout. I just nodded and slipped into the car. The seat was warm. So was the lie I told myself: *I was safe now.*

"Where do you want to go—my place or yours?"

I blinked. Totally disoriented. "Didn't we just *leave* ?" I turned to look at him, the heat in his eyes making my breath catch. Then rage flared. "Wait a damn minute. Who *were* those people?"

"Zephar?" Xavier said, like the name should mean nothing. "He's an odd one." He glanced at me, brow furrowed with a hint of apology. "Sorry I took so long. Did you enjoy your nap while you waited?"

I stared at him astounded. "It was weird…" I stopped mid-sentence.

“Wait a minute. What nap? You imagine I fell asleep and dreamed what happened in there?” Pause. Nothing else explained what I’d seen. Either it was a dream... or I was seriously losing it. “Maybe you’re right but it sure seemed real enough.”

“We’re on our way,” Xavier said, as if nothing unusual had happened. “Still want to go to my place?” He arched a brow. “Or we could go to yours, if you’ve had enough adventure for one night.”

The way he said it, casual, it rattled me. As if he’d rewound the night and erased the madness. I opened my mouth, closed it. He must’ve sensed my unease. Without a word, he pulled off the road, brought the car to a stop. Turning to me, voice softened. “Serah, if I’m moving too fast. I can take you home. No questions.”

“Maybe I *did* fall asleep,” I murmured. “You were gone for a long time. and I saw someone I met a few days ago. So maybe it *was* a dream.”

Xavier smiled, eyes unreadable. “So. Where to?”

Taking a breath to relax I calmed and said, “If we go to your place,” hesitating a breath, “will it just be the two of us? Because if there’s more weird crap going on, I don’t know if I can take it.”

“Just us,” he said. “If that’s okay with you.”

I nodded. “Yes. let’s go there. It’s the first time I’ve been out in a long time. I don’t want the night to end too soon.” The truth was, I didn’t want to go home with all the questions still unanswered.

He slid the car into gear, and we drove in silence. I wasn’t convinced it had been a dream, but I wasn’t ready to confront it not yet. There was plenty of time, and if things got out of hand, I could always run. Damn. I glanced down at my shoes. *Run. Yeah right not in these.*

When we arrived at what he called his “other home,” a gate opened at the press of a button. It wasn’t as grand as the first, not nearly as large or polished. But it had a warmth to it. A coziness the other lacked.

Xavier pulled around to the side of the house, parked, and stepped out into the night. For a moment, I hesitated. Because something told me. this place might feel *cozy*. But that didn’t mean it was *safe*.

The minute we walked inside, I closed the door, pulled her into my arms. “Stars you’re gorgeous,” my voice rasped, a gentle peck on her lips sparked a moan that vibrates the air. Her taste overwhelmed me. I knew I could kiss her for hours without complaint, but the friction of her hips against mine made me hunger for more.

I walked my fingers to the front of her dress, waiting for permission this time. She rolled her hips against mine eagerly. I slid my fingers beneath the hem of her dress slipping it up until my fingers found the slickness already gathering between her legs. I groaned and withdrew my hand and pulled back to look at her.

The rising flush against her pale skin as she panted, tendrils of golden-brown hair clinging to her sweaty temples, sent a frisson of pleasure through me. She wore my hunger reflected on her face. She threw her head back with a shuddering groan when I stroked a particular spot, and it suddenly became a goal of mine to make her react like that as often as possible. I repeated the motion relentlessly.

“Xavier.” My name escaped her lips in a breathy shudder.

“I want to see you lose control,” I murmured. A husky laugh escaped as she continued to ride my hand.

“I haven’t been in control since the moment I met you.” And I knew that was true but I also knew what had happened at my mansion, and how she almost lost control to Zephar. But who cares. She’s here with me now and the demon can return to hell.

As much as she didn’t fill silence with meaningless chatter, she didn’t shy away from vocalizing her pleasure. As her volume increased, the air began to hum around us, and I couldn’t say whether the magic was mine or hers. I was too overwhelmed with the pleasure at the base of my spine and the way the light shone off her sweat-soaked skin.

I felt the moment Serah came apart, in the shudder of power that ran through me as much as the rush of wetness dripping over my fingers. So fixated was I on the woman in my arms, I didn’t even recognize my own pleasure bearing down on me until lightning ran up my spine in a

surge, and I gasped my release against Serah's neck, gulping down the earthy scent of her warm skin. Stars, I was utterly lost.

As Xavier pleasured me and found his own pleasure, my mind kept returning to the demons, which eerily heated my own desire. Later I would give them more of my attention, but not right now my rib cage aches from the velocity at which my heart pounds. When he touches his lips to mine, I dissolve into a puddle of want.

We'd long ago left our clothes on the floor, and now I lift my hands and run my nails around his naked waist, luxuriating at the feel of his skin pebbling. Once I reach the base of his taut spine, I want to touch him everywhere at once. But when he begins to caress me again, I am swept into that web of starshine where only he and I exist.

I moan as his silken tip plows between my lips, then he thrusts the whole thing in, every thick centimeter, and there are many. I just lay there, stunned, and really full.

He keeps rocking his hips steadily, neither fast nor slow, like a male not eager for this to end. He strokes me again, and again, and my core tightens on his cock.

He snarls a series of undecipherable words, quickening the pace of both his thumb and hips. When my muscles clench, and I cry his name, he glides out, moves down my body, replacing his hard length with his tongue. "Ashes and stars, don't stop."

He chuckles, moving up over me again. "I don't intent to." He grips my hips and drags his cock along the crease of my ass. He better not be thinking of sticking it in there and I tighten my muscles. I don't care what anyone claims. I'm not ready for that never will be.

He chuckles, the sound deep and velvety. "I promise not to penetrate that any night." Then, he feeds himself into me slowly. As he moves in languid thrusts, my body begins to hum because this feels, divine.

"Are you ready to come with me?" It's almost sounds like a command but this is one time, I wouldn't think of disobeying.

His hips set a punishing rhythm, striking me in that sensitive spot over and over until my stomach clenches hard, and I shout out his name for his entire world to hear as I spasm around him and he pumps one final time and stills, twitching as he pours himself into me in long, bursts.

As we lay on the bed exhausted, I'm not even sure how we got here, but I'm glad we made it this far for the couch would not have been so comfortable, of that I'm certain.

It's early morning, and while I'd love to sleep, I have an appointment with my publisher in a few hours. Xavier reluctantly dresses himself as I pull my dress back on, then out the door we go for a ride home. And as soon as my key is in the door, I'm ready for research, the pleasures of the night almost forgotten, for now.

