



Sins of the Flesh

by J.F.Penn

Excerpted from [A Thousand Fiendish Angels](#)

I left the hysterical housekeeper downstairs with my partner and strode up the wide staircase to the first floor, my feet sinking into the plush carpet, my hand clasp the burnished bronze railing to speed my journey upwards. The call had come in towards the end of our shift and I was keen to assess the scene quickly so I could get out of uniform and into the bar as fast as possible. Since Jeannie had left, I could no longer bear our meager apartment, a constant reminder of the myriad failings of my career and tainted love.

As I walked upwards, I felt a pang of jealousy as I took in the riches of this man's kingdom. His smallest closet probably contained more than everything I own, I thought, as I reached the top of the stairs and paused to catch my breath. But even the richest man could not escape what must come to us all, and affluence meant nothing to a corpse.

The stink of death reached me as I turned towards a partially open door made of dark oak, intricately carved with symbols of alchemy and superstition. I bent to look closer and found every sign of protection against evil spirits carved there: the inverted horseshoe, the Islamic blue and white charm to ward off the evil eye, and a Catholic saint holding up a cross against Satan's encroachment in his right hand, surrounded by the letters C S P B. A Jewish mezuzah of teal Venetian glass was nailed to the doorframe, its Holy verses on parchment scroll denying destructive agents access, according to the promises of Kabbalah mysticism. This man had clearly tried everything to stop supernatural forces from reaching him, but the stench told me that death had stolen in here despite his attempts at metaphysical protection.

I was no stranger to the dead but now I felt the need for that extra ounce of courage, for a curious dread had taken hold of me, a leaden coldness that spread through my limbs. I thought with longing of the hip flask hidden in the vehicle below, craving the swig of vodka to help me focus my mind on the task ahead. I didn't want to see what was beyond this door, but I crushed down the insidious fear and reached forwards to push the door fully open.

The door creaked and wind chimes jangled to scare away malicious spirits, the sound bringing an incongruous sense of life to the inert atmosphere. I put my hand to my nose, trying unsuccessfully to mask the foul odor of voided bowels and

rotting flesh that pervaded the room. My sweeping gaze took in the ornate richness of the room and then the dead body splayed wide on the antique four-poster bed hung with embroidered curtains. On white satin sheets, now hideously stained with bodily fluids, lay a naked man, bulging flesh on a morbidly obese body lying in a vile slush of his own foul emissions. Christopher Faerwald had been a famous author who made millions from his novels, many of them adapted for the big screen, but he hadn't been seen in years. Now I understood how his physical disfigurement had turned him into a recluse, avoiding the public eye.

Accustomed to the stink now, I moved closer to the bed to examine the corpse. Flies rose into the air at my approach, swollen from feeding, their buzzing indignant at my interruption of their feast. Every inch of the man's bloated skin was covered with tattooed words. They may have been legible once, when his skin was young and taut, but now they had morphed into grotesque shapes, open vowels that threatened to swallow and sharp consonants, each cut into his flesh. The ink used to inscribe them was a dark crimson stain and I shuddered at the terrible thought that the words were written in his own blood. But surely this must be a fantastical idea awoken by this macabre den, for the walls were covered in crucifixes and painted with pentacles, and ancient holy books were cluttered in piles on the floor. Faerwald had clearly retreated here to fight his own demons, locked into some kind of madness brought about by his own imagination.

The man's face was a rictus of horror, a gaping grimace as if he had witnessed the denizens of Hell streaming out of the maw of Hades and died of terror to look upon them. A thin stiletto knife and a mirror lay next to him on the bed, as if they had fallen from his hands. It looked like he had been trying to carve more words into his forehead, perhaps even as he died. I could barely read the disfigured flesh but it looked like the beginnings of a prayer for deliverance. As I examined him more closely, I could see that strips of flesh had been torn from his limbs, leaving weeping open wounds that now crawled with maggots. It looked as if he had died in the middle of being tortured by some perverse criminal. But what could anyone want of this man other than his vast wealth, yet there were no signs of forced entry and nothing had been taken, according to the housekeeper.

I glanced around the room, the opulence a reflection of the rest of this grand property, dominated by the occult fetishes of his apparent obsession. The dying sun flooded through a pair of large bay windows, suffusing the room with a ruby glow and a touch of flame. Outside, it was darkening now and I could see thick purple clouds gathering like blood blisters across the sky, the beginnings of an unseasonal storm evident in the rain that pattered against the window. A wide wooden desk looked out towards a small church that squatted at the edge of a wood, perhaps Faerwald's personal chapel, since it lay within his vast estate out here on the edges of civilization. Apparently he had purchased this place before he rose to the heights of popular success and bought luxury properties around the world. Personally, I'd rather

be on the beaches of Monaco than holed up to die here in obscurity, but he had been obsessed with the place.

