

*Angels hover, wings dipped in gold, halos strung with stars. Altars blaze with candlelight. Saints in alabaster robes stand
Overhead, watching, unmoving. Doing nothing.*

“Take my hand . . . come with me.”

*A spark fights to ignite, the devil fanning the flame, nurturing wicked cravings that might have been doused, had anyone noticed,
had anyone cared. It flickers and rises, glowing, the scent of sulfur assaulting the sacred air, spreading, reaching out, enfolding the
innocent.*

“Come, my love . . . I have something special for you.”

Fonts of water, blessed sacramental offerings do not extinguish flames, nor sate the acrid heat of desire.

“No one need know our secret . . .”

Evil burns within one’s soul, spirits tormented by unpardoned sins. Hell. Damnation.

“Don’t be afraid . . . I will take care of you.”

Night to day. Light, then dark. Cold, then comfort offered, soft and warm. Time passing, yet going nowhere. Someone waits.

“Be still, lovely boy . . . be still, my son.”

*Flames expanding, swirling, dancing, scorching, spreading, devouring. Crimson, gold, orange, and blue. A voice rises up. “Do you
hear us now?”*

Burn, fire, burn.

CHAPTER ONE

Dana Pierson stood, waiting, scanning knots of incoming travelers at Logan International, searching for Mia. The flight from Rome, according to the digital display board, had landed on schedule, and Mia should have passed through customs by now. Dana, concerned that her young guest from Italy might arrive with no one to greet her, had allowed herself plenty of time to drive from her Boston apartment to the airport. So, here she stood, waiting, a bundle of nerves tightening in her stomach. Arriving passengers continued to flow, moving quickly, voices echoing through the expanse of the terminal. Dana shifted her weight and adjusted the strap of the handbag slung over her shoulder.

She and Mia had kept in touch since they met four years ago, sending emails and even old-fashioned letters and notes tucked into birthday and Christmas cards. Dana was fond of Mia, yet their person-to-person time had been limited. Even when Dana visited Rome over a year ago to attend Giovanni and Gia's wedding, she'd had little time to spend alone with the girl.

Now, she would be taking a seventeen-year-old into her home for the school year, and she knew little to nothing about teenagers. She had teenage nephews and a pre-teen niece, but this was different. Logistically, at least, Dana felt prepared—new bedding on the foldout sofa, guest bathroom stocked with fluffy, recently purchased towels, fridge and freezer filled with foods she thought a teenage girl might enjoy. She'd done the prep work, and yet, the nerves . . .

She glanced at her watch, and when she looked up, she saw not Mia but someone else, someone she easily recognized, though she had not seen him in almost eight years. Heat shot up through her chest, warming her cheeks as she took a deep breath.

He was checking his cellphone, and then he gazed over, making eye contact, shaking his head in disbelief. He walked toward her, a perplexed look on his face.

"Dana Pierson," he said in greeting.

She felt as if she'd been socked in the chest. His voice alone could do that to her. She was already attempting to push away the clawing of self-inflicted doubt, the inner voice questioning, can I really do it? And now this. Him. Drew.

"Andrew Monaghan," she said.

"Dana Pierson," he said her name again. It was something between them. This calling each other by their full names. It had started as a joke but had become something different, verging on defiant.

She had refused to take his last name. No, refused wasn't the correct word. There was nothing malicious or disrespectful in her decision. She'd established a career. She had a byline. She didn't want to change her name.

He extended his hand. She felt her spine stiffen. Their final parting had nothing to do with names. She had pushed him away. Yet, they would always be connected by the loss they had shared, one they eventually were unable to share.

"It's been a while. You look good, Dana," he said, releasing her hand. "I like the blonde." She'd been brunette when they met, brunette through the extent of their marriage. And now, the blonde was mostly a way of masking the hints of gray.

“You, too, Drew.” His dark hair was touched with silver, and fine lines fanned out from the corners of his eyes. Maturity played well on Drew. “Meeting someone?” she asked, then glanced down at the wheeled travel bag and realized he was returning from a trip.

“Just spent the week in Paris,” he replied. “And you?”

“Picking up a guest.” She was about to explain about Mia when a woman appeared and slipped her arm through Drew’s. Had this woman been standing there all along? No, of course not. Dana would have noticed. Had she stopped off at the restroom while Drew forged ahead to find a ride into town?

