



CHAPTER 1

INK STIRS

Angels shouldn't have questions.
Lancello had only one—
and it threatened to break him.
His quill scraped along the parchment, recording the life of a man
worn thin with lies, secrets, and small betrayals.
Another trumpet sounded through Heaven.
With it, wet ink lifted from the scroll like smoke.
“No. Not this one.”
His jaw worked as hallelujahs thundered across the heights.
The man wasn't meant to bow the knee—wasn't worthy of mercy.
One surrender, and Heaven rejoiced,
as if a lifetime of dark deeds had never happened.
Lancello would not.
How could guilt mean nothing at all?
His quill quivered above the parchment, trying to contain the fury.
God deserved worship, not this.
His fist curled.
Knuckles found the desk.

The thud dropped a colder thought into him:
Was this how angels fell?
The quill slipped.
Ink spread across the wood like a wound.
He stared at it, unmoving.
What use was a scribe who burned at every salvation?
His gaze fell to the scroll he had kept on his desk for centuries—as a reminder.
Light glistened on the name it bore: Namor.
The thief who had hung beside their Lord.
One plea—
and the permanence of his ink dissolved,
undone by a promise that left the scroll gleaming:
You will be with Me in Paradise.
The cross never stopped doing that, as if sin itself could be unwritten.
His throat tightened as he looked at the evidence piled around him—
the Storehouse of Time rising in pillars of sunlit stone, aisles upon
aisles of parchment, history stacked in quiet towers of ink.
He had written many of them himself, read the rest, then read them
all again,
chasing answers until the search itself had lost hope.
“That scroll doesn’t let you go, does it?”
Haniel leaned against an arch, calm as dusk. There was a gentleness
in him, deeper since Gethsemane.
Lancello looked away.
Another trumpet call rolled down from the Mount, and a shout of
celebration followed.
A chill cut through Lancello. Worse each time.
Haniel’s face shifted. “Will you not rejoice?”
Lancello lifted Namor’s scroll and tucked it among the others. His
hands were steady. Inside, he was not.
“Rejoice.” The word came out sharper than he meant it. “That
someone finally did what they should never have failed to do? That

the undeserving enter glory?”
Haniel stepped closer.
“Is that truly how you see it?”
Lancello’s wing twitched, as if it hurt.
“I don’t know,” he said more quietly. “I don’t seem to know much of
anything anymore. I’ve searched. There are no answers.”
Haniel’s hand settled on his shoulder.
“Perhaps the answers aren’t where you’ve been looking.”
Lancello’s gaze lifted toward the crystal stair that rose through mist
and fire to the Throne.
He should have felt awe.
He always had.
But dread pooled in his bones instead—heavy and too familiar.
Father would already know.
“Go ask,” Haniel urged.
Lancello lifted a foot,
and froze.
How could he bring a question to the Throne that no angel should
ever need to ask?
Running from it had only made the ache deeper.
He forced himself to the base of the great staircase where waterfall
mist curled through the branches of the Tree of Life.
He had missed this place.
Missed Father.
If not now, he may never find the courage to climb it again.
His breath faltered—but he stepped.
Light pulsed beneath his foot,
the Mount answering him with a welcome.
With every stride, guilt dragged heavier through his wings, as if the
light beneath his feet wanted him to stand straighter than he could.
What if he had already broken Father’s heart?
The air thickened with myrrh and cedar. Ancient trees gave way to
jagged rock engulfed in white fire: fire that left no place to hide.

By the time he reached the Sea of Glass, his courage had emptied.
He crumpled to his knees.
The sea reflected him back: his fear, his fracture, the thing he had tried not to become.
Then warmth.
Unexpected.
Unbearable.
Father's presence gathered him close as breath. Glory's fire lit his wings from within.
"My boy."
The kindness in that voice shattered him.
He had braced for rebuke. Not tenderness.
"You've been gone too long, My son." No accusation, only longing.
"Come closer. Ask Me anything."
Lancello tried. Tears stole his words.
He needed this more than he could bear.
"The mystery," Father said, answering the question he couldn't bring himself to ask, "is not kept in ink or parchment, but in living flesh."
Only a few words, yet Lancello felt them shift his heart, like a lock giving way.
"To understand it, you must walk the Earth," Father went on, "and witness My mercy at work in a human life."
Lancello's head snapped up. "Me? The Earth?"
"There is a girl there. My little Jayjay," the name carried warmth, and something else—sorrow, perhaps. "A tender soul I have called to a great work.
She believes her calling lies in ashes."
In Father's open hand lay a small parcel.
"Will you take her this gift?" He held it out. "Help her find her voice... and her life will help you find your answer."
"Yes, Father... of—of course." Lancello rose, taking the gift.
The sounds of Heaven thinned.
The parcel felt heavier in his hands.

