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Angel Dust

Written by

Sarah Mussi

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Angel Dust

SARAH MUSSI

HOT KEY BOOKS

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The Testimony of Zara Finer

Return to the ground, since from it you were taken;
for Dust you are and to Dust you will return.
Genesis 3:19

You picked your time perfectly. It was a glorious summer's day. The sky was blue and it was forever afternoon. I was almost happy. A new trust had been placed in me. I was to keep watch from the Twelfth Gate for St Peter. It is not easy to keep watch from the Twelfth Gate. It is not easy for the Seraphim to be allowed so far from the throne of God. It is not easy for the Twelfth Gate opens on to the road to Hell.

Yes, you picked your time perfectly. I was alone. And for some reason you were singled out in the last ray of the setting sun. I was laughing at the way you sagged your jeans and walked yourself down the street, as if the whole town belonged to you, every brick, every kerb. I was enjoying the way you ducked your head as you spoke. I was quivering at the deepness of your voice. I was glorying in the breadth of your shoulders and marvelling at how bold a man can be.

I think I was already half in love with you even then.

And you made your move. One minute I was so sure of

myself, then you lifted up your head, as if you could see me, and you winked.

One look into your dark eyes was all it took.

I leaned out of the Twelfth Gate. There was music booming out of someone's car. I wanted to touch you. The car slowed down. A pretty girl wound down a window. Her boyfriend, a proper gangsta, shouted to you from the driver's seat.

You said, 'Oi bruv, tonight's the night. Man's eighteen at midnight!' You held up a bottle of champagne.

The gangsta said, 'Catch you there.'

He revved his car. He surged forward. You jumped into the street in front of him, waving your arms, being silly. I reached out my hand. Then stopped. I know the Rules. God's rules. I'm not allowed to interfere with your fate. The car swerved. You opened your mouth in mock surprise, like you were scared of nothing.

But the car was going to hit you!

I couldn't help myself. You were joking around. Playing with your life. But for your sake I broke all the rules in Heaven.

I touched you.

And you were safe.

Your friend, the gangsta, slammed on his brakes. The car screeched to a standstill. The pretty girl screamed, 'Idiot!'

'I'm Marcus,' you said. 'The original badman! I have angels watching over me!'

And you laughed and laughed and everyone knew you didn't care if you went to Hell and back.

Except there is no way back.

So I just looked wonderingly on. Wondering why I'd risked

everything for you. Wondering what would happen next. Wondering at you.

And you were something to wonder at, with your coal-black eyes and your clothes and your gold and your girls. And an unexpected sadness caught my throat, because from the dust shimmering around you, I suddenly knew exactly why St Peter had asked me to watch from the Twelfth Gate. Why I was watching over you.

You were the one.

My temptation.

The one whose soul I had to Collect. And you were young, and you were beautiful, and you were flowing with energy. And my body trembled. I didn't want to watch from the Twelfth Gate any more. I didn't want to see you die.

You were only seventeen. It was your birthday. And I remembered then – another rule. Not a day more. Not a day less. It must be today. I had already trespassed once for your sake. I dared not again.

So there you were and here I was, stepping out of the Twelfth Gate to Collect you. And with a breaking heart I also understood something else. I was never going to save your soul. You were never going to pass the Twelfth Gate. You were doomed to step down the wide and pleasant broad-way, that so many take.

You were not bound for Heaven.

For your sake, I hoped death would be quick. You'd fall. I'd catch you. You'd see me. You'd understand. If there was time, I'd tell you to repent. If there was time, you would. Did I hope death would be quick? No, time should stand still. I should hold you for a thousand years, while you repented everything.

I did not think time would stand still for you. That is, after all, why they'd sent me, Serafina, the fieriest of the Seraphim, to embrace you. A brief caress of flame, for those bound for the fires of Hell.

What a waste.

The bell tolled.

The time had come.

I passed the threshold of the Twelfth Gate. I leapt across the broad and pleasant highway. I stepped down into the city.

