

# FALL FROM GRACE

## Avenging Angel Book 1

By Eden Crowne

**New Edition**

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### CHAPTER ONE

**Evie**

“I love men,” 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.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Evie and Trick

“Hey there,” said a deep voice by her ear, the warm breath a silky caress on her bare neck. “Are you awake?”

Evie gave a sleepy smile as memories of her past life and waking up in a soft bed next to a hard body coursed through her. Then she caught that whiff of smoke and the events in the alley came rushing back. Nathan McKitrick lay next to her, his handsome face just inches away, head propped up on one tan, muscular arm. Directly above him floated the Death Mark.

Throwing the covers off, she leaped to her feet in one swift move, gathering her mantle of energy around her. In her hands an energy ball formed, sparking and spitting with power. Raising it high, she prepared to throw it at the Reaper.

He scrambled out of the bed, backing away from her, hands held high in a placating gesture. “Wait, wait, wait. I'm the good guy in this picture.”

She stared.

He was naked.

Oh gosh, he was wonderfully, beautifully, wide-shouldered, flat ab, narrow hip, and rippling muscle naked.

She let her eyes linger on the rugged body and smooth skin. The energy ball in her hands flared brighter.

Dang it.

'*Control*,' she implored her inner self. Evie's eyes strayed a little further down. Forget control. What lay between this man's legs was truly a thing of beauty. Her wings popped out fully extended knocking over both bedside tables with a crash, lamps and all.

“Oh, that's comin' out of the credit card,” Trick sighed.

“You were,” her voice came out in a squeak. Clearing her throat, she tried again, “You were in the alley. I *saw* you.”

“Of course you did. I was fighting to reach the guy in the fancy suit with only one wing. You know the one who tried to take you out with a black ice crystal shoved directly into your soft, white, bouncy breast?”

She looked down. There was a blue mark with spidery black veins spread across the middle

of her chest between her breasts. 'Wait,' she thought, '*blue mark on my chest.*'

Chest. Breasts. Oh stars.

She looked up at him. "*I'm naked!*"

He gave her the same engaging crooked grin as in the bar. "Oh yes, you are."

She threw the energy ball straight at him. Nothing but a blur of motion, he turned *slipstreaming* between time, running up the wall to throw himself into a backward somersault in a back-bending, eye-popping twist. The momentum carried him up and over the ball of light.

The blast burned a hole through a poorly colored print of Santa Monica, several layers of wallpaper, plaster, and cement before disappearing out into the night and setting off car alarms far into the distance.

He gave her an affronted stare. "Hey! That would have hurt!"

She pulled her sword from its scabbard and it flared into life. Despite being naked, no one and nothing could remove the sword belt except her.

Instead of running or putting up his fists to fight, Trick stood very still, his hands at his sides. "You were freezing, from the inside out."

"I'm an Angel, I can't die."

A look flashed across his face, as though there was something he wanted to say, Evie thought. He ran both hands through his hair and when he met her eyes again, his face was composed.

"That doesn't mean you can't be hurt – at least temporarily – or captured. The Fallen's weapon was meant to weaken you, render you helpless. Pardon me for thinking you might have wanted an exit strategy right about then. I grabbed you and ran like a jackrabbit with a coyote on its tail. Brought you here. My powers are heat-based. You were blue with cold, Ms. Grace. I was healing you."

"Oh, *healing*. Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" She didn't bother hiding the sarcasm in her voice.

He let his eyes linger on the smooth, full curves of her body. Her round breasts, the swell of hips and thighs. Healing had been the last thing on his mind as he held her through the night.

Getting her here, however, had required quite a bit of effort. The hotel he chose ended up being booked right up to the fifth floor. Key Card in hand, he had dashed up to the room, thrown open the sliding window, and pulling a shadow over himself, jumped down to get her. Trick had

stashed the Angel in the bushes camouflaging the property's venting system near the parking lot. Trying to jump straight up with an armful of Angel trailing her wide, white wings had not gone so well, even for someone as strong as Trick. After several tries, he'd finally had to get a running start across the parking lot and launch himself from the top of a van before landing – just barely – inside the room.

