

EVE OF SIN CITY



S. J. DAY

TOR·COM 

S . J . DAY

Eve of Sin City

illustration by

GORDON CRABB

“ . . . there was given to me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.”

—CORINTHIANS 2:7

CHAPTER 1

Evangeline Hollis eyed the hard-hat-wearing kappa demon presently holding two wallpaper samples against the wall.

“You know,” she said, mostly to herself, “I always thought ‘Sin City’ was just a nickname.”

“Ms. Hollis.” Raguel Gadara’s voice was laced with the resignation of a long-suffering parent. Softened by the resonance unique to all the archangels, it still chastised effectively. “Focus, please.”

Eve shot a wry glance at her boss. How the hell was she supposed to focus on wallpaper patterns when there was an Infernal in the room? She didn’t care that the kappa worked for Gadara Enterprises. All demons who’d defected to the Celestial side were secretly on the lookout for anything that would win back Satan’s favor. Knocking out an archangel would do the trick.

If anything bad happened to the archangel Raguel on her watch . . .

Shaking off the thought, Eve forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. Working for Raguel Gadara—real estate magnate extraordinaire and owner of the Mondego Resort in Las Vegas—had once been a career dream of hers. The reality was more of a nightmare. Her years of interior design education and

experience had been relegated to the sidelines of her “real” job: demon bounty hunting.

“The pale blue with lilies,” she decided, cocking her head to one side. In her previous secular life, she’d be sporting Manolo Blahnik stilettos and a pinstriped skirt. As a Mark—one of thousands of sinners drafted via the Mark of Cain to kill demons on God’s behalf—she was wearing Doc Martens and yoga pants. The thick, straight black hair she’d inherited from her Japanese mother was pulled back in a simple, braided ponytail. Those who were unfortunate enough to be “marked” never knew when they’d be called into service. It was best to be prepared for everything, all the time.

“Serene choice.” Gadara gave an approving, regal nod. “A nice dichotomy to the casino.”

“A refuge from the insanity. If it takes guests longer to wear out, they might extend their stay. In theory.”

He flashed a smile that nearly blinded her. His pearly white teeth were brilliant framed by his chocolate-hued skin. For a moment, Eve was arrested by his appearance. His dark flesh was burnished by the golden sheen that distinguished archangels, making him beautiful to look upon. Awe-inspiring, and sometimes frightening. Celestial power thrummed through the air around him, creating a nearly irresistible compulsion to cede to anything he requested.

She shook that off, too.

The kappa lowered the wallpaper and popped a bubble of gum. Since Marks weren't vigilantes, working with demons who hadn't yet "crossed the line" was inevitable in the course of conducting secular business. But she didn't have to like it. The stench of their rotting souls was worse than decomposition. Without the Mark of Cain, she'd be queasy now. One of the boons of the mark was the precision with which her body functioned—she no longer had physical reactions to most stimuli, emotional or otherwise.

"I also prefer the solid gray-blue carpeting," Eve went on. "It'll need to be cleaned more than a patterned pile, so we should restrict its use to the suites, but the color will add to the feeling of serenity."

"Did you gravitate toward blue in your own home decor?"

She shook her head. "I used a lot of neutrals. I didn't want anything to compete with my view of the beach."

Her oceanfront apartment in Huntington Beach, California, was her refuge from the world at large, a world in which Infernals lived alongside mortals who were blissfully ignorant. Such was the life she lived now, having her Big Mac served by faeries and her car detailed by werewolves.

"Understandable." Gadara's smile widened. "The hand of God is incomparable."

She let that little dig roll off her. As a former agnostic, she was now forced to acknowledge a higher

power. However, she certainly didn't fall into the ranks of the devout. Too many of the Lord's decisions were ones she disagreed with, and his lack of attention to detail chafed. The oversight of the day-to-day operations of the marked system was left in the hands of the seraphim. Like the American judicial system, there were bondsmen (the archangels), dispatchers (malakhim), and bounty hunters (Marks like her). God was content with occasional vague memos.

Gadara gestured for the kappa to proceed with Eve's selection. Then, the archangel set his hand at the small of her back and urged her toward the open door leading to the corridor. "Will dinner at seven be acceptable?"

