



Jane Beckenham

To Kiss
an Angel

Red Rose Publishing

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

Red Rose Publishing

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Dedication

To my own two angels, Yana and Anzhela, with love.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Prologue

"Gather round, Angels. I have a job for you," Angel Beatrice's voice boomed across the heavens.

Reluctant to give up her prime position on the fluffy white cloud, Angel 459 nevertheless knew a command when she heard it. Shame. The day was sublime with clear blue skies rolling on forever. The perfect day for a snooze before harp practice she decided.

Stretching her arms skyward, her wings fluttered their own protest as she came alongside that cute Angel 007. She smiled at him, only to have Beatrice cough rather loudly.

"Right, there's a job for one of you. A chance to get your very own cloud, so to speak, a chance to have another shot at earth," Beatrice advised.

A collective ooh bounced across the bulbous cloud where the angels congregated.

Angel's heart raced, excitement buzzing to the very tips of her fingers. Her wings flapped repeatedly.

"Settle down, Angel 459," Beatrice countered. "The job isn't yours, yet."

A twitter of giggles and flapping wings circled Angel. Damn it. "Oops sorry Big Bopper," she whispered. She had a habit of giving people nicknames, and knew for a fact that the Almighty kinda liked it, but that was their little secret. "Didn't mean to say that." At least not out loud, she added with a secret wink.

"Sure you did, Angel. You're always speaking without thinking," 007 piped in.

"Am not."

"Angel 459, please step up."

"Me?"

Beatrice directed her clear gaze towards Angel. "You are 459, otherwise known as Angelica?"

Angel nodded.

"Then step forward, girl, don't dilly dally. You've a job to do."

A job. A job. She'd got it. A chance at earth! But the big prize was a new cloud. Closer to the big guy. Angel couldn't help a little skip for joy as her wings flapped and she glided towards Beatrice. The other angels fell back.

"Angel 459, your job, should you choose to accept it..."

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Chapter One

Clark's worry lines deepened. "It's okay, I understand."

Poor boy. She had to put him out of his misery. "No, Clark, you don't. You see heaven is great. Fabulous. Lots of big names. I mean Ghandi, Mother Theresa."

"Elvis," he prompted.

She smiled. "Yep, him too. But Clark, there's one person who isn't there. One person I can't live without. The person I love beyond having wings and going to harp practice."

"Even cloud jumping?" he asked, the tension easing in his eyes.

"Yep, even that. Oh, Clark Lannigan," she said, fingers caressing the curve of his cheek. He captured her hand, holding it in his and brought her fingers back to his lips. He kissed each tip slowly, and very seductively. Angel's toes curled. "I can live without wings, but I can't live without you."

"Really?"

"Really," she reiterated. She leaned against him, her breasts rubbing against his chest, eliciting a heat that coiled way down low. She smiled. "Wings are fun. But you are *a lot* more fun."

"Hey, I can attest to that. I have a list to show you and some photos."

"Of what?"

"Some challenges."

Love swelled in Angel's heart. "You mean you finished them?"

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"Yep. The lingerie, well, that's a surprise for later."

"Sounds exciting."

"Definitely, Angel darling. A treat worth waiting for."

"And the other tasks?"

"Food tastes so much better with your fingers. See," he said and he lifted up his fingers for her to kiss.

She did. Each and every one.

"Very yummy," she laughed.

"I even sat amidst the flowers."

"But it's dark."

"Doesn't matter. I finally found a florist open and sat surrounded by her roses and inhaled."

"Oh, Clark." Angel couldn't think very much, except for how much she loved him.

"But you know there were ten tasks. And I've only done nine."

Heat stole across Angel's cheeks. "But the tenth one was..."

"No kissing," he reminded her.

"How about we scrap that one."

"Good idea," he agreed with mock severity. He wrapped her in his arms.

Floating down to earth took some delicate maneuvering. Things had changed a tad since her last visit. Mind you, that visit had actually been a lifetime ago. Her lifetime

"Twenty feet to go, prepare for landing," the voice said beside her. It was an automatic landing gear, something that accompanied angels when they had a job to do. Angel cast a glance to her right and gave the boss angel a cheery wave.

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She should have been pleased to have the woman's company, not the least her guidance, but the trouble was, having Beatrice around wasn't going to be any fun at all. This was her chance to have a bit of excitement. Lying around on a cloud all day, harp practice, wing races, wasn't all it was cracked up to be. She wanted...FUN. Yep, definitely capital letters.