“This is Amy Beck,” Drew introduced the woman as she held her hand out to Dana. “Amy, Dana Pierson.”

Dana waited for more as she took the woman’s hand. A description, an addendum, a qualifier? *This is Amy, my girlfriend, perhaps? My new wife. My lover. My business associate. My junior partner.*

But, this was all he offered, and the woman’s expression, both guarded and curious, told Dana that Amy knew who *she* was. Several years younger than Dana, though probably not at her best, Amy appeared slightly disheveled, weary from a long flight. She had a travel bag too, and it was obvious to Dana, as Amy and Drew exchanged a quick glance, that no further explanation was necessary—they’d just shared a week in the most romantic city in the world. But why was Drew here in Boston? He’d left Boston years ago.

They stood awkwardly, saying nothing, Amy’s arm laced through Drew’s. She had a round, pleasant face, an ample, curvy figure.

He asked, “You’re meeting someone?” Arriving passengers maneuvered around them, voices mingling, the sounds of footsteps and rolling bags bumping along the floor.

“A friend from Italy,” she replied. Drew’s cellphone rang. He reached into his pocket, nodded toward Dana.

“Well, nice to meet you,” Amy said, clutching her bag as Drew motioned toward the terminal exit, speaking rapidly into his phone.

Drew shot Dana a nod and wave. “Enjoy your guest,” he called out, phone still to his ear. “Good to see you.”

Dana stood, stunned for a moment, and then turned her gaze toward another incoming crowd as the roll and click of Drew and Amy’s bags, their steps, faded behind her.

Then, there she was. Mia coming toward her. She wore skinny jeans, cuffed in the latest style, short leather boots with heels that added a couple of inches to her five-foot-two. She was tiny, darling. Her long shiny hair, sleek and dark as raven feathers, fell over one shoulder. Mia adjusted her carry-on. She grinned, moving quickly, wheeling behind her a large bag, almost as big as Mia herself.

“Mia,” Dana exclaimed, taking the girl into an awkward embrace, encumbered by her bags. “Welcome to Boston.”

“I’m so happy to be here,” Mia said. “Long flight.” She sighed with exhaustion as Dana took over maneuvering the larger bag. The two chatted as they left the terminal and headed out toward Dana’s car. Dana inquired about Mia’s father, Leo, her grandmother, Estella, her great-uncle Zio Giovanni and Gia, and Fabrizio, a young man employed at the family vineyard for the past several years.

As they pulled out of the terminal parking, the image of Drew flicked through Dana’s mind, even as she attempted to push it aside.

She glanced over at Mia, who offered a smile, equally tentative and thrilled—a smile that seemed to announce, *I’m ready for this, are you?*

CHAPTER TWO

Mia stared into the darkness, fully awake. Earlier, after arriving in Boston, she'd felt so tired, but now, she found it impossible to sleep. The bed was reasonably comfortable, though Dana had said she would get her a real bed if it didn't work out. She'd explained that Mia's bedroom was formerly Dana's office, and the bed, not really a bed, but a foldout sofa used for her infrequent guests. Dana had moved her desk, a bookcase, and most of the file cabinets out of the room and set up a small desk for Mia to use.

Mia shifted from back to side, adjusting herself, aware it wasn't the foldout bed that was making it difficult to sleep. It was the conversation they'd had over dinner. Yet, it wasn't what Mia had said, but what she hadn't said that was causing this restlessness.

Dana's mom had invited them for Sunday dinner, and Dana told Mia they were all looking forward to meeting her, especially her nephews and nieces, Kiki, Olivia, Quinn, and Zac, who was the same age as Mia.

After a while, she sat up and reached for her cellphone on the file cabinet Dana had left in the room to serve as a nightstand. During dinner, to be polite, Mia had left the phone here. Then, exhausted after her long day of travel, getting settled in, Dana going over their schedule for the next couple of days, she'd fallen into bed as soon as she stepped back into her room, hadn't even bothered to check for messages or texts. Now, wide-eyed and fully awake, she clicked on her phone and noticed a message. It was from Zac, and he'd sent it about three hours ago.