Undressing had been more a matter of urgency than lascivious intent. She was cold and getting colder, the blue tinge on her skin deepening as he worked. Throwing off his own clothes, he pulled the blankets around them, belly to belly, and ramped up his energy level like an electric blanket on high.

Holding her tightly, skin to skin, gradually the sense of urgency that had driven him began to diminish. Replaced by other, *different* sensations. The touch of her hair. The feel of her neck and shoulders. The jut of her hip bone against his. A sweet perfume as she began to warm against him. Like lavender in bloom under the afternoon sun. The smell of angels.

He'd grown so hard. Suddenly. Unexpectedly. More than anything he wanted to slip between her thighs, enter her fully, and let the two become one.

He was many things in the nasty half-life of his; rapist was not one of them. Yet how delicious during those long hours of the night to contemplate the feel of her strong legs wrapped around him, squeezing his waist, pulling him closer. He wanted to bury himself in that velvet-soft sheath of muscles and let the passion there consume them both.

Not that he ever got the chance, morals or not. Her damn wings kept flipping out, knocking him off the bed again and again and *again*.

Dogs ran in their sleepy dreams.

Angels flew.

Who knew?

Climbing up off the floor for about the tenth time as the afternoon turned to night, he felt his ardor cooling a little. It was all he could do just to keep hold of her and let his magic do its work. He wasn't lying when he told her he was healing her. Hours passed before he was able to warm her back to consciousness.

“No weapon?”

Trick blinked, pulling his attention back to the here and now. “What?”

She pointed to his empty hands, “You had an iron bar-type thing, in the alley.”

“Oh, yeah, iron is very good against supernaturals.”

“*You're* a supernatural,” she pointed out.

He shrugged, “Exactly. That's how I know. Anyway, I dropped the bar and scooped you up. What with those damn wings and all, you're a two-handed sort of woman.”

“And how did we manage to escape from a Fallen? You are just a Reaper.”

“I'll ignore that slur on my powers.” He held up a wide bracelet on one wrist, a collection of amber beads and what looked like metal amulets ringing it. The whole thing seemed burned and blackened, as if by fire. “This amulet is capable of shrouding me, us as it turned out, from just about anything for a time. A *short* time. When there is a Fallen involved, it pays to take a few precautions, no matter what side you or they are on. One time use only, I'm afraid.”

Pulling the thing off, he tossed the amulet in the wastebasket.

“You were *expecting* him?”

There was a fierce pounding on the door. They both jumped.

“This is the manager! Just what in God's name is going on in there! Open this door! I've called the police.” The door handle jiggled and the person attached to the voice tried to push it open. Luckily the heavy slide bolt held fast.

Evie would prefer not to have to explain to the night manager of an obviously mediocre establishment what a fully manifested *naked* angel with a shining sword and an equally naked Reaper – very handsome and well-built naked Reaper – were doing to his hotel room.

The Death Mark flared above the Reaper's head.

Enough talk.

Raising her sword, she swept the flaming blade directly at him. Unfortunately for Evie and fortunately for Trick, the sword cut through nothing except empty space and a floor lamp that fell with a *crash*. Trick had jumped in a flash to the other side of the room, the bathroom now behind him. In a flare of energy, spectral flames burst out to surround him in a burning halo.

“Evie, please. Let me explain.”

“There's nothing to explain. You killed those people in Hungary. Vengeance is mine.”

She rushed him. Instead of evading the blow, he ran at her, grabbing the sword's hilt in both of his hands, trying to push the edge away from his throat.

Trick was flaming red, she was flaming gold.

He must be very strong, Evie thought, to even touch the blade let alone hold it. She let her

energy flare higher, he wouldn't be able to hold it long.

