FALL FROM GRACE

Avenging Angel Book 1

By Eden Crowne

**New Edition**

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Old Edition

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

**Evie**

“I love men and I love sex,” Evie said with a sigh.

Setting down her drink, the bartender turned his head, following her gaze to the man at the end of the bar.

He nodded, “You and me both, darling.”

Ah, West Hollywood.

She'd watched him walk in from the bright, late afternoon sunshine outside. All languid grace and muscles, dark brown hair falling over one eye, high cheekbones, strong forehead, and jaw. When she was alive, she did her best to combine her two areas of interest whenever possible. If he had a butt even remotely like Michaelangelo's David, she was going to test her existential limits to the max this afternoon.

Casually he ran one hand through his hair and looked her way. He had sea-green eyes.

Oh my.

Her wings were threatening to snap to attention and break through the super-mystical prestidigitation that kept them hidden. Which would not have been a good thing since she was presently visible to everyone here at the bar. Plus she was holding a Dirty Martini. Well, actually, a second Dirty Martini. Most people don't picture angels standing at a bar drinking a Martini. Or two. Even in West Hollywood.

The guy had a slightly weathered, L.L. Bean look about him. Worn jeans, just loose enough, an oversized brown and hooded leather jacket. He wore his flannel shirt and white T-shirt in a cool half-tuck.

“I bet he smells like Old Spice,” she sighed again, taking a small sip of her drink and looking at L.L. Bean man over the rim.

“If he smells like Old Spice, you're going to have to fight me for him.”

“Don't you have something to do at the *other* end of the bar,” she stared at the bartender's name tag, “Roberto?”

Giving her a sly smile, he moved away.

She popped one of the big green olives in her mouth and bit down, absently running one hand through her hair. What if L.L. Bean man was Gay. Seeing as the bar was where it was in LA, there was every possibility of that. She stared into her martini and shivered. Life is not fair but that would be a cruel blow to women everywhere.

Hooking the heels of her short, black suede boots over the lower rung on the barstool, she tugged automatically at the bottom of her burgundy V-neck sweater. It was a little short in the back and tended to creep up above the waistband on her bootcut leggings. She couldn't pull too hard or the velcro straps holding it in place over the thick bones of her wings might pop. That had happened before. Several times.

“Excuse me,” said a smooth voice in her ear. “I couldn't help noticing. Well, our eyes met and, like I said, I couldn't help *noticing*.”

L.L. Bean guy stood at her shoulder. One invisible wing flicked out in surprise, just missing him and inadvertently knocking into the waitress, scattering an artfully arranged serving of soft shell crab and cucumber rolls onto the floor. Bar food in this part of LA is not like bar food elsewhere. The waitress looked around mystified since no one stood within two feet of her. Evie cringed. Sometimes her wings just had a mind of their own.

'*Get back in there*', she shouted at it mentally.

The guy was giving her a very delicious crooked smile that made his eyes scrunch up. Damn. Just damn.

He had the ghost of a white scar running across his forehead, she noticed, that dipped into one eyebrow.

“Grace,” she said inclining her head.

“And beauty,” he added.

“No, Evangeline Grace. Evie, that's my name.”

“And I stand by my statement. I'm Nathan McKitrick. Trick to my friends.”

That mouth had a very scandalous curl to it. Oh my *Gawd*, she could think of a few tricks she'd like to do with him. And those lips.

Scooting the stool closer in the crowded bar, he was suddenly very near. Evie inhaled deeply. No, not Old Spice.

Brimstone.

Damn it.

“You're a demon.” A statement; not a question.

“A demon for sex I hope.” The bartender slid a dark amber draft beer between them. “On the house,” and gave the man a suggestive wink.

“God damn it, Roberto! Go away!” She used a tiny bit of her power and pushed him to the other side of the room where he remained, blinking in surprise at the sudden change in his location.