She opened it with a tingle of guilt. *You here?* She should have told Dana that she and Zac had already met. Not really *met*, but they had connected online. She was curious after Dana mentioned him in her emails.

So, she'd found him on a couple of her favorite social media sites. He was about as cute as a guy could get. Dark hair slicked back like some guy out of the fifties. In some of his pictures, he wore a baseball cap. Forward or backward, depending on his mood, he'd explained to her in one of his early messages. His eyes were dark, and his smile, a little bit naughty, turned up ever so slightly in the corners in a sly way. Showing beautiful sexy teeth. Could teeth be sexy? And a single dimple on the left cheek. She'd shown some of his pictures to her girlfriends in Italy, and they were all eager to hear if he was as gorgeous in person.

After she'd initially checked him out digitally, she sent him a message and introduced herself. He messaged back, told her his aunt had mentioned her. He said he liked her profile picture.

This had started a friendship of sorts. Maybe she should have mentioned it to Dana, but it wasn't like they were doing anything wrong. She and Zac hadn't exchanged anything improper, no sexy pictures or inappropriate words. He said her English was really good. How did she know all the latest American slang? He asked how she learned to speak English so well, which made her laugh because he'd never heard her speak, and she sent a smiley face emoji and said she watched a lot of American

TV shows. That was partially true. That's how she updated her vocabulary to talk the way people in America actually talked. But she'd also been studying English in school since she was five.

He said he admired her, that American kids could barely speak English. He said he was taking French for his language credits. He'd already taken two semesters, and about all he could say was *parlez-vous francais?* He asked if she spoke French, and when she replied, "Oui," he said maybe she could help him out. She liked that idea. She could already imagine study sessions with Zac, though they would be going to different schools.

She stared at her phone now, thinking it was too late to reply. But maybe he'd still be up. It was Friday night. He might be out with his friends.

On a private message, she answered, "Settled in. Your Aunt Dana served cheeseburgers for dinner. Is that all American kids eat? Will I have to eat cheeseburgers every night for the next year?"

He messaged right back. "Pizza, tacos, maybe some Chinese. Or Sushi. You like Sushi?"

"Hate it."

"What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Dana's got a tour set up for me. The Freedom Trail?"

"If you're into history, it could be fun. Follow a red line on the sidewalk and learn some history."

"I've already been studying the history of Boston. I'm going to be here for the school year, so I want to know more about my new city." As she hit *send*, she wondered if this sounded too nerdy.

"Good place to start then. When will I get to meet you?"

"Sunday at your grandmother's."

"Great eats at Gma's!"

"Looking forward to it."

"Really?" Smiley face.

"Really."

"You'll get to meet little bro Quinn, my sister Olivia, and the fabulous Miss Kiki."

"Fun!" She hoped that didn't come across as sarcastic but then realized it might be better if Zac did think she was being flippant. Truthfully, she thought dinner with Dana's family would be fun. She didn't have any brothers or sisters, and Zac had filled her in on his through earlier messages. Quinn, he'd told her, was shy but a good kid, and Olivia—he hoped Olivia would behave herself! She tended to be a little pouty. Kiki, he said, was both adorable and spoiled. "Do you know what that means?" he'd asked Mia.

She replied that she was an only child and had been accused by some of always getting her way. "Is that what spoiled means?"

"So, you are a brat?" Zac had asked.

"You'll have to find out yourself," she'd replied. "Oh, and I'm also adorable."

"Yes, I can see that," Zac came back.

Mia *was* looking forward to meeting Zac's family, even his grandmother, but she didn't want him to think she was totally uncool. In Italy, she lived with her father, her grandmother, and until last year, Zio Giovanni. He'd been living in Rome when he was a priest but had retired to the family estate in Montalcino, then split his time between the family home and Rome when Gia Veronesi had reentered his life. That was quite the family scandal but a delightful addition to Mia's usually boring life.

Thinking of her family, Mia felt the tiniest bit homesick. She'd just arrived, and she hadn't anticipated that she'd miss her family on the very first night. But, she did.