He wasn't coming on to her or making a request. Gadara liked to keep her close for the same reason all angels and demons went out of their way to get to her: they wanted to irritate the two men in her life—Cain and Abel. The brothers went by the names Alec Cain and Reed Abel in present day, but they were the infamous siblings of biblical legend nevertheless. Gadara was as ruthlessly ambitious as the other archangels, and she was a unique advantage to him because pulling her strings kept both Cain and Abel toeing his line.

"She's not available tonight, Raguel." The low, deep voice that intruded sent a mental shiver of awareness through Eve.

If not for the mark's regulatory effect on her body, she'd have goose bumps. Alec Cain was her mentor in

the marked system and the love of her life. He'd roared into her life on a Harley when she was almost eighteen, and by the time he left her behind she was madly in love and no longer a virgin. She'd still been comparing other men to him ten years later when Reed Abel entered her life and branded her with the Mark of Cain. That started a triangular relationship she'd once thought would be impossible for her.

Actually, she thought wryly, it was impossible. In every way. Being the latest point of contention in the oldest sibling rivalry in history was a tremendous pain in the ass.

Turning her head, Eve watched Alec approach with his quick, sure-footed stride. Of course he suffered none of the effects of teleportation that she—a lowly Mark—did. That would be fair; God didn't play fair.

"Why are you here, Cain?" Gadara couldn't have sounded more reproving.

"With all the Infernal activity in the area, you have to ask?" He raked Eve with a blatantly sexual glance. "More importantly, I miss my girl. You've monopolized her long enough. Tonight, she's mine."

She smiled at the way he purred his last sentence. He was trouble and made no effort to hide it. His well-worn jeans, scuffed steel-toed boots, and overlong hair warned women to tread carefully where he was concerned. The "bad boy" look wasn't an affectation by any means. Alec was the original and most ferocious of all the Marks. He was also God's primary enforcer. Every other Mark took orders from mal'akh

“handlers,” but he took his orders directly from the Almighty himself.

Gadara bared his teeth in a gesture an idiot might think was a smile. “I believe Ms. Hollis intends to be present at the pre-opening of the Two to Tango club this evening.”

“It’s done?” Alec wrapped her in a bear hug. “Can’t wait to see it, Angel.”

Evangeline. Eve. Angel. A nickname only he ever used. He still said it with the seductive rumble that had landed her in this Mark of Cain mess to begin with. There were a lot of reasons why she loved him, but that nickname and the way he showed such pride in her accomplishments were definitely at the top of her list.

“And I can’t wait to see you in a tux,” she teased.

He groaned. “The things I do for you.”

The thought of him in a tuxedo made her hot. Alec was like skydiving—the thrill of the fall was addicting, despite knowing the ground was rushing up to meet you.

Her smile faded as his look of discomfort took on an unmistakable edge. His left biceps twitched, telling her his mark was burning—Heaven’s way of calling Marks into service.

“Uh-oh,” she said.

“Shit.” Alec glared at Gadara.

“As you said”—the archangel shrugged innocently, but grinned like the Cheshire Cat—“the Infernal activity in the area is unusually brisk.”

Eve gave a playful tug to Alec's belt loops. She hated it when he went out, knowing that one day he might not make it back to her, but she kept those fears to herself. Knowing she was scared for him would only fuck with his head at a time when he needed to be totally on his game. "You know where to find me when you're done."

He used the mental connection between mentor and Mark to share the vulnerability he had to hide from others. Damn it. I miss you.

Don't let me distract you, she admonished.

Giving a curt nod, he shifted away, disappearing from her grip as if he'd never been there at all. For a moment, Eve envied him. She hadn't been called out on a hunt since she'd arrived in Las Vegas a month ago. Occasionally, she wondered if Reed—who was her handler—was deliberately keeping her out of service (and therefore, out of harm's way), but that wasn't his style. Unlike his brother, he lived for rules. No matter what his feelings for her were, he wouldn't let them get in the way of his job.

"You feel restless." Gadara caught her elbow in a gentle grip. "I assure you, your hiatus is not deliberate."

"Don't get excited," she muttered. "It doesn't mean I like this gig. I'm still going to find a way out."

Gadara wisely held his tongue, but his dark eyes sparkled with amusement. He led her toward the bank of elevators located down the corridor. An empty car was waiting, since the entire wing was closed for

renovation. Within a few short moments, they were exiting onto the lobby floor.