Her feet touched the ground and instantly the wings attached to her back became invisible along with her white flowing robe, which was rather disconcerting as it was her best one and she'd had to win a few flight races to get that garment.

People thought life in heaven would be a breeze.

Hah! Hah!

Well it wasn't a breeze, more like a full gale force wind most of the time, where an angel had to hang on to the corner of her home cloud with a death-like grip.

Angels. Death. Kind of ironic really.

She glanced down at her feet, shod now in a rather jaunty pair of shoes and tipped her feet this way and that. "This earth thing definitely has its better moments."

A blast of sound ripped through her and Angel jerked bodily.

Another good thing. She had a body.

A body! Yes. A body. Her body. She stilled. Then moved an arm. The arm reflected in a shop window in front of her moved. Her arm. She moved the other. Smiled. Everything in the window did the same and Angel realized she was staring at herself. A rather cute *herself* too. She wanted a closer

inspection. Taking a step forward she peered at herself, fingers trailing her reflection.

"Hey, what are you doing? Don't mark my window with your grubby fingers." A sharp tap resounded on the glass and Angel jumped back, eyes darting to the figure on the other side of the window shaking a stick of some kind at her.

"If you want to look at the merchandise, come in, don't just put paw prints over my window if you please."

Paws indeed. Angel's indignation rose. "I'm not a dog, I don't have paws. These are *my* hands." She waved them with a jaunty flick at the woman on the other side.

"Well just so long as you remember that and don't mark *my* window. Christmas is coming and I've more to do than wipe your paw...fingerprints off *my* window." The woman flounced away, giving Angel a last shake of a single digit.

"Get to work, Angel," came a powerful overhead instruction.

Turning from the window, Angel sighed and cast a furtive glance up and down the street. "Okay, okay, I get it. Work first, then fun."

"You got it, Angel," Beatrice chuckled from her perch atop Major Cloud headquarters.

"Right, Clark Lannigan. Where are you? Where do I start?"

"Trust, 459. Trust."

"I trust you, but how about a tiny hint."

"I can't do that."

"Really? That doesn't seem very fair. The guy could be anywhere on earth."

"Fate always has a way of helping out, Angel. Trust in fate."

"Okay, I'll trust, but how about you make fate hurry up. Let me tell him he needs to lighten up and then I can go and have some *major* fun."

Two hours later and Angel hadn't found him. She'd searched the phone directory with no luck. Beatrice said patience was a virtue. Well, right about now, she seemed all out of virtues.

"How the heck can I fix his problem, if I can't find him?" Discouraged, plus her stomach rumbled, which was a new concept, or at least, one she'd forgotten about since her last visit. Angel tried to remember her last meal, and came up blank.

Across the road, a golden arch winked in the growing darkness. Perhaps it was best to eat first, then start looking again. Work was always easier on a full stomach her mother used to say.

Her mother?

Angel's brows creased, confused by such a thought. Mother? She hadn't thought about her mother for a long time, though she did remember that leaving her had been the hardest thing she'd ever done.

Her stomach rumbled; a sound she was sure was clearly audible to all around her. She pressed the flat of her palm on her stomach. "Hold on, you'll get your sustenance."

Angel stepped out on to the road. Big mistake. A blast of horn, the screech of brakes and the acrid smell of rubber laying a path on the asphalt wrenched her back to reality.

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Earth could be deadly.

But reality came too late and she fell backwards. Hard! Her head slammed against the pavement.

Dear God, was her life repeating itself? She cast a pleading glance skyward, praying Beatrice and just maybe the Big Bopper had their eyes on her. She sure hoped so.

She tried to move. She couldn't. Something heavy held her down. Something warm, heavy...and breathing.

Twisting her head, Angel came eyeball to eyeball with chocolate brown eyes. They reminded her of Hershey's chocolate. Dark. Rich. And very tempting. She liked chocolate.

"You okay?"

The heavy breathing lump shifted, but not before she realized it was a man. A cute, eye candy kinda man too.

Earth was looking up a tad and her job had taken on a degree of enjoyment. Watching eye candy had definite benefits for an angel's equilibrium.

"Angel, you've got a job to do, quit drooling," Beatrice's sharp tone cut into her thoughts.

Darn it. For a moment she had forgotten her boss was of the all seeing and all hearing kind. Her gaze swiveled left and right checking Beatrice wasn't actually physically in the vicinity. Seeing and hearing, albeit from the distance of cloud headquarters was quite close enough thank you.

"Okay, okay, keep your wings on," she grumbled, struggling to sit up, only to fall back to the hard asphalt at her back.