It was a dream Dana hadn't had in years, not with the vividness she was experiencing now. Drew was young, his hair dark, without grey. He stood beside Dana, hand on her shoulder. She could feel his touch, but oddly she could also see him because she floated above the scene, an observer, not a participant. Yet, the younger Dana sat in a chair, the old rocking chair she'd inherited from her

grandmother many years ago. She'd given it away to a cousin. Dana couldn't bear to sit and rock, arms empty. But in the dream, she was holding an infant. Joel looked up at her, eyes wide. He reached for his mother just as the phone rang.

She didn't want to lose this moment, but the familiar, oddly melodic, yet irritating sound of her cellphone was forcing her to release the dream. If she could stay a moment longer, it would silence itself. *Damn phone.*

Through squinty eyes, she focused on her nightstand, phone plugged in, charging, still ringing. As she reached for it, a brief flash of panic shot through her. *Mom?* But as her eyes adjusted, she could see from the contact name that it was Kip.

"Kip, what's up?" she asked groggily.

"You awake?" he asked. It came out *you wake?*

Dana and Kip Connor had worked as part of a team of investigative journalists off and on for over half of Dana's career, and recently, the two had collaborated on several articles. Sometimes when they were working on a story, Kip would call at an odd hour, particularly if he had some leads, something that couldn't wait until the following day. They were currently considering a project on fraud and abuse in eldercare. Surely this would not warrant a late-night call.

"Well, I am now." Rubbing her temple, pushing her fingers through her hair, Dana thought of another reason Kip might call at this odd hour, had on occasion called. "What's up? It's one-forty-seven," she added, taking in the bright red digital numbers on the clock perched on her nightstand. "In the morning."

"There's been another fire," he said. His words slurred—it sounded like he said *a mother fire*—confirming Dana's second notion as to why Kip was calling. It was Friday night, and he'd been drinking.

She was tempted to ask if it was a *mother fucking fire*, but instead, she said, "Another fire?"

"The freakin' frames are shooting out of—goddamn it. Did you hear that?"

Dana heard something in the background, a muffled conversation.

"It's just on my way home," he said, "and we saw these flames shootin' up in the air, so I ask the driver to drive by real slow, and now we're stopped, and we're watchin'."

"We?" Dana asked. "You and . . .?"

"Uber driver. Didn't you hear me?" He spoke with a broken rhythm. She could sense his effort in putting his thoughts and words together, which was difficult considering his obvious excitement mixed with alcohol. "I said there's 'nother fire. Oh, shit!"

A siren wailed in the background. Faint at first, then louder and louder, getting closer.

"*Another* fire? Where are you, Kip?"

"I'm gettin' out," he said, and then, voice fading as if he wasn't even speaking to her, "Wait here."

Dana was about to say *I'm here* when she heard another garbled voice in the background. "Where are you, Kip?" Dana asked again.

"At church." He laughed. "I told you. St. Barbara's," he added, though he hadn't, and then again, he was talking to someone else, but his words were faint and unclear as if he were holding the phone a foot away from his mouth. "Looks like all hell's breakin' loose." She could hear him again, and then he laughed, though it wasn't a *ha, ha, isn't that funny* laugh, but a deep-throated peel of gleeful delight. "The fires of hell. Dante's Inferno." His voice was rising.

"St. Barbara's? Didn't the archdiocese finally sell St. Barbara's?"

"Sure did," Kip replied quickly.

St. Barbara's had been in the news recently, finally sold after a twelve-year vigil by the parishioners, determined to keep the church. Dana had no idea how many fires were reported in Boston each year, but she'd guessed there were hundreds, maybe thousands, most of them not even making the news unless there was substantial damage or loss of life. This one, because of the recent headlines, would

likely make the news.

“You said *another* fire?” Dana heard something loud that she couldn’t identify over the phone. A burst, a blast, a detonation.

Kip said, “Goddamn, one of the windows just exploded.” Dana imagined firefighters breaking windows. Or beautiful stained glass, bursting into a million pieces from the force and power of the flames, the heat. Beautiful colors, exploding like fireworks in the dark, then fading and falling to the earth.

“Couple firetrucks here,” Kip said. “WBZ van just pulled up. I’ll call you back.” Then he was gone.

Dana replaced her phone on the nightstand and lay, wide awake now. She rose and went to the window. In the distance, a plume of smoke rose into the night sky, to the east, the direction of St. Barbara’s. She opened the window and took a whiff, but she could not smell the fire. Not yet.