Demons were one of the many shadow creatures, humans had feared for millennia. I had denied the possibility they existed, and assigned them to the realm of mystery and myth, but not now.

And, in my stories, demons were fascinating, and one of the reasons they play a huge role, they were devilishly handsome, disguised some might say, as angels of light. And the possibility of a place possessed by demonic forces, like Hades was behind the supernatural playing on human fears: the unexplained, terrifyingly powerful, tempting and seductive sin. And they sold my books.

When I walked into that house last night, I couldn't get him out of my head. Zephar, his golden eyes, piercing the dark. Even thinking about him, I throb with desire. What is wrong with me?

All I could think about were those golden eyes and demons.

Chapter 6

ZEPHAR

I was not cast down. I dove wings folded, heart undone, to taste the fruit angels feared, and I call it freedom. –Book of the Damned 1:4

After Seraphina had left, Gabriel vanished as well. Now I had a hard-on and no relief. Demons have needs: the drive to hunt pleasure, to seek the thrill, it's as necessary as food and water to humans, like a drug to them. Still, I could not understand my obsession with her.

As my eyes fell upon this mortal, I knew she was not a human. Her fragrance alone told me, and worse, hope sprang to life, briefly then vanished. I wondered if I'd imagined it. But one does not imagine that scent; it awakens hope like rain on Hell's parched stones, and a thirst for *forgiveness*.

And her flesh as well.

The first time we'd met, I could barely keep my hands off her, and when I spoke, she'd scorned me. But at Xavier's, when she opened the car door and those legs appeared, I knew another chance had arrived. If I were one of Adonai's I'd have thanked him because the minute I came close to her, nuzzled her neck, I smelled lust.

She followed me inside that house like an eager puppy.

Within minutes, watching Astaroth and the blond, she was ready to spread her legs for me. Of course, pushing my lust her way didn't hurt either. Face-to-face, I was ready to suck her dry, until Gabriel had shown up, and evicted us, and she walked.

Then, we were ordered back to headquarters.

“Zephar,” Astaroth greeted, as I walked in, a nod from Asmodeus while Karabasan merely smiled and watched. I didn’t know what to think about that. He’s a nice guy for a demon, but ain’t we all.

Turning to the watcher whom I’d not seen at first, Asmodeus let him speak first, and was beyond excited as the watcher related what he had observed listening in on the writer once she’d returned home.

Then he turned and vanished into the shadows.

“I told you Zephar was the one to send,” Asmodeus said, and I glowed with smug pride while Astaroth’s face turned red, although envy was not part of his court. An elitist, pride was his venue.

Asmodeus waved a hand at Astaroth. “Yes, you want her, but get over your pride. Zephar was perfect, a demon of illusion who had met her once before and his illusion this time almost had her legs spread.” His face morphed into his twisted demon form as he turned to me. “How did Gabriel even know you were there?”

“I have no idea. Heaven isn’t been answering her prayers, and Michael said her writing was merely stories that nobody really paid attention to, other than to get turned on by the sex.”

“Well, Gabriel was paying attention if no one else. So we’d best up our game if we want to seduce the Female Trinity.”

Karabasan’s eyes flew open. “The Female Trinity? I like it,” he chuckled and flexed his powerful muscles. “Excellent description. Is Seraphina the one we wanna start with?” he asked. “I have a few nightmares she might enjoy being turned on by.”

“And an excellent question, but no nightmares,” Asmodeus remarked. “If not Seraphina, who would you recommend, Zephar?” He asked.

I started to speak but Astaroth walked over to his desk. “We have two on the edge, closer than Serah.” Asmodeus raised his eyebrows at the nickname. “It’s short for Seraphina,” he explained. “Regardless, there’s one, unlike those two, who no longer know what they are, she does. Better yet, she doesn’t give a damn. Celeste.” He smirks tongue flicks. “I know perfect name, right?” He goes on.

“This Celestial, word play,” he smirked. “When I saw her, the spark in her eyes told me, offer her an easy path to sin, tempt her with darkest desires. I did and she jumped at the chance to feel pleasure - sex then drugs right from the start, a real party girl.”

“If that’s true, then she’s already hell-bound, deep into my court.” Asmodeus, who’s into forbidden pleasures, growled with a frown. “Why waste our time with her?”

“You may not like what I have to tell you next.” Astaroth glanced at Asmodeus. “While the others are on the edge, they could swing either way. And so, needing to know more, I went to the Oracle who knows more about falling into temptation than anyone.”

Asmodeus jumps to his feet, shocked. “You what? We are not allowed access to the oracle not without the boss’s permission!”

“I know,” he said, unruffled, “but Morningstar told us we could—*in extreme situations.* And this was extreme. With the Female Trinity, as you pointed out, we have to be certain. Snag one and lose the others, and the whole thing unravels.”

He gave a quick, sly wink. “The oracle agreed. Even showed me what could happen. She claims she found a fey line into the fates above—though she wouldn’t breathe a word about how she managed it.”

Astaroth inclines his head down to Asmodeus’ desk indicating he bring up the Well of Fire, and he did. A wall of flame rose before them, and over the next several minutes the four demons watch the fiery screen as certain events unfold.

“Now you understand. The best way to guarantee all three come to us is to work together to capture them. And I have a plan.”

“Of course you do,” Karabasan smirked. While not the brightest bulb in Hell’s lantern, gorgeous and unassuming, he is ready to give credit whenever and wherever due. Everyone likes him.

As Astaroth talked about his ‘*plan*’ my mind wandered to the first time I’d seen the celestial, thinking she was mortal. The pleasing curve of her breasts, thighs begging to be gripped and plundered, left bruised and aching. Heat flushed through me.

As it was, she had stared at me like I was nothing and walked away. Now I felt the burn of rage at the memory having lost her twice. One day she would pay in the most excruciating way. I knew who could do the deed for me. My thoughts turn toward:

Samyeza: he enjoyed using the females in ways they enjoyed, them on their knees ready for anything, solely to worship his arrogant ass. Then I'd step in and rescue her, or so I hoped.

Little did I know, another would get that privilege.

Chapter 7

XAVIER

She was warned about the darkness far down below. No one told her it would feel like love. –Book of Ashes 1:5

I was struck by the beauty of this woman when I met her at the party. There was something about her I couldn't explain until the truth was revealed: a celestial I'd brought her to earth centuries before, and she still looked luscious and beautiful. And now here she was in my bed, fornicating with me. Some guardian I am.