“And you're an Angel. Though not a Celestial, obviously.” He indicated the bar with a wave of his hand. “Not many Angels in bars. Outside of country and western songs, that is.”

“Don't change the subject,” she growled. “Let me guess, from Hell?”

“Arizona, actually.” He spoke with just the barest hint of a western drawl. “Though I could understand your confusion since many similarities have been drawn between the two destinations.”

She stared at him, willing her spirit vision to manifest, to look through any supernatural artifice. There must be fangs and claws beneath the *glamour* spell. There was an aura of power, a lot of power. She tried again. He remained firmly the very attractive man sitting next to her, leaning casually close, both elbows on the dark, wooden bar.

“If you're trying to peel back the layers and find the lizard underneath, sorry. There's just me in there.”

The light bulb went on over her head. “Reaper. You sold your soul; you used to be human.”

Instead of answering right away, he took a long drink of the cold beer the bartender had left. “You and I both know that no one's soul is their own to sell. Human, Angel, or demon, that singular energy belongs to only one entity. The way the deal works with the dark side is more of a *sublet* for a designated number of years. They lock it away in a metaphysical vault, slap a band-aid over the hole in your heart, also metaphysical but you know what I mean, and off you go.”

In her former life, Evie had been a Vice Detective in Atlanta. A good one. She often thought how ironic and yet appropriate she was still in the same line of work more or less.

“Money, fame, fortune, sex? What was it?” It was hard to keep the note of bitterness from her voice. She had been instantly attracted to this man and learning he was a venal soul seller was inexplicably a blow.

An expression crossed his face Evie couldn't quite interpret. “I'd rather not discuss that.”

“I hope your choice was worth however many years of servitude you are locked into.”

“Seemed so at the time.” He took another long drink. Setting the glass down. he flicked his deep green eyes to meet hers. “I suppose it's too much to hope you are a Fallen Angel, Miss Evie Grace.”

Evie allowed her heart just the smallest flutter as she looked into those eyes before saying, “Avenging.”

“Ah, just my luck.” He sighed, giving her a rueful grin. “Earthbound then. All passion and heavenly justice. A lot of smiting, I'm guessing. Is that how you broke your nose? Not that it doesn't look charming, balanced by those lovely cheekbones and dark eyes.”

“We burn with the anger of righteousness. That is why we are chosen upon our death.” She spoke quietly but the power behind the words was unmistakable. She ignored his comment on her nose. It was only a little crooked.

“All that burning must work up a mighty thirst.” He nodded towards the oversized martini glass in her hand and the empty one next to it which Roberto had neglected to clear.

Her sense of humor, always just below the surface, asserted itself and she had to laugh. “Earthbound is very, *very* different from Celestial. And thank Heaven for that. Vengeance I can handle. Abstinence, not so well.”

Trick watched her smile and the deep-set dimples that punctuated it stretched around the edge of her full lips right up to her clear, brown eyes. His mouth felt dry and another drink of the amber beer did nothing to quench that thirst.

For a time they stared into their drinks. Temporarily at a loss for words. Wanting to say so much yet unable to find a way around the steel door that had – spiritually speaking – slammed so solidly between them. Trick kept darting looks at her from under his lashes. He felt her presence as soon as he walked in. Not as an Angel; as a woman.

Looking at her, Martini in hand and a world-weary grin on her face, pushing her long, brown hair back from her face, he'd felt a longing. It was skipping and jumping along his nerve endings even now as though he was seventeen again and just discovering life. Learning she was an Angel had changed nothing – yet it must change everything. He was in LA to do a dirty job for his Master. Maybe the dirtiest.

Trick hadn't prayed in a long time. He figured he'd severed that sweet link to God's ear with his black bargain long ago. Staring sightlessly into his beer, he desperately offered up a very small plea. Just in case.

Their cell phones rang simultaneously. They jumped, startled, then grinned sheepishly at each other. Acting through human agents and Acolytes, both sides of the supernatural fence made full use of the modern world and its technology. The phones rang again. She recognized his ringtone, the rock classic *'Light my Fire'* by the Doors. That made her smile. Reaper or not, the man had a sense of humor, no doubt about it.