"Pardon?"

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Whoa. Deep and throaty. Sexy. Angel's eyes flicked open. Suddenly the headache that had been threatening and the hunger gnawing at her innards, evaporated. This cutie pie was far more enticing. She pasted a smile on her face, though her body hummed and her head seemed to be swimming with the sharks. But heck, her eyesight was 20/20.

She heard the distinct tap, tap of Beatrice's toe tapping and the frantic beat of the woman's wings. But none of that mattered. Oh, no. Only the vision divine in front of her.

"Angel!"

Beatrice's chastisement reached her in a soft whisper. Angel's lips pursed. "Go away."

"Can I help you up? Sorry I landed on you."

"I'm not."

"Pardon?"

"Um...I mean, use me for a landing mat any time."

"Are you okay?"

Those sharks began biting at her brain cells and her vision blurred. She swayed.

Strong arms snaked around her waist, guiding her to a half concrete wall at the side of the pavement. "Here. Sit down."

"A regular knight in shining armor," she said, trying to feign fluttering eyelashes at the guy, taking note that she must remember to pass out more often if it meant hunks would come to her rescue.

And still dark eyes stared down at her, brows creased with concern. "Yeah well, I'll try not to land on you next time."

"There's going to be a next time?"

"No...I mean..."

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"I don't mind. Really I don't. If you want to tackle me to the ground go right ahead. Are you a footballer?"

"No."

"An athlete?"

He shook his head.

"Hell!"

"459!"

"Okay, okay," she whispered skyward.

"Okay what?" Mr. Sexy-eyes questioned. His voice definitely matched his eyes. Sexy. Warm and smooth as velvet.

Darn. She had to remember not to speak aloud, at least not to AB a.k.a. Angel Beatrice. More than likely she'd be committed to the funny farm if she carried on like that.

Someone passed her a paper cup of water, but as she took it, her hand shook and the water spilt across her newly acquired designer outfit. "Oh no." The water spread across her cute skirt. Her cute skirt with a tear in it, plus her heels, the ones she had found out were Manolo's, were now Manolo's minus a heel.

"You're not going to faint on me are you?" Hunk took the cup from her fingers and held it to her lips.

She took a quick peek at him. He sure did concern well, plus the hunk factor had to be considered a major ten out of ten. She slid her gaze, in all its fuzzy glory from his beautiful head and chocolate eyes down...and then right back up. If he asked, she could always say it was because she was dizzy.

But she'd been wrong giving him a ten. The man definitely earned an eleven plus.

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She took the opportunity to rest a still shaking hand on his as he held the cup for her. There was a zing, and a definite tingle from him that shot right through her.

Beatrice's warning came instantly. "Concentrate, 459."

How the he...heck could she do that? She'd been nearly killed. Again. Plus squashed by someone who really should be playing quarterback. Angel blinked several times, trying to gather her wits, though not quite sure if they were where they should be. Her brain wouldn't work. All shook up. "Oh, jeez, I'm sounding like an Elvis advert now."

"Elvis?"

She shook her head. Silly move. Pain pinged every square inch of her brain, so she did the easier task and squeezed her eyes shut. "Nope," she said, relishing the darkness for a moment, "he has definitely left the building; actually he lives on cloud 27.3, not far from the Big Bopper. Did you know that he's one of BB's favorites?"

Suddenly, Angel realized everyone around her had silenced. She opened her eyes slowly. They all stared at her, that wide eyed, what have we got here kinda stare. The...oh, she's nuts stare.

She pressed her lips together. She had better cut out the nut-speak, otherwise there would be a straightjacket in her near future. "It's okay, really, I'm just excited."

"Excited? You nearly got yourself killed."

She looked up at the hunk. "I...well, you know, it's not every day an ang...gal," she corrected quickly, "gets rescued."

"Sure hope you don't want a repeat performance."

Oh yes please. Arms and legs entwined had kind of a nice feel to it.

"459!"

Yeah, yeah, I know, keep it seemly. But she couldn't help herself. "I will if you will."

He smiled at her then and that really did make it all okay. It was one of those beautiful smiles, perfect in all respects, but natural, not something from a \$20,000 dental bill. And when he smiled, the corners of his eyes went with it too.

Definitely yummy.

"Can I call someone for you, a husband, or boyfriend?"

Here was her chance. "I have no one." She fluttered her eyelashes, doing the best damsel in distress she could.

His eyes darkened, and Angel suddenly remembered she had to breathe.

Oh yes, definitely very yummy.