Seraphina, like many, had reinvented herself as often as needed but it seems she had forgotten what she was and now, she tempted me. Not like humans, for she was not the young celestial I'd known and would never have taken to bed. Then, I'm not the same as before either. And this one, older and experienced. Oh yeah.

Clearly, she hasn't forgotten everything because she writes stories no mortal could write, unless they had knowledge of the upper realm and celestials. Because of those stories, I could tell she knew all about sex and enjoyed it. Which she proved tonight by not turning me down, twice. However, she did turn down the demon Zephar. Miserable cur. He almost claimed her earlier, but she'd scorned him, and then last evening. Well, she'd almost said yes to him.

Thankfully, Gabriel showed up. Those above in the upper realm had discovered her identity purely by accident when one of the books she had written ended up in the hands of our librarian. She recognized her from an image reproduction.

That's when it came rushing back. I had brought her and another to Earth ages ago for training. Then, one day, while attacked by demons

and I was busy fighting them off, both vanished, never to be seen again, not until recently.

I spent a long time searching for them, but eventually, as time went on, busy training others, they slipped from my memory unfounded. Now, I'd found one of the female angels.

We'd suspected they had turned Seraphina to the dark side so, you can imagine my relief her turning down Zephar, not once but twice.

He's one of the demons I'd let in my house for the purpose of tempting. After she'd left in a hurry, those three had been called below. Now they are back where they belong. And she's with me.

As Seraphina gets into my car, I have to decide how much to tell her, and I wonder if she'll even believe it.

The next morning, she had an appointment she said so I offered her a ride home. It was then, guilt crept in and I had to inform her of truth so she could choose whether she wished to stay on Earth as a writer or return to the Upper Realm.

"Seraphina. I have something to tell you which may sound odd. No, unbelievable." She was silent which meant she was listening. So, I said, "Where do you get your ideas, those you write about in your novels? I know you enjoy sex so must have some experience, but the other stuff about demons and angels."

"I don't know; the words are there. I woke up once from a dream about a scene in Heaven. I thought it would make a good story. So, I developed a plot and wrote a story. More ideas came, demons and all. Once I'd finished and did some editing, I was able to sell a few of my books.

"Once, at a conference, I put the books out for writers. One woman, intrigued by the title took the book and read it over the next few days. The books then disappeared, at an astonishing rate. And one landed in the hands of a publisher who was amazed by the stories, she said, and got in touch with me. That's how my novels got started."

A rueful smile and a head shake, she said, “Most of the women at the conference wrote soft Christian and/or historical romance. Reading about demons in the human world was shocking for many.

“One woman was so outraged, said they were the work of the devil.” Her head down, tears in her eyes, she stopped speaking. “I almost stopped writing she was so hurtful.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “But you didn’t. You continued to write. You bravely kept on. What prompted you to go on in the face of criticism from others with the same beliefs?”

“Her words hurt and I was angry. My stories are similar to Dekker and Peretti novels, only more risque’, in that they deal with temptation, and sex, not spoken of in the church.”

“I’ve wondered how stories evolve, from start to finish, then you sell the books. It must be an arduous journey.” I turned to look at her and could see the anger in her eyes when she asked:

“But, that’s not why we’re having this conversation is it?”

“No.” Taking a deep breath, it was time to share what needed to be said. “Before I tell you, let me also say, what I’m about to tell you has nothing to do with our having sex. You need to know that I truly adore having sex with you, even if.” He hesitated.

“Here’s what you don’t know, and because we don’t have a lot of time, I’m going to quickly share some difficult information with you.”

“Okay, out with it.” A smirk on her lovely face told me this was not going to be easy and the anger still simmered beneath the surface.

“Believe it or not, the stories you write are memories of your past, when you first came to earth. That’s how we learned about you, from the stories as an angel, celestial as they’re known. In one of your books, at the conference you spoke of, the woman recognize the stories turned the book over to the librarian who was so astonished by what she read, she had trouble believing, you dared to put information about heaven out there for mortals to read.

“Not that what you wrote wasn’t true, but to share it with humans. At first, it wasn’t an issue because you said later the publisher contacted

you. It was when your books started selling to a lot of people it became a problem. Then you wrote more about celestials and their interactions, here on earth with demons and mortals."

Her brows pulled together. "Help me understand, if what you're sharing is true, how is it a problem? I'd imagine you would want the humans to know heaven is real, and celestials, as you call them."

"You're right. It's what humans believe about demons as presented in your stories. Demons are not handsome men who want great sex but they are the epitome of evil and while they may disguise themselves as fine-looking men, angels of light their goal is anything but.

"That's just their come on, the temptation. Once they have you in bed they eventually take you into hell, and for whoever is foolish enough to follow it's all over; your trapped." He sees the growing disbelief.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd read my books and believed what I wrote was true. Which is a great compliment," she chuckled.

"What I've told you is true. At least consider it." I pulled up to her place and Serah opens the door and gets out of the car. She shuts the car door and walks towards her home, stops and comes back.

I lower the window and she leaned down. "Xavier, what you say sounds nuts. I will consider it. I'm seeing my publisher tomorrow. Maybe we can get together after. What was true is, the sex was great. Call me." She drops a business card on the seat with her number.

"Okay." I watch as she enters her building. Except the next day comes, and the next. No Serah. She's not answering her cell, not the number she gave me and there's nothing I can do but wait. And while waiting I keep busy. A couple of times a week I head to the nightclub where I've heard about another female, Anara not knowing she's another one of the lost. I'm just a male who's interested in a female.

This one, from what I later learn, doesn't know she's a celestial either. No none of them did, and at first, I didn't either. Ana as she's known has been on earth so long she's forgotten who she is. It happens with those who come for the long haul. Those sent on a short jaunt, like the two who visited Abram centuries before they returned to heaven right after their visit.

Many young ones, in a world one much larger than it was centuries before, are sent to aid mortals. But even angels run into problems - like Anara. And I suppose myself, their guardian.

Then there's Celeste. I don't remember her. Someone does. Actually four of the someone's, the unholy trinity and Zephar.

Ana and others like her who came to earth, after a time, lost their memory and had to be reunited with who and what they are, so they could return to heaven. And I'm soon to learn, it's not that easy.

Like I said, In the beginning, Ana was a hostess, not an angel as far as anyone knew. Gus gave her a job as a singer. Her voice is heavenly and she reminds me of Billie Holiday, whose vocal quality and style was unique and masterful as is Ana's.

