

# TOSCA LEE

Thank you for joining me in this world of story—this mystical place of co-creation between author and reader.

I'm asked often about what prompted the writing of *Demon: A Memoir*, about my publishing journey and writing process. That is a long conversation, but here is a little bit of what went on in the writing of my books to date.

## **On *Demon: A Memoir***

I first got the idea for *Demon* in 1998 while driving home on a straight and hypnotizing stretch of Nebraska road. I was in the middle of another project, a fantasy novel about a woman warrior I had been working on for years and had affectionately named *The Book That Will Kill Me*, if only because I had spent years writing and re-writing the first 100 pages like some literary Sisyphus with his boulder. Had I known then what I know now, I would have pressed on to the end and fixed the rest later, but I was bent on getting it *right* (whatever that is) and pummeling that story into submission.

I jotted down the idea of a demon telling his story, planning to revisit it some day—after I had finally vanquished the *Book That Will Kill Me*.

“Some day” turned out to be only a few hours later when my motherboard short-circuited as I sat down to write. It fizzled and popped inside the case, a tiny wisp of smoke drifting out the vent. I freaked out, pulled the thing apart, beat my head against the desk a few times and finally sunk down in a concussive slump. It was early evening by then—help would have to wait til morning.

I sat down with notepad and paper, determined to march on.

Nothing came. Just the faint waft of burning circuitry from the direction of my office.

At last, I flipped the page and began to write this demon idea. The story that would

become *Demon: A Memoir* was finished six weeks later.

What you may not know about *Demon*:

- The manuscript took six years to sell.
- It was nearly published under the title *The Appointment*.
- Every detail of the setting is real, including Clay's apartment house on Norfolk, the large house in Belmont and the artwork on display at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.
- The dim sum restaurant, The China Pearl, is a regular stop for my sister (who lives in Boston) and me whenever I'm in town.
- My father, my sister and I all have cameos in *Demon*. My sister immediately recognized the two of us standing in the Four Seasons' Bristol Lounge scene. Dad, however, didn't recognize himself (or his Gold Toe socks!).

### **On *Havah: The Story of Eve***

At some point during the six years I waited for *Demon* to sell, I randomly penned a single page in the voice of Eve. I imagined her nearly 900 years old and near death, preparing at last to tell her full story. I'm not sure why I did this—I only remember her voice, tired with age, being as clear in my head as my old Korean grandmother's was the last time I saw her before her death. And then I put the page away in a drawer where I kept scribbles and random story notes and forgot about it. In 2005, as my agent and I were negotiating the sale of *Demon*, my soon-to-be-editor asked what else I had. They wanted more books. I remember looking blankly around, yanking that drawer open and fishing inside. "I have this one thing..." I said, pulling out the fringed notebook page, which eventually became the prologue to *Havah*. Of course, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. A year later, Genesis commentaries, horticulture textbooks, and random books on ancient farming, early weapons, textiles, basket weaving, brick-making and early civilizations littered my floor alongside a copy of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. ("Is there anything you want to tell me?" my boyfriend at the time asked.)

I was fascinated with the emotional journey of Adam and Eve, with the potential for tension between Adam and his first son, the idea of seeing a first infant, the first death,

the first enmity between human and animal and dysfunction in relationship.

But there was a problem. I was paralyzed by *Demon*'s early success. It had quickly garnered great reviews and award nominations in the first months of its release. And here I was, about to prove myself a one-hit wonder.

I chased Eve's story in a dogged panic and overwrote the first draft by 67,000 words. Somewhere toward the end, I called my friend Meredith Efken.

"I can't do this anymore. I'm so tired. I can't get it out."

"You're almost there!" she said.

"I can't—"

"Push! PUSH!!"

I whined, begged for some kind of creative epidural and went back to work, convinced I was birthing some literary monster.

Some time after *Havah* released with a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*, I realized I had learned a valuable lesson. I wasn't sure what it was yet, but it had something to do with forests and trees and simply bearing down on the work.

### **On The Books of Mortals:**

The Books of Mortals series with Ted Dekker was one of those unforeseen things—a conversation that started when *Demon* re-released and I asked him for a cover blurb.

"What are you working on these days?" he said.

Weeks later, I was on the phone with his manager (and today, my good friend), Kevin Kaiser. Within a year, I left the consulting job for which I had travelled globally the last eight years. (I edited *Demon* between trips to Austria and Bangkok, *Havah* between New York and Hong Kong. I couldn't keep this up forever.) And then we started writing.