She pushed him back, through the bathroom doors and inside as they struggled. Her blade sliced through the glass shower doors and the window. It gouged out a deep V-shaped cut in the bathtub as they jostled for position.

Somehow Trick managed to twist out of the way, still holding the hilt.

“I didn't kill anybody!” he insisted.

“Not kill anybody? I find that hard to believe,” Evie panted, pushing back as they careened around the small space.

Snaking one leg around the back of his knee, she threw him hard into the mirror above the sink, shattering it and wrenching several layers of plaster from the wall. His face was almost touching hers. So close she could feel his warm, sweet breath on his skin. He smelled like crushed pine needles and fresh-picked sage.

*‘Damn it, Evie,’* she yelled at herself in her head. *‘Stop smelling him!’*

He stared frankly into her dark eyes. “Ow! Okay, Reaper and all. I concede that. What I mean is, whoever you’re talking about, I did not kill.”

“My Death Mark says differently.”

The sink crumbled and a fountain of water shot out, drenching them both.

“*Good god* that sword's hot!” he exclaimed as he was forced to finally let go of the hilt.

He backed up, jumping up on the rim of the toilet seat and grabbing the ceramic top of the tank. He held it out like a shield. “Your Death Mark is wrong!”

“The Mark is never wrong!”

She sliced through the ceramic lid. It was easier than cutting through soft butter. So easy that the sword just kept going right through the base of the toilet and deep into the floor. More water washed out onto the hotel room carpet.

Spinning, she kicked him hard as he tried to jump by her, out of the bathroom.

Cursing, knocked off balance, he managed to recover in less than the blink of an eye. As he sailed by, she struck out with a mighty blow that cut right through the bed – mattress, frame and all. It fell into two neat pieces. The sword, though, kept right on going, penetrating deeply into the cement floor beneath where it got stuck. Very stuck. Evie tugged and tugged finally pulling loose a large chunk of concrete and metal. Pulling and pushing, she finally pried the block off her blade.

Trick jumped away, pushing off the desk to bounce from the floor to the ceiling as though

the earth had no hold. Evie sliced after him, the sword gouging more deep trenches in the floor several feet deep. Metal and concrete melted away from the blade.

Trick ran up one wall to crouch on the ceiling. Defying gravity, he hung there upside down. “If you'd just listen to me!”

Evie gave an angry roar. She jumped onto one half of the ruined mattress, bouncing up and down, trying to run him through as he scrambled this way and that just out of reach. There wasn't enough room to get any lift under her wings and corner him.

“Have you ever questioned it? Question who you were sent to kill?” he said breathlessly.

She paused for a moment, her sword raised and burning above her. “No, I don't have to. I feel the truth in it. The vengeance flares in my heart. The pain and fear of those unjustly murdered.”

“And do you feel it with me? Do you?” he demanded.

His words brought her up short. She had felt a lot of things for this Reaper from the moment she saw him walk through the doors of that West Hollywood bar. None of them had to do with the agonized cries of the innocent. She stretched out with her feelings and was surprised. Nothing. No rage, no anger. What the *hell* was going on?

Jumping down, he grabbed the desk chair, holding it out in front of him cartoon lion-tamer style. “Nothing, right?”

The pounding on the door increased in fury. There seemed to be several people in the hall now.

She stood her ground on the broken bed, wings stretched out as wide as they could go. No matter. The Mark had been called. She raised the sword high for the killing blow, “Vengeance!”

There was an ominous creaking and with no more warning than that, the bed fell through the floor into the room below with a thunderous crash. Plaster and cement rained down on Evie's head as she stood there blinking in surprise.

*'Well,' she thought. 'That was unexpected.'*

She looked up to see Trick's face peering down. “Are you all right?”

Without answering him, she spread her wings and using them as leverage, jumped back up through the gaping hole in the ceiling. Thank the stars the room below had been empty. She shuddered. Killing innocents in pursuit of vengeance was *not* part of her job description.