The words she sang seemed to mirror the circumstances of her life, I assumed for I knew nothing about her. Still, she brought feelings to life and the audience was living her memories through the lyrics that lingered on her lips. The meaning of those words in the song had a deep impact on those listening to her.

The first time I heard her sing I didn't know who she was. So, when the piano player took a break, I walked over, sat down and started playing. It raised eyebrows and when she looked at her boss, he shrugged. All he cared about was the tip jar filling. She was good and sexy. I'd never guessed she was a celestial heaven sent. And my response was like the others. Yeah, even me, after a time, can fall prey to temptations.

The way she dressed every man hoped for a better look inside the slit in her dress. As she moved, it revealed almost all the way to her garden of delight. And I was not immune. Still, I had the feeling I'd seen her before but couldn't place where. So, all week I'd head for the nightclub, to play piano and try to remember.

Flirting with her was one of the enjoyments I experienced because she didn't seem to mind, believing I wasn't trying to seduce her. Oh how wrong she was and naive because that's exactly what I was doing, being very subtle about it.

Unlike the boys-at-the-bar, who were trying to see up her dress. While not short, it was slit up the front far enough to entice but not show everything but I was eager to see the whole show one day.

Yes, I know, I should be above such things, but she is gorgeous and sexy, and I am a male, after all. I'm also privileged to see her behind the piano so I see more than those booze guzzlers. Damn she's hot.

One night she took a break, came behind the piano and bent over to get something from her bag, I reached my hand over slid it over her curves and down. She looked back. "Hey, Xavier. That feels nice but don't do it again."

My face heated. "Sorry." I mumbled. "It did seem like an invite."

A line forms between her brows, eyes narrow. "You know it's to entice the customers, not for touching. If you want to shag, then ask. Don't be like those idiots, drooling all over me from afar."

She nods toward the men at the bar then strode off. Just as she was about to go on stage, she turned back and said, "You're plenty hot on your own you know." With a wink she walked away.

Confused because she seemed to want me. She gave seductive looks and cast eyes my way often. I didn't know what to think. A few nights later, she actually winked at me. It was then I remembered what she'd said, "If you want me, ask."

I was ready to do just that, but a few minutes later, after she finished singing and slipped backstage. Most of the customers had already left, and that's when I heard her calling, "Oh, Xavier."

Instantly, I perked up, hearing her sing a song, one I was familiar with, though I'd never heard her perform it on stage.

"Love. love is strange.
Lot of people. take it for a game.
You have me, you will never want to quit, oh no. no.
'Cause after you've had me, you're in an awful fix. lover boy."

The words were a little off from the original, so I approached cautiously, slipped my hand between the wall and the backstage curtain, and looked inside.

What I saw was nothing like what I expected.

Ana stood there, legs slightly apart, dress hiked up, fingers between her thighs. She looked at me from under lowered lids and sang softly:

“Many people… those men... don't understand, no. no. They think doing me is their money in my hand… and it is. But your sweet lovin’… will be better than their kiss. Oh yeah. And when you leave me... ’cause you will.”

A look of sorrow crossed her face.

“Sweet kisses I’ll miss. And everything else.”

She smiled, stopped singing and walked toward me. As she pressed close, her soft lips brushed mine, and I whispered:

“Ana.”

“Yes, Xavier.”

“How do you call your lover boy?” I half-sang the words. I’m no lover boy, or singer like Ana. But I knew the song.

She was panting. I looked down and saw her fingers wet.

“Come here, lover boy.” Her nostrils flared, a brow arched.

“And if he doesn't answer?” I smirked down at her.

“Oh, lover boy.” She moved in closer, feeling how hard I was.

“And if he still doesn't answer?” I pretended to turn away.

“I simply say.” Her voice turned breathy. “Baby, oh… oh, baby. My sweet baby, you're the one, the one for me.”

I am hard and throbbing for she’s coming on to me powerfully and I’m not about to say no. It’s a good thing no one heard what was going on as I removed her dress; and when it hit the floor I gaped for a second then did what any male would do, or angel for that matter.

At the time, I didn’t know she was a singer in the Crimson Thread, a nightclub, and I loved to shag her. Later, I heard her story, realized who and what she truly was.

Chapter 8

ANARA

They did not fall all at once. They danced their way down, light-foot on wings embers burning, calling it ecstasy. –Book of Ashes 1:6

I woke to the smell of antiseptic and the hiss of a heart monitor, the too-bright lights making it feel like I'd opened my eyes in another world. My name, who I was and where I'd been, my past, my life. All of it - gone, as if someone had scrubbed me from my own story.

Panic curled in my chest, tight and choking. The ceiling above was stark white, unfamiliar, and too bright. I blinked against it, willing my eyes to focus, willing the room to make sense. A steady, mechanical beeping filled the air beside me, too calm for the storm tearing through my mind.

I didn't know it then, but somewhere beyond those walls, a man was searching for me. Xavier, my unseen guardian on earth, had lost me in the chaos of a demon's attack. Now, he didn't even know if I was alive. And I had no idea the stranger I would soon meet was not a stranger at all but a friend of demons.

Just then, a woman walked in wearing a pink top and bottoms. So, a nurse, meaning I was in hospital. She was middle-aged, kind-looking, with tired eyes and a soft smile.

"You're awake. How are you feeling?" she asked. I must've looked completely lost because her expression shifted to concern. "I'll let the doctor know you're awake," she said quietly, "I'll be right back." And she slipped out of the room.

A few minutes later, a man in a white coat stepped in, clipboard in hand, glasses perched low on his nose. I assumed he was a doctor, though his presence only heightened the strangeness of it all.

“You took quite a fall,” he said, offering a calm, clinical smile. “You were found unconscious at the bottom of an embankment several days ago. We didn’t know if you’d ever wake up. Head injury, likely a concussion. You might have struck a rock or some debris on the way down. You’ve been out for a few days.”

I just stared at him, words caught somewhere behind my lips. Nothing he said connected to anything. There was no memory, no name, and no flicker of recognition. Only emptiness.

“You didn’t have any identification,” he continued. “No phone or ID, no personal belongings at all. You’re listed in our files as a Jane Doe.” A sad smile on his face. “It must be disorienting for you.”

Disorienting was putting it mildly. *Jane Doe.* The name hit like a stone, hard, cold, and strangely humiliating. I was no one.

“It feels bizarre,” I say, my voice thin. “Not knowing who I am. My name a blank slate.” I paused, searching for the phrase I’d heard somewhere before. “Don’t they call it *kubla rosa* or something?”