As the doors slid open, a deluge of sensory input poured into the enclosed space—the merry dinging of slot machines, the putrid odor of rotting souls, and frequent shouts from both joyous and distraught gamblers. Eve wondered how gambling fit into a divine plan, since the income from all of Gadara's various enterprises funded the activities and living expenses of the Marks under his command. The archangel was effectively serving a 24/7 all-you-can-eat buffet to Infernals; the desperation, avarice, and desolation filling Las Vegas drew them like ants to honey. Basically, the archangel was using demons to help fund the killing of demons. Poetic justice? Or a sick joke? She couldn't decide.

"I took the liberty," Gadara said, "of having a selection of gowns delivered to your suite."

Eve's nose wrinkled. She hated to be indebted to him for anything, especially calculated kindness. On the other hand, she disliked herself for taking her wariness to the extreme and being ungrateful. "Thank you."

He nodded.

"But," she qualified, "I have some suitable cocktail dresses of my own."

"Ballroom dancing in a cocktail dress?"

"I can't ballroom dance." She shrugged at his widened eyes. "It's not something the average girl learns, you know."

“You are not average.”

As they passed the front desk en route to the elevators that accessed her wing of the property, Eve noticed the proliferation of Elvis impersonators clogging the registration area.

She whistled. “And that’s not an average number of Elvises. Or is it Elvi?”

“International Elvis Week,” he explained, pointing to a banner stretching across the casino ceiling.

“I’d like to see Elvis ballroom dance.”

“That could be arranged.”

Eve’s brows rose. “Really?”

Gadara’s smile was mischievous. “Seven o’clock, Ms. Hollis.”

Two Marks in black garb approached and flanked him. The personal guards of the archangels were impressive by any estimation; Eve gladly handed Gadara’s care over to them.

Knowing he was safe, she worked her way through the throng of jumpsuit-clad impersonators and hit the button for the elevator. She had a new club to open and a night with Alec to look forward to. As crappy as her day had been so far, things were definitely looking up.

She decided not to think about how that usually meant things were about to take a turn for the worse. . .

CHAPTER 2

Gadara towered over Eve with his hand extended to her. “Dancing with me is not optional.”

Eve remained seated and crossed her arms. “I told you, I don’t know how.”

“But I do.”

“I’m a quick study, but I’m not that quick,” she argued. “It takes a week for the stars on Dancing with the Stars to learn one dance.”

The popular reality television show was the inspiration for the creation of the Two to Tango club. Using the basic setup from the show as a launching point, Eve had gone with 1930s’/1940s’ Big Band retro decor throughout, then shaken things up a bit by using the same hardwood of the dance floor to create meandering trails around the booths and tables. Professional dancers in costume whirled along the paths, providing entertainment to all the patrons no matter where they were seated while also encouraging them to participate. For a designer with her level of experience, such a highly visible project was a major gift.

Satan wasn’t the only one who traded dreams for souls. The archangels read from the same book, after all.

Gadara's lips pursed. "Your lack of faith is your greatest hindrance. Your welfare on this earth is entirely in my hands. You must trust me."

"I died!" She had no intention of ever letting him forget it, since he was the one who'd put her in the line of fire before she was fully trained.

"Ms. Hollis." The exasperation was back in his tone. "Dance with me."

Celestial command resonated through his words, creating a compulsion strong enough to make her stand.

Eve glared at him. "The Jedi mind trick isn't cool when you're using it on me."

A hand reached between them to catch her wrist. Her gaze followed the line of a tuxedo-clad arm, then moved across a broad shoulder before coming to rest at warm brown eyes.

Reed Abel's smile was slow and seductive. "Hey, babe."

She inhaled sharply, struck by how handsome he was. The resemblance to his brother was unmistakable, but they were very different men. The reaction she had to each was unique, yet equally powerful. "Hey."

Gadara looked prepared to argue about the intrusion, then changed course and stepped back. He never gave an inch unless there was something in it for him. In this case, she guessed he wanted to facilitate aggravating Alec.

The archangels got their kicks where they could.

Reed tugged her toward the dance floor. “You did a great job. This place is impressive.”

“Thank you. So are you.” No one wore Armani like Reed. He was always impeccable, from his perfect precision haircut to his custom designer suits. While Alec was rough-and-tumble, Reed was smooth and polished. But only on the outside. On the inside, Alec was more stable. Reed was best described as volatile, especially in regards to his feelings for her.

He checked her out and gave a low appreciative whistle. “It takes work to do you justice.”