To the right of the desk, one whole wall was devoted to erotic images, with gorgeous art morphing into pornography, and I couldn't help but look closer. Sandstone carvings from the Hindu temple of Khajuraho depicted orgies of debauchery, with bodies entwined in yogic poses as they thrust and writhed together. A set of art-house black and white photographs revealed scenes from a dungeon, as scarred and whipped bodies were soothed by gentle tongues.

Amongst the frenzied sensory overload, a small print caught my eye, portraying naked human figures swept into a hellish vortex, embracing each other with desire even as they were sucked into oblivion. William Blake's Circle of the Lustful, I read in the text below, and I couldn't help but glance back at the obscene figure spread-eagled on the bed, pushing away the repugnant image of this bloated man engaged in carnal acts. But beneath the mound of flesh, fattened from years of gluttony and excess, Faerwald's bones were aristocratic, although he was now a shade of the handsome man he had once been, a magnet for beautiful women, and envied by men for his success. I picked up a Hollywood-style photo frame from the desk, the picture within showing him in a slim-fit white tuxedo dancing a waltz, his strong arms wrapped around a stunning young woman, who smiled up at him with cornflower-blue eyes. I imagined them together, her shining blonde hair a veil that hid her eyes as they darkened with wanton pleasure. Envy surged within me and the need to drink almost drove me back to the car, desperate to tip even the tiniest dribble into my mouth. I pushed down the cravings and turned to examine the desk, using my pen to flick open a leather diary that sat in pride of place. On the final page, Faerwald's last words stared up at me, written in the same dark red ink, but diseased with tinges of purple and rusty clots that stained the thick ivory paper.

She comes tonight to claim what I promised in exchange so long ago.

I didn't believe her words back then, didn't think at all, but what she offered has come to pass and yet still I struggle to believe my soul can be so taken from me. I know I must pay the price for my sin, but if I can, I will prevent another from falling as far as I have done. With no self-indulgent pleasure bloating a soul to feed upon, she must sink back to the depths from which I summoned her. I have hidden the book so she will have to sleep again. It is buried, and I am finished, but perhaps this last act will earn me a sliver of redemption.

The diary page was signed with his name and yesterday's date, the handwriting measured, sane and deliberate, but the words read like one of his novels. Was he living within the realms of fantasy when he passed so violently into the next world? Looking over again at the man's horrified face, I knew that his agony had not been mere imagination.

My eyes were drawn out the window to the church again, for he had sat here looking at it when he wrote those last words, and I felt a prickle of sensation, as if those murky portals called to me. Could he have buried this strange book within? Something dark began to uncoil within me and I felt compelled to delve deeper, for I knew that I would exchange much to experience the riches this man had enjoyed.

Running back down the stairs, I called out to my partner that I had to investigate further evidence outside. He shouted after me but I ignored him, caught up in the sensation that I must get to the chapel, and that time was of the essence. Part of me wondered at this desperate insistence but I felt possessed by something beyond my control. As I stepped outside, the light rain that had been falling morphed into an icy sleet and the heavy purple clouds above me split open with lightning. Thunder rolled across the desolate space between the house and the church and I was buffeted violently as opposing winds clashed all around. I pulled my coat tighter, fighting against Nature as if I was pushing a great weight ahead of me into a squall sent from Hell itself to tear this sombre valley apart.

Each step across the open ground was a huge effort, but when I finally made it to the lych-gate at the entrance of the tiny churchyard the storm had eased a little, the rain lighter now, although the wind still howled around me. The church was old and partly ruined, with stone blocks that had fallen to the grass below, and eroded gargoyles hanging skewed from the edges of broken masonry. The present facade seemed to be built upon a more archaic structure, stones that had perhaps been worshipped as pagan gods in the days before Christ. I had imagined that I was running to sanctuary but now I felt that the miasma of the place was oppressive and malevolent. Yet I still wanted to enter, my curiosity deeply roused to search for the mysterious book.

Stepping carefully along the overgrown rocky path, I noticed that the plants blooming in the churchyard were withered, all color leached from them. Yet they still covered the earth thickly, rising up from around the edges of tombstones as if growing from the bones beneath. The fury of the storm surged again, crackling with energy, wind whipping round in tornado spirals, lifting the heads of strange albino flowers to the sky. Dust and ashes blew into my eyes, painting the scene with the desolate grey of mourning. I rubbed them frantically to clear my vision and hurried into the porch, my face brushing against something soft as I stumbled out of the wet gloom. I reeled back to see a dead crow hung by the neck above me, blue-black feathers still adhering to decaying flesh, its eyes open and unseeing.

Pulling at the great door, I found it opened with a sigh, as the wind was sucked inside, filling the void with the desolation of chill air. I stepped through, my footfall stirring dust from the floor, the noise echoing around the deserted building, which absorbed the sound hungrily. The light inside was an amethyst haze from the heavy storm clouds that barely penetrated the nave through intricate stained glass windows. Looking up at them, I discerned the images of tortured saints, martyred in

the most ingenious ways for the glory of their God. This place seemed to venerate death, rather than eternal life, and ahead of me, a life-size crucifix hung behind the altar, Christ's face a skeletal version of the dead Faerwald, as if the Son of God could see what Hell awaited him beyond the veil.