Light gave way to shadow, myrrh to exhaust, glory to the small hum of refrigerators and traffic,
until he stood at the door of an apartment—far below the heavens—where a girl was not expecting Heaven's knock.

Jasmine's Apartment – Present Day

Jasmine sat back, reading the final line. Her finger hovered.
A few careful words and suddenly the sentence breathed, as if it finally knew what it wanted to say.
She felt the small satisfaction of it.
Then remembered the words were wasted on *The Analysis of Standardized Filing Protocol Efficacy in Municipal Archives*.
The ping of her inbox pulled her eye.
Subject: Rent Due.
The cursor blinked like an alarm. Her sentence collapsed under it.
Thesis number fourteen, another ghostwritten dream, this one polished to shine beneath Dr. Fanning's name.
Her coffee had gone cold hours ago. No time for another.
A knock was the second intrusion, soft, insistent.
She froze. She wasn't expecting anyone.
Another rap, a little firmer this time.
The room seemed smaller, the air pressing close.
"Please don't be early," she muttered, pushing back her chair.
When she opened the door, light spilled in, too warm for winter sun.
A courier stood there, hoodie under a loose vest, his expression too searching for a stranger.
She blinked.
For a moment everything felt... unusual.
Then a car passed behind him, tires hissing on asphalt, and the feeling broke.
She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Can I help you?"
"Delivery for a Jasmine?"

“Yes.” She signed, took the small parcel.
He blinked, as if tugging his thoughts back from far away.
“Thank you?” she managed, closing the door with a smile. It clicked shut. She stared at the knob. *Odd.*
A small envelope was taped to the parcel in her hand.
She peeled it open.
Jayjay—it’s time.
Only that.
But her whole world tilted.
The note felt heavy. No one ever called her that, except—
Is it possible?
Jasmine’s fingers brushed the edge of the parcel and tension coiled inside her, as if a door she’d nailed shut years ago had shifted once on its hinges.
Hope flared... then panic crushed it.
She set the parcel down too quickly, and backed away as if distance alone could muffle whatever truth waited inside.
She’d learned early how to hide her pain: tidy it up, smile, pretend it wasn’t there.
It had kept her safe.
The words rang in her mind. *It’s time.*
No. It couldn’t be.
The cursor blinked. *Fanning’s thesis!*
Her fingers flew; the printer buzzed, spitting pages.
While her hands worked, her eyes kept straying to the parcel.
Not now. Finish this. Bills don’t pause for mysteries.
But what if—
A streak of sunlight crept across her desk. What if it was Him? After the ashes...
Her pulse quickened.
No. What right did she have to hope?
Her mind slipped backward, three years earlier, dragging her there as if time itself refused to let her escape:

the cold plastic chair warming beneath her excitement,
coffee and ambition thick in the air,
Anne Hargrove on the stage, silver threading her auburn hair.
Her book *Words as Witness: Writing the Divine in a Fractured World* had been a revelation to Jasmine.
“Here’s the truth,” Anne said. “Writing isn’t safe. It’s a calling that costs. You pour your soul onto the page, and it might shatter you, or save someone.”
Jasmine’s pen had flown.
When she asked, “What if the story feels too big?” Anne had smiled.
“Then you write it anyway, kid. Raw and real as it is.”
Later she’d pressed a card into Jasmine’s hand. *Send me a draft.*
It felt like a promise all the way home.
Who could have guessed it would end in ashes?
A knock shattered the memory.
Five past five.
She gathered the pages, tied them with twine, braced herself, and opened the door.
Dr. Fanning: immaculate, citrus perfume, white Mercedes idling.
Jasmine handed over the thesis.
“You’re a darling,” Fanning said.
“Good luck—” Jasmine began.
The door was already closed.
Then, silence.
Another dream delivered; her own buried.
She reached for the kettle, and saw the parcel catching a thin ribbon of lamplight.
Still there. Still waiting.
She stared, daring it to blink first.
Then walked away, came back, walked away again. A sigh.
Wanting it hurt; not wanting it hurt more.
She’d spent years editing other people’s words because her own were too dangerous.