She smiled. The peacock blue dress she’d selected was brilliantly hued, yet simply designed, allowing the vibrant color to take center stage. Even jewelry would have been too much, so she’d gone mostly without. Her only adornments were a necklace worn as an anklet and the diamond ring on her left hand—two pieces of jewelry she never removed—and her only cosmetics were mascara and lip gloss. She’d dressed up for her own enjoyment, just to feel like her old self for an hour or two, but she was still glad he liked it.

When they reached the edge of the dance floor, he bowed elegantly. “Dance with me.”

Eve groaned at the images filling his mind: thoughts of beautifully skilled and expert maneuvers she wasn’t capable of. As her handler, he had the same mental access to her as Alec did, making her brain the brothers’ closest connection since childhood. Which was a real bitch for her.

“Give me a few years,” she said dryly. “Maybe I’ll find the time to fit in some lessons.”

“Do you trust me?”

She shot him an arch glance. With her life, yes. With everything else, not so much.

“We’re in public,” he purred. “So I have to keep it clean.”

Eve took the few steps required to become enfolded in his embrace. “Don’t get fancy, and you might be able to walk away from this without a limp.”

Reed laughed, a full-throated sound that did things to her it shouldn’t. “Let me lead and we’ll be fine.”

Setting her hand in his, she opened the mental connection between them. He caught her waist and shot a meaningful glance at the band conductor. Eve barely registered the first notes of a passionate tempo before she was swept away.

While the music flowed around them, he weaved his thoughts through hers. He did so effortlessly, sinuously. She knew each step before she took it, as if she’d always known it, as if the moves were natural to her. It was an Argentine tango, fierce and sexy, and Reed was delicious with it. With his confident and elegant movements, their dance was almost like having sex with their clothes on.

The rush was intense. There were only two stimuli capable of overriding the physical throttle of the mark—arousal and bloodlust. By the time he ended the dance with a dip that bent her almost to the floor, Eve was breathless.

He lowered his head. His mouth hovered a hair's breadth away from hers.

Tense with expectation, she licked her lips and waited for the kiss she knew was coming. . . .

. . . Then her mark began to burn.

"You suck," she complained, since he was the one responsible for calling her into service.

Reed winked and straightened. "Time to get to work, babe."

CHAPTER 3

“Time to get to work, babe,” Eve parroted under her breath. She paused on the threshold of the corridor that emptied into the casino and set her hands on her hips. “Smug bastard.”

I caught that, Reed chided. Watch your back. It’s crazier than usual out there tonight.

So I’ve been hearing. Eve scanned the crowded space for anything overtly irregular, not an easy task in Las Vegas.

The muted throbbing of the mark on her deltoid acted like a proximity warning. The level of pain told her the Infernal she hunted was in the same building. The trail wasn’t stone cold, but she wasn’t yet getting warm either.

Her fingertips tapped an impatient staccato on her hips, bringing the feel of her gown to her attention. She sighed. It was time for Cinderella to change back into her working clothes.

She was heading toward the elevators when her attention was caught by a slight commotion by the entrance. Her head turned. Five Elvis impersonators, each one in a different color pantsuit, formed a V-shaped formation just inside the revolving glass door. They paused there, affording everyone an opportunity

to catch the impressiveness of their multihued collective presentation. Dressed in sequined pantsuits, capes, and gold-framed aviator sunglasses, they caught the eye and held attention. She whistled.

In unison, they pivoted on their heels and made a beeline in her direction.

Eve looked over her shoulder at the corridor she'd just vacated. The theater where the impersonators were vying for a \$250,000 grand prize was located behind her. From this distance, a track of Elvis singing "Such a Night" was barely heard, but easily recognizable.

Her inner alarm bells started clanging hell for leather.

Gut instinct was a Mark's best weapon, and Eve had learned to follow hers. Unlike Infernals, who had various supernatural gifts to call upon, Marks had only enhanced bodies and a mental connection to handlers who were forbidden to assist them. Eve's ability to heal fast and move faster wasn't enough to keep her alive. She relied more heavily on her intuition and intellect than she did on her extensive combat training.

Turning about, she set off at a brisk pace.

Trying to kick ass in a ball gown was going to blow big-time.