My eyes dropped to the altar, draped in cloth that had once been pure white but which now hung in dirty, dismal tatters. As the holiest place in the building, it was the most fitting place to bury such a book so I walked towards it, across flagstones carved with the names of those buried here. On one broad surface, the names of the dead ran into each other like the broken words on Faerwald's body, a mass grave of victims who perished together in some ancient plague. I usually felt a calm peace within churches, a sense of something holy, but this place was malignant and hungry, taking each breath faster than I could exhale it.

A pair of candlesticks coated in melted wax rested on the altar, the gold of their surface dulled by dust, but I could just make out the twisted figures of crucified angels, tortured by the implements of martyrdom, their mouths open and calling to a God who had deserted them. This was a strange church indeed where such objects were venerated, but I was compelled to discover more. In the centre of the altar was a box, a tabernacle for the Host, the bread of the Eucharist turned into Christ's body for the consumption of the faithful. I pushed the lid open to see a mass of crawling maggots within, their swollen white bodies wriggling over each other to get at the crumbs of wafer, an unholy miracle of rotting sustenance somehow sustained in this unnatural place.

Sensing that the book was close, I knelt down at the altar and a momentary chink appeared in the madness that possessed me. My resolve wavered and I knew I should just walk away now, leave the church and be done with this place, but other thoughts intruded. My sordid apartment, the fighting neighbors that disturbed my sleep, the debts I owed at the bar and the need to top up my vodka supply ever more frequently. To walk away now was only to return to that life, but this book was something precious, valuable enough to be hidden here, a secret that perhaps I could unlock, or sell at the very least.

My mind made up, I crawled around the altar, feeling the flagstones for any evidence that they had been lifted. The dust and grime of years layered my frantic fingers as I searched, and finally, I found a place that had been brushed clean. The flagstone was carved with a strange symbol, a curling filigree of loops ending in a forked demon's tail, crossed through with a shaft and Roman numerals, all surrounded by a roundel of letters. It was cracked through the center, with a chink at the side, and as my heart pounded with excitement, I levered it open.

In the violet light that touched the stone with a sickly haze I saw the book, and immediately I felt a visceral desire to possess it, an emotional wave that overwhelmed me with infatuation. My hands clutched at the book, pulling it to my chest like a long-lost child. The cover was soft leather, a patchwork of colors

reminiscent of the varieties of human skin tone and it smelled of ancient herbs, a heady scent of rich tombs and incense disguising the darker note of death.

It opened beneath my eager hands and I tried to read the first words aloud. They were strange-sounding in my mouth, but within a few lines I could not hold back the torrent that flooded from me. It was as if the book spoke through me and as my voice grew stronger, it echoed in the nave of the deserted place, rivaling even the power of the storm that raged outside. As I reached the end of the powerful prayer, the world seemed to tremble and split as sounds of lamentation filled the air. I crouched down, utterly terrified, screwing my eyes tight shut, trying to block the cacophony with my hands. Words of agony assaulted my ears in horrible dialects with the sounds of pounded flesh, as tortured spirits howled like dogs on the hunt. Then all at once, it was over and I heard soft footsteps in the silence that followed.

Emerging from a side chapel, where I had thought lay only tombs, came the woman from the photograph who had danced with such abandon all those years ago with the young and handsome author. Her long silken hair hung loose, with flowers wound at the crown, as if she had just woken from dappled sleep on the banks of a sparkling stream. Her skin glowed with an internal light like the alabaster from Egyptian tombs and her full lips were a deep peony pink. I watched her tongue dart out to lick them and my breath was drawn from me by her beauty. Her eyes were blue as a cornflower meadow, languid like a summer day and, gazing into mine, offered pleasures beyond my imaginings. As she walked towards me, I could see the outline of her perfect breasts straining against the white gossamer of the long flowing dress. She exuded innocence with an edge of erotic knowing, and as she drew closer, I could scarcely draw breath. She pressed herself against me, her cool hand feathering down my chest to my belt.

"Through me, there is everything you desire in this life," she whispered, as her hand moved lower. "You only have to write it on your skin and it will be yours." Her lips touched mine, her tongue darting out to lick delicately at the corner of my mouth. "And there is only one tiny thing I want in return."

My lips opened against hers and I pushed all thought of Faerwald's bloated body from my mind, for surely his diary could only be the ravings of a madman.

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About J.F. Penn

Joanna lives in London, England but spent 11 years in Australia and New Zealand. She has a Master's degree in Theology from the University of Oxford, Mansfield College and a Graduate Diploma in Psychology from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She brings these twin obsessions to her research for her books. Joanna worked for 13 years as an international business consultant but is now a full-time author, speaker and entrepreneur. Joanna is a PADI Divemaster and enjoys traveling as often as possible. She loves to read, drink pinot noir and soak up European culture through art, architecture and food. Her favorite authors include: James Rollins, John Connolly, Daniel Silva and Val McDermid.

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