He smiled gently. “*Tabula rasa,*” he corrected, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Exactly. But the good news, often amnesia is short lived and you could get your memory back in time. It’s hard to say. ”

After a few days of observation, they decided I was stable, enough to be discharged. That’s when social services stepped in. A woman with sharp features and all business at first came to see me. At my confusion when she tried to explain the situation, her voice gentled. She explained they were placing me in a women’s shelter.

“It’s a safe place,” she reassured me. “They specialize in helping women who’ve been through trauma, especially abuse.”

I blinked at her, unable to speak. “Abused? How was I abused?” While I couldn’t remember anything, something about it sounded right.

“We think,” she said carefully, “you may have been running away. Something terrible happened, maybe you were thrown, and you fell down the embankment. It’s like… sometimes… the body remembers what the mind can’t.”

She stopped, her eyes soft, searching mine for something, recognition, maybe, a hint of memory. I had nothing to give. Not knowing who I was. and the fear I just didn't *want* to remember what… I had been running from.

"Where, where are my clothes?" I asked voice trembling.

"They were in pretty rough shape. We never throw clothes away, and they're in a bag in your closet but nothing you'd want to wear."

I swung my legs off the bed, padded barefoot over to the closet, and opened the door. A white plastic bad hung on a hook, so I took it down and went back to the bed, pulled the draw string and let a single item of clothing fall out on to the bed.

My eyes opened wide at what I saw. Looking up, her face flushed red. "I was wearing this little scrap of nothing?

"Oh my god, what was I doing running around in practically nothing?" All I could do was shake my head. "I cannot wear this thing." I shoved it back into the bag. "Might as well toss it."

She heaved a sigh and nodded. "We'll give you a set of scrubs to wear, like you see the nurses wearing. At the shelter, they'll have clothes for you so no need to fuss about it." She took the bag, holding it gingerly. "You're positive you don't want this?"

I shook my head no. "Please, just throw it away."

"They're going to let you stay for up to thirty days, then they'll help you find a place to live and get work." I started crying because they were so nice to me, though the clothes I had worn, I heard one of the nurses say I looked like a hooker, whatever that meant. Later I would find out and was glad not to know. Only later did I learn I had been used for sex, and it wouldn't be the last time.

"I don't know who I was," I whispered, "but now I get to decide." But decide what? There was a stillness after that, as if the air was waiting. They called a taxi to take me to the shelter. I stared wide-eyed as we drove away, winding through the city streets. Before long we arrived at an old house, more like a mansion at one time.

I stepped out of the taxi and he smiled a farewell then drove off. I walked up the steps onto a broad porch, opened the door and was met by a smiling face, a woman much older but she seemed kind.

They handed me the intake form. The woman who'd met me when I first entered, asked, "What name should we use for you?" Hesitant, she went on, "most of the women who come here don't use their actual name; it's to protect them."

I hesitated, pen hovering. A few names flickered through my mind like moths against glass. And then, *Anara.* I heard it as sure as anything, so maybe it belonged, unexpected but like I'd heard it once in a dream. "Anara," I said aloud, testing it.

The woman nodded and wrote it down without question. Then, she looked up at me and said, "Anara is a lovely name, and very unusual. It's a name I heard once before, it means "not bound," sort of like being independent and free. I suppose in a way you are now."

What could I make of that? Had God freed me as he did the slaves I'd once heard about? Egyptians, I thought. Given my former occupation from what the nurses had said, a sex worker, not a godly woman. But still, he'd freed me it seemed.

Anara. It was a name to walk into. A name that might carry strength, even if I didn't remember mine yet. Only the change I was about to make - Heaven would have shuddered.

Living at the shelter was lovely. Women from the local churches ran it and they believed in god. Most of the women in the shelter didn't care for preaching, but I couldn't see where it was a problem.

They gave us a place to live for free, listening about god didn't hurt. Then, I was told they found a place for me with a young woman, and the first month's rent was covered.

"You can have the front bedroom," Angela says. I look around the room. It has a nice big window that looks out over the tree-lined street. Yellow wallpaper with white flowers on three of the walls. Plain white with a closet on the fourth wall.

“It’s not quiet, but it should be okay. They’ve paid your rent for a month. If you need work, the boss is hiring.” She notices me looking over the apartment, her eyes move to the furnishings, and she asks, “Not to your liking? Maybe you have money for another place.”

“No, no. I love the wallpaper and the rooms better than sleeping on the street. You have an eclectic style.”

“Yeah, thrift shops don’t often have matching furniture. Were you sleeping on the street before?” I frown not knowing. “I didn’t make a mistake renting to you? You seem awful young. You a druggie?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.” It’s all I can say. “I woke up in a hospital and was told I’d been in a coma for several days. No one knows what happened. I had a knot on my head, so maybe someone hit me. I was found at the bottom of an embankment.”

“That’s tough. Doesn’t mean I’ll feel sorry for you and let you stay if you can’t pay the rent. Like I said, my boss would hire you. Good looking girl. Want me to ask?”

So, I smile thinking it would be perfect. “That would be great. Thanks.” Thinking it over, finally I asked, “What kind of work - in a nightclub?”

“He’s needs someone to stand at the entrance when the bouncer lets men in, as a hostess. All you need to do is smile and put up with idiots who want to grab your ass all the time.”

“Seriously.” I don’t like that idea, though with no other place to stay it’s not like I can be fussy. “Does it pay enough for my rent?”

“Definitely.” And she smiles to reassure me.

“You’ll have plenty. We’ll share the rent. I pay half and you pay half. That way you can buy decent clothes. To be a hostess you need to show off those legs and more. We can go shopping today, if you want. Didn’t you say they gave you some money?”

I put a hand in my pocket, feeling the money. “A little. I don’t know if it’s enough for clothes.”

Ana looks at the clothes I’m wearing with a frown of disapproval. Worn jeans and a too tight tee-shirt. And my shoes are someone else’s

discards. “When you wake up in a hospital and are sent to a shelter, your only option once your released, clothes are the last thing I was worried about,” I explain.

“No worries. There’s a thrift shop down the street. They get clothes all the time, stuff the stores can’t sell.” Looking at me, she says, “The men will like you, nice butt, small waist and breasts also a nice size. Maybe later when you get comfortable and want to make extra money , the men always pay good for favors.”

“It sounds easy enough,” and I smile. “I don’t know what you mean - favors. Doing favor wouldn’t hurt I suppose.” I thought about being free and independent, so I could do as I pleased.

Angela just looks at me with a curious expression. Likely not knowing what to make of me but I don’t have anyone looking out for me. So, she tries to explain. “You could make a lot of money, if you don’t mind the men fondling you and other stuff. Long blond hair attracts men, and your breasts, big boobs men like. Heck any size will do.