As though choreographed in a dance, they reached for their phones, tapped the screens, thumbed through a message, read it again, tossed off the last of their drinks, and stood. Evie slapped some cash on the bar. With one lingering glance into each other's eyes, they abruptly turned and left in different directions. Trick walking towards the front doors; Evie slipping into stealth mode and pulling a *glamour* over herself, running the other way.

Roberto the bartender wisely stayed where he was.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

**Evie**

Evie was nothing but a shadow gliding through the kitchen, past the hectic prep area, and out the back door. She slid her sword around from back to front, slipping off the thick leather loop that kept the weapon firmly in its golden scabbard. She'd added that last part herself when she learned her sword, like her wings, sometimes tried to think for itself. Her gifts were hidden from mortal eyes until she needed them. *Most* of the time. By Angel reckoning, she was still pretty new at this job and there had been a few, uh, accidents. As a precaution, she snapped her phone into the pocket of her light jean jacket along with her cash, tying it around her waist. Her Angel sense was tingling and, given the message, she thought things were going to get messy.

An enormous green dumpster nearly blocked the exit from the bar. Still moving fast, Evie squeezed around it at a run only to come skidding to an abrupt halt. The entire alley lay shrouded in a damp gray fog. Just a few yards away, beyond the line of dumpsters, she could see the late afternoon sunshine burning brightly on the busy street bordering the back alley. California was famous for its micro-climates, but alley-sized? The hazy air gave off a distinct scent. Slightly scorched. Not a bad smell. Like rosemary bushes burning. Paranormal smoke and mirrors. Someone was intent on hiding this place from mortal eyes.

In the ebb and flow of the fog, images seemed to waver as though nothing was quite what it seemed. Focussing her energy, Evie let the sword blaze into life. The golden spectral flame shot out like a beacon, burning through the mist. And that's when things got interesting. From an Avenging Angel point of view at least.

Only a few yards away, a ragged man lay sprawled on the ground, several dark rivulets running from his body. Three black dogs the size of ponies stood around him panting, their long red tongues hanging out over sharp white teeth. The dogs looked up from the man to Evie as she paused there by the dirty dumpster and licked the blood from their lips.

Ripples of energy stirred the mist at Evie's feet into a tidal ebb and flow. She tensed, swinging the sword around in a quick circle to loosen her wrists, leaving a trail of fire in the bright blade's wake. The air around the dogs appeared to shimmer, like heat in a mirage. All three dogs stood gracefully, impossibly erect on their hind legs. Evie shivered. The dog shapes shifted, folding back as though they were only fur cloaks. In their place stood three tall beings. Male or female, or maybe something in between. Their hairless bodies were black and shiny as obsidian and their eyes blacker still.

Evie stared at the strange, dark creatures looking for the Death Mark – the burning cross and circle that would mark her quarry. The text message had explained why she'd been sent to that bar in West Hollywood. Her mission was to avenge four innocents. Loyal Acolytes, killed defending a relic of terrible power taken from a tiny church in Hungary. The Celestials of the Otherwhere, she was told, had tracked the blood of the murderer and dispatched the Death Mark to show her their killer.

She stared harder, calling on her spirit vision to manifest. A tickling, prickling sensation skipped along her nerves, telling her he, she, or it was near but it was not these dark beings. Nor was she called to avenge the ragged man's death. Poor guy, he just picked the wrong alley to scavenge today.

She looked for the shadow of his soul.

Nothing. It had already fled. Not for the first time she considered the capriciousness of her mandate. She never understood why some deaths were avenged and others went unnoticed by the Higher Ups.

With a mental shrug she thought, also not for the first time, that was why she wasn't a Celestial and probably never would be. And thank God for that.