St. Barbara’s? Though the building had just been sold, it hadn’t been used as a Catholic Church for over a dozen years. When the archdiocese barred the doors and slapped a FOR SALE sign on the building, the congregation had rebelled, set up a vigil, and appealed to the Vatican Court to reinstate the official parish of St. Barbara’s. To no avail.

As Dana stared out into the night, she recalled a friend’s wedding at St. Barbara’s and pictured the lovely marble altar, the colorful stained glass. From her window, she saw only billows of smoke.

She returned to her bed but couldn’t sleep, her mind abuzz. Kip had said there was another fire? What was he talking about? Then she remembered there had been a fire at St. Aloysius about a month ago. She and Kip had never seriously discussed it, other than a fleeting mention of the small fire that had quickly been extinguished with minor damage. It occurred in mid-July, the middle of summer. It hadn’t warranted great concern. That church, too, had been closed down for at least ten years, though Dana believed it was still owned by the archdiocese. As far as she knew, it hadn’t been sold. In a rundown neighborhood, it wasn’t the greatest location for a commercial enterprise. She’d heard it had been used by the homeless to keep out of the weather, and the fire was attributed to someone *camping* inside. The fire had done little damage, other than charring a couple of old wooden pews. Barely a news bleep, though Dana remembered now a quick, fleeting thought she’d had even back then—had it been cold enough in mid-July to require a fire for warmth?

She must have dozed off. When she awoke and checked the time, it was 3:54. She snuggled back in bed and lay watching the red numbers on her digital clock flip over. 3:57 . . . 4:11 . . . 4:24 . . . 4:30. Then the phone rang again.

“Looks like it’s under control, but substantial damage,” Kip said. “Not much left but a stone shell of a building.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Not that I’m aware. It’s the middle of the night, so probably not.” His speech was much clearer and quicker than during their earlier call. He still sounded excited, though relatively sober, as if during the almost three hours since his last call, the heat and excitement of the fire had drawn the alcohol out of him. Like a simmering stew.

“The other fire you were talking about,” Dana said. “St. Aloysius? That church has been closed down, too.”

“Bingo,” Kip replied. “St. Al’s. But, here’s an interesting little tidbit. I overheard one of the firefighters say this was the third church fire this summer.”

“Seriously?” she asked. “Catholic Church?”

“Not sure, and the firefighters aren’t exactly accessible now, but I’m gonna stick around, see what I can find out.”

“The fire at St. Al’s was started by some vagrants,” she said. “Any chance of that at St. Barbara’s?”

“Don’t know,” he replied quickly.

“Take a good look around,” she said. “If *someone* started the fire, they could be watching right now.

Is there a crowd of onlookers?"

"Hell, yes," Kip answered.

"Why don't you scan the crowd with your phone."

"Good idea." She thought he might hang up, take some pictures, but he kept talking. "Big crowd. Looks like mostly neighbors." She heard more voices in the background, but she couldn't make out the words. "Why don't you hop in your little car and come over," Kip suggested.

Dana swallowed, rubbed her eyes, swung her legs over the side of her bed. She stood, stepped to her dresser, grabbed her jeans from the lower drawer, started to slip them on, cellphone pressed between her shoulder and ear. *On my way*, she was about to say when she realized her situation, her life had changed completely in the past twelve hours.

Surely Mia didn't require a babysitter, but it would be a terrible, thoughtless gesture for Dana to leave her alone on her first night.

"Damn. I can't," she told Kip.

"Why not? Got someone there with you?" he added with a chuckle. As if she had some sleepover-romance thing going, Dana thought. Over the years, Kip had attempted to set Dana up with his friends, but it never worked out. Kip, also single, wasn't great with relationships either, and it was almost a joke between them. They were a good team, professionally speaking. They both agreed they would be an awful couple, something that likely contributed to their continuing success. They were colleagues and friends.

"Mia arrived this afternoon," Dana said.

"Oh, that's right," he said thoughtfully. "Well, I'll be in touch, then." Dana could hear the disappointment in his voice. "I'll let you know if there's anything to . . ." His voice was fading. "Gotta go," he said urgently.

"Call me," Dana replied.

"Will do."