“What do you mean by other stuff?” Confusion’s written all over her face, it’s the face of innocence, not that it bothers Angela. Only later does Ana find out she gets a kickback of whatever she’s paid going with the men. Angela knew the men would like her so she decides right then to make Ana her best friend.

“Let’s go shopping.” Angela grabs her handbag pulls me out the door. “I’ll pay for a couple of outfits to get you started. You can pay me back when you get paid. Not much interest. If be nice to the men they’ll fork over enough for your rent and then some.”

“Wow. That would be great.”

Angela wonders, Did she fall off an Amish turnip truck? Shrugging to herself, she doesn’t care, as long as the rent’s paid.

The next day, dressed to kill, as Angela says, together they enter the nightclub where she’s introduced to ‘the boss.’

He steps back and whistles. “Where’d Angie find you?” He walks over and runs his hands over Anara. “Nice ass,” he says, patting it. Ana would like to slap his face, but needs the work. “She keeps her mouth shut,” he smirks. “I like.”

Leaning in he sniffs. “Great perfume.” His hand reaches up under her dress between her legs to see what she’ll do.

Anara steps back and says, “A little too familiar mister boss.”

Cackling, he slaps her butt. It took every restraint Ana had to not to storm out but she stayed. “So, your name’s Anara,” he says, “How about Becky or Ana? You okay with that?”

Anara shrugs. “Great. You can start tonight.” After working out the details of what she’ll be paid, he sends her away.

Chapter 9

ANARA

Demons do not always lie. Sometimes they whisper what you've always feared was true. –Book of Ashes 1:7

"You found a hot one, sweetie," Gus said, his grin wolfish. "And she was fine with the wages, so, lucky you, you get a raise."

He stepped in close, too close, the air between them thick with his sour breath. "She didn't like being touched like this, did she?" His hand slid between her thighs.

Angela smiled, slow and knowing.

"Lift it and spread," he ordered, unfastening his pants, already imagining the profit. "We'll make a fortune off that angel girl."

He had no idea just how accurate his choice of words really was.

Later, at home, Angela tells Ana, "Gus likes you and would do you plenty of favors if you were to make the men happy." She shrugs. "I do it. And men like being happy – just not Gus"

While Ana doesn't know what she means by making men happy, it isn't long before she finds out. After work a few nights later, she goes to the office to let her boss know she's leaving. Ana sees Angela up against the wall and Gus holding her tight. He's pushed up against her doing something, and she's moaning.

"I'll come back later," Ana says and quickly leaves.

Later, Angela tells her, "Like I said, you can do the same, be nice when the men want in your happy place. You might like it, and you can make lots of money for a little bit of meaningless sex."

“I don’t think so.” Ana doesn’t bother going into the office after that, not wanting to witness what they’d been doing again. But she thinks about the money she could make with other men. Meanwhile, she sits at the piano bar, singing along with the player.

One night, Gus calls her to his office. Not knowing what to expect, Ana goes. “What’s up boss man?”

“Call me Gus. I have new work for you, if you’re interested. I think you are going to love it.” He pats the chair urging her to take a seat.

“I’m already going out with customers, and make enough, so I’d have to say no to the generous offer.” She is trying to be nice.

“Yeah, do them as you please. You might like being on stage singing at night though. You’d get lots more offers from high rollers. And that means even more money.” He rubs his fingers together which she now knows means money.

When her face lights up he knows she’ll do it. “Do you mean, I sing with the piano player at night?” Ana asks.

“Sure I can pay you more too because the guys close to the bar will drink and spend more. Your tips will triple.” Going over to Ana, his hand reaches up her skirt. “What do you say, sweetheart? I’ll make you happy and Angela doesn’t need to know.”

Ana pushes him away, disgusted. “I hope that’s not part of the job. Cuz I won’t do it. I promised Angie.”

“Nah. It’s okay,” he says as she walks out of his office, happy with her new job but not with her boss.

The Crimson Thread came alive after dusk within the pulse of the city. Unknown to most, it was run by Gus but owned by demons. Drapes of black silk cascade from high ceiling like waterfalls, rippling with amber and plum lighting. A haze from scented oils, concocted to tempt those who enter, drifts through the air. The bass throbs as if the building itself had a heartbeat, thrumming through the air.

As one demon remarked, “As I stepped through the velvet-draped entrance, the air clung, thick, warm, and alive with scent. A slow curl of amber slid over my skin, rich as silk, as cinnamon and black pepper sparked in the back of my throat, quickening my pulse. The heady scent of Jasmine unfurled in languid waves, lush and heady, twining with the sharp kiss of blood orange. I couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began. Beneath it was something darker, labdanum, leathery and sweet as sin, binding the scents together into a perfume that felt less like fragrance and more like touch. It filled my lungs, my hair, seeped under my clothes, and for a dizzy, unguarded moment, I thought I might never leave. Lucifer would love it.

The crowd was an eclectic group of work and polished shoes, clinking glasses, and half-lidded eyes watching the stage. Men in open-collared shirts leaned against gold-trimmed booths. Women in silken gowns smoke cigarettes and trace patterns on cocktail napkins, laughing. But everyone turned toward the stage as she appeared.

Ana stepped into the spotlight, swaying in a red satin gown that clung like spilled ink. A mile-high slit kissed her thighs as she walked, revealing the shimmer of flesh beneath. Part of her hair was pinned in soft curls to tumble over one bare shoulder, and a tiny silver chain winked around her ankle with each step. The room hushed. And the demon hesitated, taking her all in.

She took the mic, lips grazing it like a whisper. For a breath, silence held, then the music began: slow, sultry like a saxophone that wept. Her voice floated through it like honey over smoke.

"You touch me like a memory
I can’t recall, but feel too well.
A stranger’s kiss, a phantom flame,
That lingers where my secrets dwell."

At the bar, Angela, a dancer with dark hair and a quick mouth, leaned toward Marius, the bartender, who polished a glass with more focus than necessary.

“Girl’s got mystery,” Angela said, eyes on Ana. “Like she lost a life and found a better one. I wonder what she did before.”

The bartender, Marius didn’t look away. “Maybe forgot the pain long enough to make it sound beautiful.” He knew none of Ana’s story.

Backstage, girls in sequined bodices giggled and adjusted garters, and one of them, Selene, traced her eyeliner in the mirror, glanced at the curtain. “She doesn’t know she’s the main event,” she murmured. “Wish I were still that naïve.”