As if on cue, the three beings raised their arms. Evie jumped back, holding her sword ready, the flame flaring brightly in response. Her wings flashed out and she allowed some of her power to manifest until she, too, was as shining and golden as her weapon.

The three held their pose for several heartbeats. Bringing their hands together almost reverently, each bowed their head. Evie shifted her stance, all her nerves tingling in anticipation. Something was coming. Something wicked.

An explosion of inky darkness shot through with red momentarily engulfed the alley and everyone in it. With the darkness came a blast of icy cold air that swept through the space between the buildings and nearly knocked Evie off her feet. The temperature plunged to teeth-chattering levels. As swiftly as it had appeared, the smoke cleared.

 Before her stood a tall, thin man in an elegant velvet suit from another age. He had one large, feathered wing. Only one. The wing and his hair shone with the same shade of deep metallic gray. He flexed the wing and the long flight feathers twisted to beckon to her.

A Celestial. Fallen from light to darkness long ago.

Above his head, a glowing cross inside a circle of fire formed.

Evie swallowed.

The Fallen had extraordinary power. It would not be an easy fight. In fact, she was pretty certain it was not a fight she could win.

The elegant man seemed to sense the Mark and looking up, gave a tight, mirthless smile.

At the other end of the alley, the sound of footsteps running caused all of them to turn and stare. The Death Mark moved as well, drifting almost lazily away from the Fallen.

As the figure burst through the fog, Evie exchanged startled glances with, of all demons, people, or spirits to appear: the Reaper from the bar, Trick McKitrick. Above his head, the burning cross in the circle came to a stop. He gave her one horrified look, then all hell broke loose.

A swirl of ethereal energy from the Fallen shoved the line of dumpsters up against the back doors leading to the alley and the entrance to the street, effectively blocking any interference from the humans. Trick leaped over one dumpster as it swung by in a gravity-defying jump, coming down in front of the three dark figures. He pulled what looked like a short, iron bar from his coat and that was all Evie had time to see.

Evie dropped into a sword fighter's crouch, waiting. The elegant man was not her mandate and, as far as she knew, she had no quarrel with him.

Apparently, he did not think the same.

The Fallen's eyes turned scarlet. The same color as the blood in the street. From beneath his beautifully cut velvet jacket, he drew a slim, black sword burning with dark flames. Cold, not hot. Even from where she stood, Evie could feel the icy flare. He rushed at her so fast the speed made her eyes water.

Their blades met, releasing a sonic boom of energy. Gold flame against black ice smashed together with such force the shock wave blew out every window in the alley. A thousand pieces of shattered glass seemed to move in slow motion as Evie and the Fallen slipped between time with paranormal speed. Jagged shards refracted the flare of their swords into a million bits of light.

The laws of physics are turn liquid in the spiritual realm. A hundred blows between them were the blink of an eye for a mortal.

Evie was a seasoned warrior. Quick and strong. But she was an earthbound Angel and despite his Fallen state, the one-winged man was a Celestial. The odds were overwhelmingly in his favor. Gripping her sword with both hands, she pressed desperately against the strength of the other, beating her wings hard and fast. They came nearly forehead to forehead, jostling for position. His face very close. So close that when he smiled unexpectedly she saw his brilliantly white pointed teeth.

“Surprise!” he said with a fierce laugh.

Evie gasped as an agonizing stab of glacial cold ripped through her chest.

Time seemed to slow even further and she took it all in. The Fallen, holding his sword with only one hand now, the other gripping a shard of black ice, thrust halfway into her chest. The golden glow of her power wavered, sputtering like a candle in the rain. Time sped up and she heard someone shouting as though from far away. Her wings drooped and she felt them brush the ground.

The icy cold clutched her arms and legs with frozen fingers, dragging her deeper until she had no breath left. The Fallen's magic gripped tightly around her heart, squeezing hard, pulling her under. Down, down she fell into a black well. The last thing she saw was the beautiful, wasted face of the one-winged man, so close she could feel his breath on her skin.