Back in their room, water was shooting out of the bathroom in two separate high arcs. She coughed, choking on the smoke and dust. At least the banging on the door had stopped.

Out of the corner of her eye, a heartbeat too late, she saw something bright and shining. It flew, spinning through the air to coil around her, pinning her arms to her sides. Trick held what looked like a burning length of rope in his hands. He had lassoed her!

With a flick of his wrist, the lasso spun out like a living thing to wrap around and around Evie until she was tied up as tight as a Sunday roast. She teetered there amidst the wreckage.

“Sorry, Miss Grace and Beauty. I guess explanations will have to wait until you're a little calmer.”

“I am calm!” she screamed.

The pounding on the door started again much louder. Maybe they had found a battering ram. Sirens howled close by joining the chorus of car alarms from the parking lot below.

Trick gathered up a pile of clothes and gave her a jaunty salute. “I must escape into the night like a thief. Until we meet again.” He flashed her a smile that lit up his face and with a wild laugh ran to the windows. Holding the pile of clothes in front of him, Trick crashed through the glass and was gone.

Yelling in rage and frustration, Evie volted up her energy, burning through the coils of spell-cast rope. Running to the shattered window sill, she thought she saw the Reaper trance jumping incredible distances, already far away. They were no longer in Hollywood, she noted but closer to LAX. The colored light columns at the airport's entrance glowed brightly in the distance. Below her, a squad of police cars and two fire trucks, sirens blaring and lights flashing, screeched into the parking lot.

Time to go.

She looked around the room for her clothes. Only then she realized the Reaper had taken them with him.

“Nathan McKitrick, you bastard!” she shouted, shaking her fist in the air.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Evie

The Guardian Angel had his beautiful wings wrapped around himself as he rocked back and forth on the pavement, sobbing.

Evie had heard him crying as she flew over the city, cursing in an extremely un-Angelic way and trying to pick up Trick's trail. The Reaper had used something to mask his magical signature and she was only able to narrow it down to a vague direction towards the Hollywood Park race track. The smell of horses and hay and car exhaust drifted up on the night air but no sign of the Reaper.

A few miles along Century Boulevard, she lost the trail completely.

Circling around and around, she comforted herself thinking of all the painful things she would do to the Reaper once she finally caught up with him. And there was no doubt in her mind she would. Evangeline Grace had never failed on a mission. Dead or alive.

She tugged at the hotel sheet currently wrapped around her Greek Goddess style. The cheap hotel hadn't had any bathrobes in the room and this was the best she could do unless she wanted to fly over the city naked. Trick McKitrick was a doomed man.

Breaking through her satisfying thoughts of torture and dismemberment were a few resplendent images of him standing there naked in all his manly glory. She was going to kick that tight ass to hell and back.

That very tight ass.

*'Damn it, Evie,'* she yelled in her head. *'Eyes on the prize!'*

Her thoughts strayed again. *'Not that prize stupid,'* she told herself crossly.

"I am such a pervy perv," she moaned out loud and then shut up.

Someone was crying.

And not just any sort of crying.

An Angel was sobbing. The sound was unmistakable. Angel's tears are fey and fearsome things. Such was their power, she heard each teardrop as it hit the pavement.

Evie crisscrossed the dimly lit streets below, soaring the air currents on silent wings. It must be two or three in the morning. The streets mostly empty.

There.

Directly below her.

Winging down in big circles, she watched two thugs drag a thin girl with Asian features out of a small all-night grocery and throw her into the back of a big old-model Cadillac. The girl looked no more than sixteen or seventeen. They had already hurt her. Evie stared at them with her spirit vision, seeing beyond the flesh and blood, into their hearts. They were going to hurt her more.