With every step she took, the throbbing of her mark intensified. Any lingering thought of changing her clothes was abandoned. If there was a chance of ending the hunt now, she was better off taking it. Otherwise, she could be searching for the Infernal all over the city. Considering the number of security

cameras in Las Vegas, that was too dangerous for her. Things had a tendency to get messy when she was involved. At least here at the Mondego, any disasters could be controlled and made to disappear.

As she approached the theater entrance, the guard recognized her and swiftly ushered her inside. The sight that greeted her made her smile, despite the gravity of her mission. Female fans were frenzied over the impersonator on stage, a handsome young man with bedroom eyes and impressive hip action. His singing was noteworthy, too, but she doubted many women were paying attention to that.

She was surprised at the large number of Infernals in attendance. Who knew demons had a thing for Elvis?

“Who are you looking for?”

She turned her attention to the female Infernal beside her. The detail (a.k.a. hellspawn insignia) around the demon’s throat revealed her to be a mare from the court of Baal, one of the seven kings of Hell. Her Priscilla Presley glamour was impressive and sure to draw more than a few admirers in this crowd.

“No one in particular,” Eve replied.

The Infernal laughed. Mares were the source of nightmares, and the females found it easiest to lure a victim to sleep by seducing them into bed. From there they could feed off the distress and misery their mind-rape caused.

“Marks are shitty liars,” the demon scoffed.

“And demons smell like shit. Guess that makes us even.”

A ripple of hatred marred the surface of the mare's glamour, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared. “Well, you're obviously not after me, so happy hunting. Hope you get your ass kicked.”

The demon strolled away and was swiftly lost in the stream of attendees cruising the aisles.

Eve darted in the other direction. She knew a problem when she met one. The mare would spread the word that a Mark was on the hunt, and Eve would lose the advantage of surprise. Since the nearby demons couldn't know which one of them was on the chopping block, they'd all react defensively.

Using the intensity of the mark's throbbing as a homing beacon, Eve flowed with the current of traffic. She was rounding the front row when the impersonator on stage pointed at her and called out, “Hey there, pretty mama.”

She shook her head violently and began to move away, pushing aggressively through the milling crowd.

“Hold up,” he drawled, detaching the microphone from its stand and leaping agilely to the theater floor. The orchestra continued playing “Viva Las Vegas” without his accompaniment. The attendees around her surged forward in response to his new accessibility, but the crush didn't deter him. He caught her by the elbow with surprising dexterity.

The moment she was snared, Eve smelled the mark on him. Sweet like candy, the scent of Marks could be

cloying when contained in an enclosed space, like the atrium at Gadara Tower. Here in the theater, it was a welcome relief from the reek of Infernals.

Distracted by her surprise, Eve allowed the impersonator to serenade her up a set of stairs on the side of the stage.

A Mark impersonating Elvis? It made no sense. Not all Marks were hunters like her—and clearly this guy wasn't, because he was singing instead of dealing with the Infernal influx in the area—but they all had important jobs. Some were secretaries; others were chauffeurs. The list of duties was endless, but they all kept the marked system running smoothly. So what was this guy's story?

The impersonator gyrated around her stationary form, whispering, "I think the one you're looking for just ran back there. Yellow pantsuit."

He stopped in front of her and jerked his chin toward the left wing. She simultaneously noted that he kept up the Elvis-inspired drawl even when whispering, and that his facial resemblance to the King was uncanny. . . .

She stared hard. He winked, turned around, and resumed wooing the crowd.

Eve hopped toward the wing on one foot while pulling her shoe off the other. She repeated the action on the opposite side, then set off at a run on bare feet, with heels in hand. Pushing her way through the line of numbered impersonators waiting in the wings, she

gained the hallway leading to the rear of the backstage area.

Engaging what she jokingly called her “super sight,” Eve caught a flash of yellow rounding the corner at the far end of the hall. Her mark sizzled beneath her skin, and her jaw tensed. Adrenaline and bloodlust flowed thick and hot through her veins, inciting a highly addicting level of excitement. That was her biggest hurdle in acclimating to the mark: she got off on hunting and killing things. What did that say about her?

“You can run . . . ,” she muttered, looking for some sort of weapon among the various backstage props. She snatched up a wooden spear with a plastic tip. Marks were supposed to be able to summon flaming swords and daggers, but she’d learned she couldn’t rely on their appearance. Her skepticism regarding God and his motives had put her on some sort of Celestial blacklist, which didn’t help bolster her opinion of the Almighty.