For you.

The Book of Serafina

Serafina 1

Let me remember.
I have time without end. I will go on forever. I will
retell your story until the rocks melt.
I will fill eternity with thoughts of you.
I will make you immortal.
From *The Song of the Seraphim* ~ 3:7

My God, but aren't cities fantastic? Chip shops and noisy traffic. I was nervous, of course. Anyone would be. We'd heard such tales: streets paved with bad intentions, how even a saint could lose his way in the Eden of those concrete gardens. Terrifying. So of course, I kept my eyes firmly glued to the pavement. I was not going to be tempted. I would be worthy. I would do everything right. I thought of St Peter and the trust he'd placed in me. I would not fail him again.

I bit my lip and kept my wings folded tight. I kept my thoughts focused on my mission. I hadn't got it very right so far, had I? I should never have touched Marcus. What'd possessed me? But if I got the rest right? If I delivered his death on time, asked him to repent, if I Collected his soul?

If I led him personally to Hell and left him on the shores of Styx? If I paid Charon, the ferryman, myself?

Such a huge unforgivable mistake.

That was it. No more mistakes. No more temptations. No more excuses. I would be the greatest Angel of Death ever. I would be darkness personified. My mission would become legend. I'd deliver Marcus the best Final Moments in the whole history of Final Moments. He would die at the right place, at the right time, in the right way. I'd add extras: ethereal music, golden glimpses of Elysian Fields, the keening of a thousand weeping souls and tears, bright, falling like shooting stars. Brilliant. I was going to get it so right and make it so romantic, even Azrael would be jealous!

Then surely God would understand?

Anyone can make a mistake.

Plus I'd tell St Peter all about the car thing when I handed in my mission. I'd come clean. After all, there was no actual way of telling if that car *would* have killed Marcus. Was there?

And it wasn't listed in the Manifest. I was in the clear.

It was going to be all right.

Wasn't it?

With the speed of angels I got there in good time. And my God, what a place! How it oozed with sin. There were late-night bargain booze bars, twenty-four-hour one-stop shops, kebab cafés and greasy pizza parlours. Oh, to be human! And there were the basements too. Such mischief. Illegal gambling joints, all-night blues parties, crack dens and dingy little rooms rentable by the hour. Imagine. I

squashed my nose against the glass of a burger diner and breathed fire on the windows. I pressed my ear against the brickwork of a tenement block and listened to the groaning inside.

Thank Heaven I was early. No more mistakes for me. I dithered a bit until I found the nightclub where Marcus's party was scheduled. It was called The Mass and housed in the crypt of an old church. Then I checked the place out.

I wafted through the empty rooms with their black leather sofas and upholstered walls. It all reeked a bit, but I didn't mind. I like the smell of humans. I got out the Manifest and double-checked all the deaths scheduled for that evening. Yes, Marcus Montague was on it. There was my name next to his, and all the details. I peered at it very carefully. The Manifest gets updated all the time – at least the when, and where, and how. The day never changes. I super double-checked that the car wasn't supposed to have killed him. There was nothing to suggest it. I breathed a huge sigh of relief, and crossed myself in gratitude, and reminded myself that next time I'd triple-check. I'd put myself on super alert. Even if death was to be delivered at my discretion, no slightest detail would *ever* change without me being on it like a bonnet.

Quickly I found the spot where he'd die and decided where I'd stand. I tried out a strain or two of angelic harps and freshened the place up with a sweet southerly breeze straight from Heaven. That relaxed me a bit. If there were any demons to deal with, they'd find me more than ready. I drew a few fiery breaths and imagined cleaving them with

a thunderbolt. On the way out I twirled my wings in the huge mirror by the door. I was very beautiful. My angelic glance alone could have enthralled all men. How perilous my smile! I twirled and spun and filled the club with star-dust, made sunbeams dance on its polished floors. Oh, I was beautiful. I was even more lovely then.