Folding her wings back, she landed lightly on the sidewalk as the driver gunned the engine and roared off down the street. An alarm was ringing hollowly nearby. Evie walked to the shop and peered inside. A man and woman lay tumbled together in an untidy heap. Their blood pooling on the floor. They were already gone, only a soft golden aura left of the souls they had been. Soon that, too, would dissipate. Life to Afterlife.

She returned to the Angel. He seemed very young, both cosmically and chronologically.

“Are you her Guardian Angel or theirs?” She pointed to the bodies with one wing.

He sniffed, wiping the tears away with the sleeve of his tight black suit jacket. “Hers.”

Evie looked after the car as it disappeared around the corner. “Well then, why don't you get yourself in gear and start *guarding*, kid? Go on. Get after them and smite.”

His voice was ragged with grief, “I received no mandate. No orders to step in and save her. I prayed, I called out, I *begged*.”

Evie looked at the bodies by the store counter. Innocents. Their lives stolen by a couple of murderous bastards who were getting away. Soon one more life would be lost.

Still staring after the car, she asked the young Angel, “Did you receive specific orders *not* to interfere?”

The boy looked up, his face suddenly full of hope. “No.”

Evie nodded. “Good enough for me.”

Spreading her wings, she drew her sword and flaming with golden fury, flew after them.

It took only moments to overtake and pass the speeding vehicle. Shedding the magical *glamour* shielding her from human eyes, she came down a hundred yards in front of the car on the empty street, sword blazing. She could only imagine what the murderers inside the car thought as a winged angel, haloed in magnificent light, clothed in white (courtesy of the hotel top sheet) manifested directly in front of them.

To Evie's disappointment, this heavenly vision did not bring on an epiphany to end their

evil ways, stop the car, fall to their knees, and beg for forgiveness while simultaneously dialing 911 and pleading to turn themselves in.

No.

Instead, the wretched bastards accelerated, determined to run her down. With a crooked smile, she sheathed her sword. Digging in, Evie stood her ground, both hands stretched out straight in front of her. The car rammed into the Angel at probably around seventy miles an hour.

The laughing, twisted faces of the murderers turned to shock when they realized not only was she still standing; she was pushing *back*. The driver gunned the engine, revving the motor higher and higher. Instead of roaring away, the car came to a stop as Evie began pushing it up the street, one barefoot step at a time.

She could hear both men cursing even over the roar of the engine. The driver slammed the accelerator to the floor. Plumes of smoke engulfed the street as the screaming tires spun, fighting for traction. Evie clearly saw the goon in the passenger seat aim a massive handgun – a Magnum by the look of it – and open fire, shattering the windshield into thousands of jagged fragments. Keeping one hand firmly on the hood, she swatted the bullets aside like bugs with the other.

Time to end this.

Drawing her sword with her free hand, she sliced effortlessly through the entire front end of the car, severing the engine block. There was a burst of flames and a terrible twisted shriek of metal as the car spun away in two parts, spewing oil.

The men scrambled out of the wreck, guns blazing. One of them had a shotgun now as well as the handguns. Evie sighed. These guys were not going to give up. Stepping between time, she easily dodged the bullets. At this moment, she was moving so quickly they could not even see her.

Confused, both men stopped firing to look around, waving their guns this way and that, staring wild-eyed.

“Where is she, goddamn it!” the man who'd been driving snarled.

“Right here,” Evie whispered.

Reappearing directly in front of him, the Angel plunged her bright sword to the hilt in his chest.

Blood bubbled from deep in his throat making a gurgling sound. His eyes locked on hers. The murderer's heavy features, mottled with dark stubble, broken blood vessels, and old scars, sagged as if gravity itself was pulling him from into the grave. Using her *sight*, Evie looked into

his soul. Just as she thought, there was such evil there.

Stepping away, she let him fall in a broken sprawl onto the pitted concrete.

The other man screamed in fear, the note of hysteria high and loud. He appeared to realize he was finally in a situation a gun could not get him out of. Throwing his shotgun to the ground, he tried to run.

Fool.