When she rounded the corner, she saw a door ahead. Two people were shouting obscenities at whoever had recently shoved them out of the way to run through it. Eve spotted a microphone stand and paused. Switching the spear to the hand dangling her shoes, she grabbed the stand with her free hand and wrenched the rod out of the weighted base. Then she continued her pursuit. Pushing the bar latch on the door, she stumbled into a stairwell.

The only way to go was up. Eve tucked her shoes into the open space beneath the stairwell and listened to the demon's pounding footfalls as he raced upward. A small arrowed sign read "To the roof," and she set off after him, the metal risers chilly on her bare feet.

Why head toward a dead end?

Unless he had an agenda . . . or planned to fly away.

Her mind quickly riffled through the known classifications of demons, sorting out those who had the gift of flight. When she reached the roof, she was ready to rock. She threw the door open and bounded out to avoid an ambush, rending the slit in her dress from knee to waist in the process. Her focused search for yellow mitigated any regret.

Beautiful things in her life got broken; she was resigned to that now.

She was midair when she caught sight of her quarry running across the roof. Drawing her arm back, she launched the metal pole like a javelin, jagged end first. Air whistled around the projectile before it struck its target. The vampyre stumbled from the blow and fell to his knees, cursing.

Eve landed in a crouch, wincing at the pain of impact to her bare feet. Waiting with fists to the ground and spear at the ready, she left the next move up to the demon.

With two feet of pole protruding from both the front and back of his torso, the vamp ran both hands

through his blond hair and glanced down to inspect the damage.

“I’d chide you for missing my heart, luv,” he said with a clipped British accent. “But I heard you have shoddy aim.”

That stung. So she’d been aiming for his shoulder. . . . That she couldn’t throw worth a damn wasn’t the point. She had gone out of her way not to kill him. It was that gut-instinct thing again.

She sized him up. He was tall, lean, and golden. She couldn’t imagine a person looking less like Elvis than this guy, yet the yellow sequined jumpsuit looked strangely good on him. He was checking her out, too, and the calculation in his eyes was unmistakable. Gripping the pole with both fists, he began to pull, hand over hand, divesting himself of the impalement in unhurried increments.

If this guy had stayed put or exited through the crowded casino to the busy Las Vegas Strip, she would have had her hands tied by the crowd around them. Instead, he’d led her to a perfect place to kill him. Of course he’d thought that result would be reversed, and maybe he was right. Maybe she’d blown her chance to vanquish him. But she knew something was off. She wasn’t going to take him out before discovering what it was.

“That was too easy.” She broke the spear over her knee, creating two weapons with splintered ends.

Nothing came easy to Marks, especially kills.

A slow smile curved his mouth. He brandished the pole with deadly elegance. “Let’s make it harder then, pet.”

CHAPTER 4

The vampyre lunged to his feet in a rush of fleshy, featherless wings and blood spatter. Eve fainted to the side, then spun around, using her canted balance to put weight behind her thrust. She shoved half the spear into his lower back. The momentum of her pivot crashed her into him and they both went down, the microphone stand clattering against the rooftop before rolling out of reach. She twisted away, narrowly missing a kick to the shoulder.

Scrambling to her feet, she asked, “What are you after?”

The vamp regained a kneeling position and reached around to his back, laughing. “Who says I’m after anything?”

“I was giving you credit for being caught so quickly, but maybe you’re just stupid.”

He pulled the stick out of his flesh and brought it around. As he pushed to his feet, smoke rose from the sizzling blood coating the wood. “Sammael was spot-on about you.”

Right about what? Eve adjusted her grip on her remaining half of the spear and crossed the fingers of her other hand. She also sucked in swordsmanship, but give her a gun and she could cause some serious

damage. Unfortunately for her, guns weren't much help with most classes of Infernals. "Of course Satan was right. Why do you think he's the boss? He's smarter than the rest of you."

The vamp growled, then spooked her with a mock lunge. "You won't be so chipper when I hand you over to him. Lilith taunts him because you don't wear the bloody necklace he gave you. He acts as if it doesn't matter, but I know it does."

"It didn't fit the neckline of my dress," she managed past a tight throat. The damn necklace. She'd known it would come back to bite her. Satan hadn't given her protection against his own minions for nothing. At some point, he expected the "gift" would benefit him in some way, and Eve doubted she'd come out ahead when it did. What creeped her out most, though, was the realization of how closely he must be watching her to notice that she rarely wore the piece around her neck. "He knows better than to take it personally."