I had the rest of the evening to kill. So I thought I'd wander down every back street I could. I'd eavesdrop on conversations and explore. I was quite invisible, of course. Nobody was going to see me. I'd make a thorough night out of it. Why not? We have so little time on Earth, we Seraphim. (No time, in fact, under usual conditions.) Anyway, snooping around back streets wasn't against any rules, was it? Come to think of it, now I was down on Earth, I could snoop anywhere I wanted. The Seraphim can travel in the beat of a wing, to the furthest corners of the sphere. I started wondering if I wouldn't prefer to go somewhere else. Paris? Rome? The summit of Mount Everest? Monte Carlo? What names!

But, you know, there's something about the perfume of the streets in Earthly cities that's completely beguiling. And I'd never been anywhere quite like this downtown place before. I was fascinated. I stood still and drunk in the night air. I wanted to make it all last forever. God, how I loved it. I wanted to stare into shop windows and listen to the roar of traffic until all the seas ran dry.

Traffic.

What *was* it like to ride in a car? I peeked into a late-night minicab office, just trying to imagine. Inside men sprawled on seats, smoking cigarettes. Real genuine nicotine.

They looked so bored. Imagine being bored! There was a girl with greasy hair plastered down one side of her cheek sitting behind the most incredible steel grille. She was reading a magazine. I wanted to have a look at it. It might have enticing images. How I would have treasured a magazine with enticing images.

But I couldn't wait until she put it down. And of course she couldn't see me, so I couldn't ask her. But I did look over her shoulder. When I did that she went all shivery and flicked her hair in my eye.

'Flipping freezing in here, innit?' she said to no one in particular.

I laughed. I loved her voice. It was all deliciously crispy and hoarse. And she wasn't even trying to be funny! One of the men grunted.

'Just had this weird déjà vu thing, like someone's standing on my grave,' the girl said.

I grinned and tickled her neck.

But of course, I was fooling myself. The real reason I wanted to hang around there was Marcus. Fooling yourself can be very convenient. And it's also not against God's rules, either. I decided to fool myself a bit longer and visit his home.

Marcus lived in a high rise called Curlston Heights. I adore high rises. On my last Collection mission I was sent to Manhattan, for a cleaner who died mopping the floor in a penthouse. I'd soared straight up the side of the building, straight through the downdraught, and peeked in at windows as I flashed by. I love lifts too, all that concrete and metal, that smell of humans! I love the way a lift clangs

around you. It makes my skin flutter. I went up and down in that lift in New York five times!

Gosh, I make it sound like I was such an old hand at Collections. Not! The truth was I'd only been doing it for three days. I'd only ever done five deaths in fact. (The cleaner in the penthouse, a nasty old man and three sleepers.) Actually I was a complete novice.

You see, for most of my angelic existence I'd been praying for the Redemption of Humankind in the Cloisters of the Holy Heavenly Host. And if it hadn't been for the Declaration of War, I guess I still would be. It's really an awful reason to be allowed out, isn't it? Satanic war. Imagine. I really *shouldn't* have been so thrilled about it.

Anyway, the thing was, when Satan declared his 'New Offensive' against Heaven, God took it very seriously. Immediately we went into Code Yellow. I don't really know why everyone got so panicky – it wasn't like Satan was going to win, was it? But they did. And you know, you can't argue with God.

So you see that's why I was down on Earth in the first place. Because Code Yellow means that no lesser celestial creature or low-ranking angel is allowed out of Heaven. When we're on Code Yellow, God is always very fussy about whom he lets pass the Pearly Gates: only the brightest and the best. Those above temptation – just in case.

Still, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good – I suppose. And Death Collections still have to be done. I mean people don't stop dying just because Satan challenges God, do they?

I soared up the side of Curlston Heights at an amazing speed, faster than Apollo 11. Imagine doing that at the Cloisters! What a flibbertigibbet they'd dub me! I landed on a tiny window ledge outside number 56, the home of Mrs Faustina Montague, her two daughters, Jasmine and Rayanne, and her eldest child, Marcus Montague.