Building the world of *Forbidden* was fearsome and fascinating. This idea of an oblivious, dead world resonated strongly with us—two very different writers with an interest in the same kind of thematic material. We were deliberate about the strengths we brought to the table, about blending Ted's plotting and pacing with my prose and description in ways that we could not have accomplished alone.

We're asked often how two authors collaborate, and as far as I can tell, every team does it differently. For us it was important to build the world, the characters, the plot

from the ground up together and to meld our distinctly different styles into one narrative voice. We wrote and re-wrote each chapter. Today I don't think either of us could pinpoint a whole sentence written by one or the other.

This all sounds quite methodical, but most of the time, hilarity ensued. Several of our conversations went like this:

“So, I accidentally killed \_\_\_ in this scene.”

“WHAT? That's not on the outline!”

“Dude. It was his time.”

“But—”

“You gotta let him go, man. Let him go.”

“Look. This is what I think we need to do.”

“I don't like it.”

“What? Why not? It's brilliant.”

“Because.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don't.”

“Okay, this is what needs to happen now.”

“I don't want to do that.”

“But it'd be cool.”

“Okay.”

“What?”

“I said let's do it.”

“You're supposed to defend your position.”

“They have to kiss here.”

“Can we skip that part?”

“They have to kiss.”

“I hate it when they kiss.”

“That last scene you did was really cool.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Except that you kind of went on and on.”

“What?”

“And then you used a semi-colon.”

“So?”

“And you have this habit of—”

“I thought you said it was cool?!”

*Forbidden* debuted on the *New York Times*. By then, we were head-deep in *Mortal*, which would also land on the list. As I write this, we're six months out from the release

of *Sovereign*, our favorite of the three.

### **On *Iscariot***

From the first moment that editor friend Jeff Gerke (who had acquired *Demon* and *Havah* and now gone on to start his own publishing imprint) suggested the story of Judas, I was running fast and hard in the other direction. I knew how much research that story would take and was completely cowed.

At some point after avoiding the idea for about a year, I found myself sitting in a restaurant scribbling a scene between Judas and his mother on the paper tablecloth. My head was in my other hand. I was a goner, and I knew it.

I called my agent a few days later, fully expecting him to talk me out of it. He didn't. All my friends failed in this regard. I flailed around for a few more months. I couldn't do it.

The thing that finally got me was the idea of slipping into the skin of the only disciple Jesus called friend, of sitting down at the side of this mysterious healer, teacher and uncontrollable maverick I called Messiah. I wanted to see him for myself, to experience him in this way.

Over the next year I compiled a library and a small cohort of academics, theologians and Bible experts. I went to Israel (and ate so much hummus I couldn't touch the stuff for a month after returning), read incessantly and then sat down to write. The project took more than three years.

Once again, I overwrote the book—this time by 140,000 words. Somewhere in that giant forest of history and geek theology I realized I had lost my way, had utterly obscured the trail of this journey and the mystery of Judas and Jesus' relationship with it.

I thought back to my time in Israel. I had stood on the shores of Galilee's lake, sat in Capernaum's synagogue, had seen the theater of history. I had learned so much. But as I entered Jerusalem, I was bereft. Ascending toward the Dome of the Rock that day, steeples and mosques and temples crowding the horizon like so many hands reaching for God, I realized I had not *experienced* one moment of mystery. I fought back tears on my way toward the mosque, distracted myself by stopping to give an old beggar woman a few shekels. The moment I did she grabbed my hand in both of hers, and I nearly fell to

my knees. *Here* was God. And I knew without a doubt I had traveled all the way to Israel just to hold her hand.

I returned to the manuscript and pulled it apart, throwing out three theses' worth of detail. I returned to the heart of relationship. *Isca*riot was no longer Judas' story... it was mine.

**On My Readers:**

I am grateful for you every day. Thank you for taking these journeys with me, for your letters, your support and prayers. And for your patience, especially these last years as I wrestled with *Isca*riot—thank you.

You won't have to wait years for my next one, I promise. I'm fast at work on a return to the Old Testament and the City of David's ancient stones. I look forward to meeting you at my next tour stop or signing. Until then, you are in my mind constantly.

With love,

Tosca

For more *Demon* trivia and the full post of "Blood, Guts and Peanuts: What It's Like Writing With Ted Dekker," go to [www.toscalee.com](http://www.toscalee.com).