"You never wear it," the vamp insisted. His stance was wide, his hands flexing. "He says you don't need it. I say you need a firmer hand."

Circling the vamp, she forced him to rotate to continue facing her head-on. "He sent you after me to prove his point, right?"

After all, Satan didn't care which of them survived this encounter; either outcome would entertain him. "And you're dumb enough to go for it," she goaded. "Why? I'm betting on Lilith. She's got you pussy-

whipped. She has a plan to irritate Satan, and you're the collateral damage."

The vamp glared and licked the tip of a fang. "You'll be the one sporting scars, luv."

He was probably right, but she wasn't going to think about that now. "Really? I think Satan is using me to get rid of you. You're not worth his time, so he's betting on me."

"This is Vegas." He assumed a classic Elvis pose. "A city built on playing the odds. Of course, there are ways to even them up a bit."

She jumped back from a wild swing of his fist. His goal had been to knock her off her game and it had worked, but she didn't let it show. Sometimes, like now, a Mark's best weapon was their bravado. "I take it you're not talking about counting cards."

"Location, location, location." He tried to kick her, but she blocked him with a downward chop of her forearm. "And making sure every one of your Mark mates from Mesquite to Baker was . . . indisposed, increasing the odds that you'd be the one sent after me."

Fists clenching, Eve bit back a curse. Once again, other Marks had been placed in the line of fire because of her. She was gaining a reputation for making life harder for others. That perception was compounded by the mistaken belief that having Cain as a mentor made her life easier. Pretty soon she would have a similar number of enemies on both sides.

She exhaled and steeled her nerves. The vamp had deliberately done something heinous to get on the short list to be vanquished. She wasn't going to ask how he'd pissed off the seraphim. What mattered was that he'd deliberately crossed the line for the sole purpose of getting to her. Someone, somewhere had suffered because of her. Maybe multiple people.

The thought made her homicidal.

Eve wrapped one arm loosely around her waist, leaving the hand holding the spear hanging at her side. The façade of vulnerability was calculated. When the vamp sidled closer, she lashed out.

Striking him in the temple with one fist, she followed with a kick to his shin. When he leaped toward her, she met him halfway, their bodies colliding with teeth-rattling violence. His greater weight shoved her back. An inch away from hitting the roof in a pained sprawl, his wings burst free.

Spinning in the air like a speeding bullet, they left the safety of the roof in a flurry of wings and sequined cape. The Mondego's lights and neon signage swirled in a kaleidoscope around them. Eve wrapped her leg around his, calf to calf, ankle to ankle. Hanging on for her life.

The moment she locked on to him, all traces of amusement faded from his face. Eve wished she could find the situation funny. It really should be. Just a few months ago, the thought of flying over Las Vegas with a blond, vampyric Elvis in a yellow jumpsuit would have been a teenage acid trip come back to haunt her.

That she found it so “normal” now sparked a level of frustration and fury she’d thought was long gone. She was pissed enough to almost forget she was terrified of heights.

Almost. Not quite.

The vamp hissed. He bared pointed fangs, his irises red and laser bright. His hand fisted in her hair and yanked her head back, exposing her neck.

Damned if she’d be the in-flight meal.

Rubbing her leg up and down the length of his like a lover, Eve shimmied his pant leg up and worked his sock down. The moment her anklet met his bare skin, his wings and fangs retracted instantaneously.

They dropped like a stone.

The vamp screamed and clutched her tighter, as if she could save him from the inevitable crash.

Their downward spiral increased in speed with every rotation. Blood rushed through her ears, nearly obliterating the sound of his frantically flapping cape.

“There’s more than one way to wear a necklace,” she yelled, hoping her timing wasn’t skewed by her dizziness.

A parked Mondego service truck rushed up to meet them. She jerked hard to the left, positioning the Infernal beneath her. They hit the roof of the cab with enough force to crush it and burst all four tires. The pain of the collision was softened by the vampyre, whose bones shattered audibly. His inhuman scream sprayed a fine mist of blood into her face.

Eve briefly registered the agony of sharply angled metal digging into her thigh. She lifted her head, wincing at the feel of the semigelatinous body beneath her. The vamp gurgled as she shifted. He'd heal in time, but she wasn't going to let that happen.