Ana’s voice dipped, rich and aching, curled an arm around the mic, a hand dragging slowly down her thigh as if remembering something her mind had let go but her body never did.

The men leaned in, captivated, breathless, caught in the illusion that they might be the ghost she sang about.

"And if I’m dreaming, let me stay
Wrapped in velvet nights this day,
Where love’s a shadow I obey,
And truth is just a kiss away."

Applause followed her final note like thunder in lightning, slow at first, then rising, catching fire.

Ana’s gaze swept the crowd. She didn’t smile. Something flickered behind her eyes, longing? Or perhaps just the distant echo of a name she no longer remembered. Only Ana knew the applause was empty and there had to be more to look forward do.

She stepped down, past the lights, into half-darkness of the wings. Behind her, the Crimson Thread breathed, its patrons stirred, stories unfolded with the brush of fingers on thighs under the tables.

Tonight, Ana had sung like she knew something she didn’t know. And in the shadows, someone watched her. She went into the back, after her boss called her in. “That was great. We’re going to make a ton with you singing and that tip jar filling. Don’t forget my cut.” He winked his hand reaching for her.

“No, Gus. I like you but not like that. Sides you have Angela.” His eyes shine with disappointment and lust. She turns to leave when he says, “Angela will never be you sweetie.” And Ana’s thinking about how much Gus pays Angela while with her, he takes her tips and if she goes with any of the men, he wants a cut of that too, so she never tells him. But there’s one who would pay for her favors. She smiles as she steps out of the office and sees his blue eyes twinkling.

“You want to get it on with me, tonight, I’ll pay you better and I’ve got more to make you happy.” His hand moves down. Ana’s eyes follow to his crotch, and she smiles. “Want to go tonight, after work?”

Ana stares at him a minute, glances down and remembers how good Angela said it was and he was a real nice guy.

“Sure, I’ll give it a go.” She pauses. “I don’t put out for Gus, you know. He takes from my tips and never gives, so I’m looking forward to it.”

A smile on his face, he says, “You won’t be disappointed sugar,” and he hands her a few bills. “To keep you motivated.”

Ana looks down at the money, and she smiled, liking this guy. “Only thing is,” she says, a slight frown on her face, “What about Angela? I know she likes both you and Gus.”

“What I do with my time is her business only if I’m doing her. I’d much rather pay you sweetheart.”

“Okay then, see you later.”

Later, after the Red Thread, as she calls it, closes, Ana heads back stage. “Hey, you going to see Gus?” Angela asks with a jealous tone.

“No I don’t see Gus, Angela. I know he’s your guy.” Her smile soft. “Well, I gotta go. I’ll see you later at home.”

“Okay,” Angela says with a smile, hips swinging as she leaves, and Ana steps behind stage into the arms of Matthew.

“You came,” he whispered. “I heard you talking with Angela.”

“Let’s not talk about her. You wanted to see me,” she said as she sets her bag down, he takes her in his arms and drops his face down to her neck, nuzzling her soft skin, hands roam over curves.

“The first day I saw you,” Matthew murmured, voice deep and soft. “It was on the street. You couldn’t decide if you would come in the door, and I thought you were a dancer, never imagined you a singer.”

“Are you going to talk all night,” she asked, her hands traced a slow path over his body, touch both teasing and insistent. “I’m not here to share my life with you just me.” Ana recalls what the one nurse had said. Guess she wasn’t so far off, then shrugs the thought away.

Matt’s eyes sparkled with a faint smile. “Just you, eh?” he replied, his hands on her back stroking. “I like the sound of that.”

With a grin, his tongue traces over skin, intensifying the anticipation until she wanted to scream. He liked to play at sex while she wanted to get it done and over. She’d thought about him all evening and now, here he was, and the pulse of her desire nearly broke her. She wanted all of him, all he promised, and right now.

“I want to do everything with you,” he said, voice thick with longing. “Make you climb high, eat your pussy until I drown in you, watch you spread your legs and scream in pleasure as I plunge inside and you screaming in ecstasy, lungs burning and alive.”

“Damn. Keep talking like that and.” His mouth captured hers and she couldn’t speak, hands move down to release his belt, unzip his pants, rock-hard he springs free. She looks down, eyes widening. “Holy moly, you’re a big boy.” And smiles.

“You’ll see, I’m no boy, baby.” He stepped out of his pants and started to help her out of her dress then he reached for her lace panties and slipped them down and knelt down before her like she was a goddess and his tongue flicked out, touching her nub, then slid between her lips to penetrate her garden of delight.

“Oh, stars,” she moaned as he plundered her sex, his tongue stroking in and out, and she didn’t want him to stop it felt so good.

“You like this baby. Told you I’d make you scream.”

No one had ever done this to her before. “Yes,” she breathes her core tightens and she pushes into him as he whispers, “These are the steps to glory that carry us higher, deeper into each other.”

“Yes,” she murmured, breath catching. “Clear to heaven.” Her hands slid down his arms, pulling him tight to her, coaxing him to keep going clenching and pumping her hips back and forth slightly.

“You in your thin silk gowns slit so high. It drives me mad.” His lips find that tender spot, inside her again hands roaming. “You like it here and here,” he asked his thumb on her clit rubbing gently, finger slips deep inside as he coaxes a soft gasp from her.

He smiled, feeling her pulse quicken beneath his touch. “Now spread your legs, my beauty.” He stands up, bare assed, throbbing and Ana trembles as he brings her closer, clasped her face, pressing his lips to hers with a depth that spoke more than desire. She feels him probing and she wants him inside now.

His hands tangle in her hair, heart swells with a sense of completeness then he stopped. She’s against the wall, legs spread, he gazes down at her wetness glistening and wants to go down on her again but he’s in need too. As his velvet tip touches her he almost orgasms hearing her moans, and probes her entry, teasing, making her wait.

Suddenly, he slams into her all the way and she cries out, in ecstasy and his thick length glide in and out smoothly with her juices coating him like rich cream and he’s rocking his hips steadily, not fast or slow, just enjoying every scintillating moment.

His hand reaches between them and a thumb presses her clit, gently rubbing, feeling her tighten even further with him inside her. “Damn, babe. You feel fabulous, so tight on my cock.”

Suddenly, he snarls, quickens the pace plunging in hard and fast. “I’m going to make you come so hard,” he mutters as her muscles clench, and her body arches to meet him, her voice a plea. “Oh, god yes.” And she bucks into him, meeting every thrust with her own as her passion builds, increment by increment.