Jasmine peeled the wrapping open.
The paper's crackle jolted her frayed nerves.
Inside an ebony box, nestled in a bed of satin, lay a fountain pen:
white and gold, as if it carried the glow of promise itself.
It was beautiful.
Her hands shook.
But it couldn't be time. Not after what Anne had said—
The memory came flooding back, unwanted but unstoppable:
Anne's invitation had kindled a hope.
She'd sent the draft.
Weeks later, one night in her apartment, the match flared too fast.
She held the flame above the crumpled manuscript in the grate.
Firelight danced on the walls.
She froze.
What am I doing?
The flame crept toward her fingers. The match slipped and hissed
out harmlessly.
Her manuscript lay like an offering on an altar, her heart exposed on
paper.
Coffee stains. Midnight tears. Prayers poured into ink.
Anne's reply still glared from the laptop:
 Jaz,
 You have a voice, raw and reaching, and that's rare. But
 this isn't ready.
 You write about things too sacred to touch: a God who
 kneels,
 a love that bleeds.
 Some might think it presumptuous, too intimate.
 People will read and mock, or worse—believe you, and if
 life doesn't match your promises, shatter.
 It's reckless. Shelve it. Write something safer.
 Grace isn't a wildfire; it's a steady lamp.
 Anne

Jasmine couldn't read it. And couldn't stop reading it.
A chill set in, but her denial lingered, as if the room accepted it was
over before she could.
She shut the laptop hard enough to rattle the cup beside it.
Tears came anyway.
Why had she believed she could write this?
Breath quivered into shaking lungs.
Her eyes fell to her Bible. *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew
you.*
She closed it too.
What madness had made her believe God had called her?
She struck a second match.
This time her hand did not tremble.
Flame met paper.
The cover caved, curling inward. She had loved that opening line.
Three weeks before it finally settled—before it began to feel like Him.
Now the words dissolved, taking the only proof she had ever tried to
say anything at all.
Ink blistered and turned to ghosts.
Smoke rose.
Jasmine knelt, watching her dreams blacken and fall: soft and
soundless as dying petals.
Maybe Anne was right: Jasmine was simply too much.
There.
It was undone.
She stared into emptiness.
“Good,” she whispered. “It's easier this way.”
She didn't know anyone had heard her.
Didn't know he was always there—Skylock—her unseen guardian,
his wings sagging beneath a blow obedience would not let him defend.
He blew gently. A single charred scrap drifted up and landed by her
knee. She did not see it. Not yet.
The memory of that night snapped like a brittle thread.

Jasmine blinked.
The pen lay patiently.
But she couldn't.
Life had taught her this much: wounds didn't die, they waited.
"It's time," she said, trying to believe it.
Hope and dread surged together; always tangled, she didn't know
which frightened her more.
She couldn't go there again, not now, not when she finally had her
life back.
Her pulse hammered.
Her fingers tingled.
She was spiraling.
She grabbed her Bible for an anchor.
Something slipped free and fluttered to the floor: a scorched
fragment, curled at the edges.
A ghost from the fire.
She'd tried to throw it away once, but grief, or grace, had made her
keep it.
It had been tucked beside the verse she once claimed as her call.
She lifted the pen. Gold thread wound along the barrel.
Her fingers brushed raised letters: Jeremiah 1:5-7
The same verse.
Again.
"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you..."
He *had* spoken the first time.
So He did want her to tell what she'd seen that day.
Fear rose, but beneath it, something fiercer.
"I wasn't dreaming."
The pen felt heavy.
It felt like home.
The nib glided across the clean page like a breath finally released.
The first sob startled her.
She sank to the floor as years of restraint shattered.

Tears came unguarded. They wrung her heart out until the ache tired.
When it was spent, she said one small prayer:
"Okay, Lord... if it is time, I'll try.
Even if it hurts again.
For You I will."
Her words dissolved into the quiet.
Heaven was listening.