"When you get back to Hell," she wheezed, "tell Satan if he wants his gift returned, he'll have to come get it himself."

With the last of her strength, she angled the stub of the spear and pushed it through his chest cavity, finding his heart and finishing the job. He burst into ash.

Broken, Eve closed her eyes and sank into oblivious darkness.

CHAPTER 5

“I will not mention the destruction of yet another vehicle,” Gadara said while pacing in front of the windows of her Mondego suite. The view behind him was of the Eiffel Tower and a thriving Las Vegas strip.

“You just did,” Eve pointed out wryly, holding a bag of ice over a bruise on her thigh. The chill felt good, as did the dampness of her recently washed hair. The mark was mending her injuries—which included a myriad of cuts and bruises as well as a broken rib, collapsed lung, and fractured leg—at an astonishing rate. The healing process caused her temperature to run high—almost as high as the level of testosterone in the room. Alec and Reed glowered at each other from opposite sides of the expansive space. One stood with arms crossed and legs wide; the other leaned into the wall with dangerous casualness.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Reed snapped at her.

“You have to ask?” she retorted. “You’re the one who gave me the assignment.”

“To vanquish him. Not skydive with him!”

Her hand went to Satan’s necklace, now hanging around her neck. “He wanted this. I got the impression

Satan sent him after it just to teach the dumbass a lesson.”

“Sammael clearly has a death wish,” Alec said in a moderated tone at odds with the look of mayhem in his dark eyes. “Damned if I’ll let him play his games with your life.”

She looked at Gadara. “How are the other Marks in the area?”

The archangel shot a meaningful glance at Reed. “Abel is about to check on them and their handlers.”

He’s punishing me, Reed complained. It’s going to take all night. Following up on the handlers is his job, not mine.

I’m glad you’re the one doing it, though, she offered. You give a shit.

Alec straightened from his position at the wall. “Time for you two to leave. Eve needs to rest so she can heal.”

“Then you better get out of here, too,” Reed shot back.

“She needs someone to make sure she takes it easy.” Alec glanced at her. “Since she’s my girl, I’ll be the one to do it.”

Reed’s lip curled scornfully before he shifted away.

“Take the next two days off,” Gadara said, heading toward the door of her suite on foot. “I need you in prime shape.”

She returned his parting wave.

When the door clicked shut, Alec closed the distance between them and sat on the coffee table in front of her. "I need you alive."

"If Satan really wanted me dead, he would have sent someone more substantial after me. Especially knowing I have this damn necklace. By the way, I hate this thing. It feels like a bomb around my neck."

Tick tock, tick tock. The lovely gold piece had definitely come with conditions she wasn't fully aware of yet—like using her to purge his ranks of stupid demons.

"It's a godsend," he argued.

"From Satan?"

"Jehovah works in mysterious ways. Besides, you need all the help you can get. You attract disasters, Angel."

"Including you."

His mouth curved in a sexy smile. "Especially me."

"I'd like to meet the Mark who was in the Elvis impersonator competition."

"Why?"

"You have to ask? A Mark who spends his off-duty time playing Elvis? I'd love to know what he does in his on-duty time."

"He entertains."

Her brows rose. "His job is to entertain?"

"We all have our talents."

Eve's earlier suspicion grew. "Are you saying—?"

"That we can talk about it after you've gotten some sleep?" he interjected. "Absolutely."

As if on cue, a wave of exhaustion swept over her. She managed to yawn and glare at the same time.

Standing, Alec scooped her up gingerly from the couch and carried her to the bedroom. "Time to crash and heal."

"Sounds good to me," she mumbled.

He tucked her in and kissed her forehead. "I'll be here when you wake up."

"You better be." He hadn't been ten years ago.

"Damn straight. You're stuck with me now. Someone's got to keep that tight little ass of yours out of trouble."

Eve would have argued that he was the reason she'd been marked to begin with, but she fell asleep.



Copyright 2010 by S. J. Day

Artwork copyright 2010 by Gordon Crabb

Acquired and edited for Tor.com by Melissa Ann
Singer.

Books by S.J. Day

THE MARKED SERIES

Eve of Darkness
Eve of Destruction
Eve of Chaos

TOR·COM



Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe.
And related subjects.



More than just a publisher's website, Tor.com
is a venue for **original fiction, comics, and
discussion** of the entire field of SF and fantasy,
in all media and from all sources. Visit our site
today—and join the conversation yourself.