With a single downswing of her wings, she caught up and grabbed a fistful of his long, dirty brown hair. Spinning him around to face her, she easily lifted the man off the ground as her wings beat the dirt and leaves into a whirlwind.

“No wait, wait,” he screamed. “I repent. Mercy, have mercy on me!”

She smiled. His soul was just as tainted and dirty as the other man's.

“Sucks for you, buddy,” she said wryly. “Wrong sort of Angel. Mercy is so not my mandate.”

She was still smiling as she ran him through.

Both men lay at her feet. The police would find no mark on them when they came, nothing but a scorched bit of cloth where her sword entered their bodies. “Heart attack,” the corner would say about the burst organ.

Evie watched as their dark spirits began to crawl out of their skin. What was coming for them was far darker still. She could feel it in the air, smell it getting closer. Evie did not know exactly what would happen to them; she hoped for the sake of the girl's murdered parents, it would be very bad.

She glanced at the wreckage of the car burning fitfully, the dark smoke rising up to smudge the sky. That was not going to be so easy for the police to explain. Especially the precision-cut slicing directly through the center of the engine block. Oh well, give those college guys and gals in the forensics department something to work on.

Sheathing her sword, she walked to the other side of the wrecked car. The girl had managed to drag herself out of the back seat and lay half in the gutter and half on the sidewalk.

The girl's Guardian Angel arrived on a *whoosh* of air.

'*Better late than never*,' Evie sighed to herself.

He took Evie's hand and held it reverently to his forehead. “Thank you.”

She glanced at the girl. The poor little thing was in bad shape, shaking uncontrollably. Evie automatically reached for the cell phone in her pocket to call the police. That's when she

remembered she was only wearing an over-bleached hotel sheet tied roughly around her. McKitrick had taken her phone along with her clothes. Damn him.

“We need to call 911. I lost my cell. Do you have yours on you?”

He looked at her blankly. “Do Angels carry cell phones? Is that even possible?”

She rolled her eyes, “Just how new at this *are* you?” Guardian Angels, in her opinion, spent way too much time in the Otherwhere.

Nothing for it but to go through the bodies. Darkness was drawing in around the corpses, icy cold and bleak. Sidestepping the inky black ooze, which had no interest in her anyway, she felt in their pockets.

“Got one!” She held the cell up for him to see and he stared back, still wide-eyed and clueless.

The dispatcher wanted to know their location. Of course. Evie had no idea where they were beyond a street full of dark and shuttered doorways. This was one of those commercial/residential blocks where people didn't want to know what was going on beyond their double-locked front doors.

Slipping once again into stealth mode, she spread her wings and flew over to the corner to see where the hell they were. Got it. 911 call completed, she held onto the dead guy's phone just in case, he certainly wouldn't be needing it.

Back at the scene of the crash, she found the Guardian Angel crouched by the girl, invisible to the mortal now, just like Evie. The Angel extended his wings, gathering her up in his embrace. His wings were beautiful, Evie noted, shades of brown and cinnamon with streaks of white, like a falcon's.

The girl's eyes were open, unfocused with shock. She probably wouldn't have seen the Angels even if they manifested right in front of her in all their heavenly glory. Brushing the skin lightly with his fingertips, the Guardian Angel closed her eyes before allowing his power to manifest. Waves of healing energy flowed through his fingers into the girl.

She gave a little gasp that eased into a sigh as the pain began to ebb. The terrible lines of suffering twisting her face relaxed as she slipped fully into the Angel's healing embrace. There would still be scars, mental and physical, but they would not destroy her. Guardian Angels were gentle souls. Too gentle, Evie thought ruefully. That did not mean they couldn't summon powerful magic when they chose to.

The boy stroked the sleeping girl's hair, his eyes never leaving her face.

"What's her name?"

"Stef. *Stephanie*. Stephanie Chen. Her Dad is Vietnamese and her mother is French Chinese. Was. *Were*."