We can do that, you know; just be somewhere and know everything – by touching it. I could tell you all the names of everyone who'd ever lived in that flat, plus the names of every builder, carpenter and plumber who'd ever worked on it. But only the facts: names, dates, figures, never the thoughts or feelings – plus it takes time and it's boring.

I was only interested in Marcus.

I pressed my nose up against the glass and peered through. Inside was a small front room bursting with furniture. A huge three-piece suite was crammed in beside a shelving unit of fake wood and brassy handles. The sofa and chairs were angled around a deep pile rug, which lay on a cheap laminate floor, in front of the widest widescreen TV, ever.

On the sofa sat a woman. She was sniffing and talking on the telephone. Marcus's mother.

'I just don't know what to do any more,' she said.

There was a pause as if someone was telling her exactly what to do.

I slipped into the living room and stood beside her. I listened to the conversation.

'He's never here . . .'

'It's his friends,' said the other.

'He's gone for days, without . . .' Mrs Montague's voice broke.

'He's using drugs.'

'No . . .'

'I hope you're not giving him money?'

'No, it's Marcus who's bringing in money . . .' said his mother, rallying.

'You'll have to tell him to go,' said the person.

Marcus's mother sighed. 'But where to?' she said. 'And where is he getting the money?'

'Give him a choice. Stick To My Rules Or Find. Your. Way!'

Marcus's mother sighed again.

'What he needs is a shock. A Big Nasty Shock!'

'But it's his birthday . . .'

'Fat lot to celebrate. He wants to be De Man, doesn't he? Then he better act like one!'

The caller was getting irritated. I prowled around the living room looking at pictures: Marcus as a baby, Marcus with his arms round his mum, Marcus with his sisters, Marcus in a football team, Marcus posing like the Original Badman, Marcus in dark glasses. Marcus looking manly. My throat caught. There's something unbearably sad about being on Collection Duty. However beautiful you make the death, however gentle, however welcome.

I went into his bedroom.

What a delicious mess! Clothes thrown everywhere, ash trays full of butt ends, CD covers scattered on the floor, expensive trainers showcased on their shoeboxes, an Xbox still playing over and over the opening sequence to *Call of Duty*. And everywhere there were pictures of girls, tacked

up alongside sheets of paper covered with lyrics in a small spidery scrawl.

TO MY HOT GIRL
those fiery eyes
Hot girl! hot girl!
Soul on fire
take out my heart
i gotta do right
i gotta talk true this time
oh oh oh
i'm fallin for you
and that is so true
i gotta do right
I gotta talk true
before i lose you
oh no no

I looked at a T-shirt flung carelessly on the floor. What was it, to be human? To feel the breeze against your face and know that nothing lasts? If Marcus could have lasted, would he have changed? I could smell change and goodness somewhere in his scent. Standing there, in his room, his life spread out before me, in clothes and music and passion, I saw the speed at which he'd lived. No time for regrets. No thoughts of the hereafter.

I didn't return to the living room. Right then his mother was grieving for the loss of that little boy in the photo with his arms around her. There was nothing I could do to comfort her. Not true. I could have touched her, I suppose.

I could have given her oblivion. Would she have wanted that?

I started to fret about the Collection again. The palms of my hands began to sweat. I could feel my feathers tingling. I had to get this absolutely right. Marcus had a definite time pencilled in against his name. There must be no mistake. I must get back to the nightclub. Maybe demons were already sniffing him out. Demons are foul creatures. They feast on unclaimed souls. They soil every death they touch. I went over my checklist:

- Catch him as he falls.
- Give him the chance to repent.
- Get there before the demons.
- Deliver him his Final Moment.
- Pinch out his life.
- Collect his soul.

Even if he was bound for Hell, he shouldn't fall into the hands of demons. What the heck was I doing wasting time snooping about?

I must get to the club immediately.

Ready to kill Marcus.