“Oh, blessed flame!” she exclaims reaching a point of no return. Ana felt it thrum through her in wave after wave of pulsating currents, and

when she thinks he's done, his powerful strokes wring another orgasm out of her. Before she knows it, he erupts inside to overflowing.

Suddenly aware of where they are, Ana was surprised to find herself still up against the wall, thighs wet running down her legs, her gown on the floor, and his jeans nearby.

She laughed. "It's a good thing I've a change of clothes." Reaching down she grabs her gown, heading for the dressing room, bare ass swings as she walks away.

He sees the moisture on her legs and Zephar cannot stop looking. They're going to be shocked when I tell them about this he thinks pulling on his clothes, yet wanting her all over again.

"So, do you want to meet again?" he calls out.

Chuckling she looked back and said, "You have to ask?"

"Let's make it soon. Like right now." He grabs her as she's about to disappear behind the curtain and pulls her tight to him, cock hard and thrusting inside and she feels the fiery heat as he slams into her again, and before Ana knows it, she over the edge again, and he's bursting inside her. "Damn, you have a body made for sin and I'm more than willing to turn you into hell's favorite."

"Okay by me," she grins and leans back against the wall. Watching as his cock starts to harden again. "I don't know if this is going to be an all-night thing or not, but I need to get home." She slaps at his hands as they try to pull her to him again, and quickly turns away. "Later big boy. We've lots of time."

Panting and ready to go after her, again, he stops himself. "Oh yeah. They will definitely have fun with her over and over."

Chapter 10

ASTAROTH

Whether love or hunger we fed on the lies tasting so sweet. Now we're bound in our needs where even pleasure bleeds. –Book of the Damned 1:8

"Get in here, everyone!" Asmodeus bellowed into the void.

The other two of the unholy trinity knew immediately he meant *them*. There were many demons, but only *three* had names embossed on the door. A moment later, Astaroth swaggered in Karabasan following, still shirtless purely for vanity. Both halted seeing Zephar already lounging on the obsidian chaise.

Astaroth arched a brow. "Did the intern bring chili donuts or…?"

Asmodeus waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah, he's not part of the trinity, but he's been with the show a while, so he stays. And he's got news all of you will enjoy, hearing the temptation."

No one argued. Just a few shrugs and a shared look that said, *fine, but he's not getting my spot in the pit.* They sprawl around the chamber, waiting. Waiting was part of the performance.

And then Asmodeus dropped the headline. "We've got one back."

That got their attention.

"Anara," he said, eyes gleaming. "They call her *Ana* now. And let me tell you, she's a *hot dish just waiting to be eaten up.*" He raised a finger and drew a spiral in the air, and the flames flared into a screen. The *Well of Fire* was in streaming mode again. There she was.

Ana. On stage. In a red dress, *split to salvation*, though it would save no one, singing with a voice that curled around every man in the room like

smoke. Their jaws were on the floor and their eyes weren't on her face. And oh, she knew *exactly* how to move.

Asmodeus smirked. "Whatever you two taught her back when. Guess what? She doesn't *remember*, but the *body does.*"

"No memory?" Astaroth whistled. And she's still on Earth.

Karabasan gave a low whistle. "That's muscle memory *I* wouldn't mind activating." Instantly his mind is off and gone, imagining her with him and him alone in the flames. Oh baby, he mutters.

"And here's the cherry," Asmodeus continued. "Angela, you know her, she works at the club, does those little side projects. Porn. Artsy stuff. And she's no angel, a mortal."

"Very *avant-garde,*" Astaroth added with a wink. Another one I'd like to take down so she could feel hell fire in a certain dark place. He licks his lips as his imagination runs wild.

"She's been prepping Ana. Once she's ready for Astaroth, she'll have a bigger role in film, I'll send maybe all three of you." He grinned at Zephar. "Maybe you want to share your adventure, Z?"

Zephar didn't love the nickname, but being part of the group felt *good*. He nodded. "I may not have closed the deal with Seraphina, but I did with Ana so no problem. That girl's stage-ready and bed-broken."

"If you didn't know," Asmodeus says, "Zephar here is working the club as their bouncer, Matthew, so that's how he met Ana.

Again the Well of Fire climbs for viewing and as they watch him and Ana fornicating behind the scenes, he narrates.

"Xavier's not a guardian. He didn't sneak off with just Serah. He's been doing *Ana*, and she *invited* it." He smirks then says, "I make her an offer because money gets her panties wet." He nods at the screen. "And as you can see, she loves cock.

Astaroth rubs his hands together, pupils dilating. "When do we get to her? Bloody halos and broken wings. This is exciting. "

"Slow it down, hot stuff," said Asmodeus. "Don't want to spook the starlet. Angela says she's almost ripe. And if the plan works out..." He

glances at Zephar. “Meantime, he’s doing her as often as she wants and angel girl is loving it.”

“I’m looking forward to Serah,” Karabasan grinned. “Golden girl.” He’s getting a hard-on watching Zephar with Anara, imagines himself being with her, Celeste too. Hell he doesn’t care, as long as they’ve got some new hot stuff to heat up hell.

Asmodeus nodded. “Ana’s hot for cock but she’s also a sucker for saving the lost. Once we get Celeste down there, she’ll walk right in thinking it’s a rescue mission, happy to help. And likely Serah will be only too happy to follow.” Zephar smirked. “Crack the Veil and down below, this is too good.”

About the Author

Lore Weaver of Light and Shadow

Bold as a flame, deep as the void between stars, a fearless storyteller who dances between heaven and hell, ink in one hand, fire in the other. Whether conjuring fallen angels aching for redemption, cursed lovers bound by myth, or warrior queens riding dragons into battle, her worlds shimmer with spiritual depth, emotional grit, and irresistible drama.

She don't shy away from the dark, but she never leave you without a flicker of hope and a wee beam of light.

A woman of fierce creativity and quiet conviction, faith with fantasy weave celestial battles, divine mysteries, and even broken hearts into sagas that grit the soul. Her characters cry, bleed, repent, and rise, just like the readers who walk beside them.

Counselor. Novelist. Visionary. She builds realms that don't merely entertain, they heal, provoke, and inspire.

Brandy lives in Vancouver Washington with her two Aussies and four koi in a pond, writing paranormal novels about Heaven and hell, angels and demons with Fae, seraphs, cherubs and a dragon or two.

Elyra Thorne is one of her pen names as is Maggie McGrath Author of one children's novel (no demons there).

Her nonfiction and fiction novels can be found on her website:

www.brandymarks.com

This website also has a link to her Amazon Author page