"You know, all Guardian Angels fall in love with their charges," Evie's voice was gentle.

His eyes flashed up to hers, face flushed as though he had been caught doing something shameful, dirty.

Evie knelt beside him. "What's your name?"

"Josh."

"Josh, it's okay to love Stephanie. In fact, that's how this is meant to be. You don't have to be ashamed. There is one non-negotiable prerequisite for this job. You can't be an Angel without love in your heart. A lot of love."

His expression mirrored the confusion and doubt over his and Evie's actions. "But I received no orders to interfere. What if I have changed her destiny, or someone else's through this event? Remember, there's no 'I' in Angel."

She looked at him.

He stared back, apparently completely sincere.

Despite the two dead men and gathering darkness roiling up from the Otherwhere to take them, despite the burning car and injured girl, Evie laughed out loud. "Please, tell me your trainers didn't really give you that line after your transition? Not really."

"No 'I' in Angel," he said the words again, like a child reciting a lesson.

She cut him off before he could say anything else. Though no matter what he said, it couldn't be as stupid as *that*. Reaching over she loosened his tightly knotted black tie.

"First of all, this tie is so tight it's cutting off oxygen to your brain. There, that's better."

Josh was dressed like all the Guardian Angels – men or women – Evie had seen: black suit, a little too tight across the shoulders, starched white shirts, and, of course, the slim black tie. They looked like extras from the "Men in Black" movie series.

"Now, take a deep breath and stop beating yourself up. Listen carefully. What are the odds that an Avenging Angel," she pointed at herself, "equipped with a golden sword," she waggled the sword in its scabbard, "would be winging it over the wrong side of LAX at the precise moment on this night to hear you crying? Believe me, it's been a helluva' day and I never expected to end up

here.”

He seemed to consider what she said. Answering finally with a cautious nod.

“Exactly. Very long odds indeed. I'd say since you couldn't or wouldn't take matters into your own hands, a way was found. I mean a 'way', you know?” She pointed up with her index finger. “Things worked out pretty much as they were meant to and the poor thing did not meet a terrifying death. Though I wish you had taken out those two bastards before they shot her parents.”

He gave her a stricken look and his wings tightened protectively around the girl.

“Not everyone has their very own Guardian Angel. Unfair, right? To compensate, you,” she pointed at him, “are supposed to quietly multitask and keep an eye on those less fortunate. Sometimes destiny means just going out and kicking some righteous ass. Orders or no orders. Okay, Josh? If the Otherwhere wanted blind obedience in their Guardian or Avenging Angels, they wouldn't choose humans. They'd animate mannequins for those jobs or squirrels or something.”

That got a smile out of him.

“Neither you nor I am omniscient Celestials and somehow that is how this gig is supposed to work.”

"So I may interpret the events and act accordingly if I have no orders to the contrary?"

That question had no easy answer.

"Faith does not preclude analysis and judgment. Sometimes we make the right mistake for all the wrong reasons and vice versa. Destiny and free will get intertwined like two long-tailed black cats in a brawl. Hard to tell where one ends and the other begins. Just like in life, we can only do what we think is right and hope for the best."

He reached to stroke the girl's hair softly again. "What if I, um, you know, get fired?"

Josh had a point. Even as an Angel, your contract was always up for review.

"Isn't she worth the risk?"

Evie waited with him until the ambulance and police cars arrived, using the time to give young Josh some much-needed advice on interpreting his Angelic mandate and Guardian-related ass kicking.

She wasn't quite sure if she was qualified to play Yoda to the kid. Really, was she any wiser in the ways of the 'force'? And maybe that wasn't such a good analogy since things hadn't turned out so well for the Jedi as she recalled. Still, somebody had to do something and Evie was right here, right now. Standing by and doing nothing had never been an option she was comfortable with.

Besides, if she was reading this young girl's aura right, Stephanie Chen was destined for something important and would need a lot of guarding.

Josh was going to have to man up and fast.