Hunk loosened his tie then, revealing a smidgen of dark curling hair beneath a crisp white shirt. Tiny beads of perspiration dotted his temples.

Her tongue slid across her lips. Those dots seemed rather thirst quenching, and she had a raging thirst.

Hunk swallowed. "Perhaps you should go to the hospital, get checked out."

"No!" She sprang to her shaky feet. "Whoa! Bad move." Her world slid decidedly sideways.

"What's your name?"

"Angel."

"Do you have a surname?"

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Did she? She couldn't exactly say hi my name's Angel 459. She wracked her brains for a name, any name. "Smith." Sounded okay. Basic. Simple. Untraceable.

"Well, Angel Smith, what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know." She had a job to do, but who the heck knew where to start? She'd walked for hours with no sign of him, no hint from above where to exactly look. Quite frankly she wasn't sure she wanted this job any more. "I'm searching for someone," she said.

"Hey, mister, give us a picture, you're the hero of the hour."

Angel stared up at him again. The man was her idol. "Isn't he just."

A flashbulb burst into the darkness, haloing them in a golden glow. The irony of the moment didn't go amiss. But as quickly as the crowd formed, the necessity of the search for the perfect Christmas gift lured the onlookers away, leaving just the two of them.

Feeling rather awkward, Angel scrambled to her feet, wishing she had her wings to counterbalance the effects of her fall.

Silly angel. Nothing to do with the fall, but the hunk holding you.

But the reality was she couldn't hang around, no matter how much she'd like to cozy up with the hunk. She had a job to do. "I better get going I suppose."

"Where to?"

She shrugged.

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"You're in no fit state to wander around, Angel," he said. His rich voice, tinged with a sensual huskiness did seriously kinky things to her insides she reckoned no angel should actually feel. Well, that would be Beatrice's spin on it. But what the heck, Angel wasn't about to announce those feelings out loud. Oh, no siree, best to keep Beatrice in the clueless category in this instance.

"How about I buy you coffee?"

"Really?" Angel couldn't help but smack her lips at the thought. Angels didn't drink coffee, or eat food for that matter. Heaven didn't need sustenance. The idea however of a rich, dark coffee made earth seem even sweeter right now.

The coffee shop was one of those fifties type diners, all chrome and red plastic booths. The waitress didn't exactly roller blade towards them, actually she didn't saunter either, more a slow gait of unexcited disinterest. She didn't ask what they wanted, but hunk gave their orders. Angel was quite happy to let him take charge while she took everything in. The atmosphere, the sounds, and oh, Lordy, the smells. She inhaled deeply, eyes shutting. Simply divine.

The clatter of coffee cups being deposited on their Formica table tore her back from wallowing in the thought of food. Funny how it all started to matter the moment she landed back on earth.

"Your coffee," he said, holding his cup in front of him, and dropping his gaze towards hers.

Heat stole up Angel's neck. "Thank you..." She stumbled over her words, realizing she didn't know who he was and yet

here she was passing the time of day with a stranger, a man who could be a Jack the Ripper wanna be, for all she knew.

"Impossible, 459. The Ripper went to that other place," Beatrice interrupted.

Angel gulped. That other place of course was the fiery dungeon below. Hell. "I don't know your name," she said.

"Clark." He offered another of those slow smiles of his, and his eyes crinkled again, while tiny gold and silver flecks glittered across the irises.

"Clark." The word slid across her tongue, a caress that plucked at her still muddled brain.

"Clark Lannigan," he added.

Angel's cup dropped from her hand, crashing to the table, its contents spewing across the mottled Formica. She jumped from her seat. Another bad move. Her head spun, everything a tangle of images and sounds all out of focus. It was one of those heart in her stomach and her stomach wanting to spit it right out kind of moments. Her mouth opened and shut. Twice. Not a good look. But hell...yes hell, hell, hell.

"You!" Her accusation echoed around the diner, all voices silenced, eyes directed at her. Waiting. Watching.

Just like him. He watched too. And waited.

But what could she tell him? Hiya. Did you know you're the guy I've been hunting for? Oh, and by the way, I'm your angel from cloud eighty-eight.

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Chapter Two

Clark couldn't take his eyes off her. Didn't want to either. But every time he looked at her, a savage guilt churned in his belly.

Don't look.

He was *sort of, kind of, nearly* engaged. Nearly. But not quite. Not yet.

So he looked, which didn't make him particularly honorable...but heck!

Angel Smith sat opposite him. Normally, he was a long hair kinda guy. Funny how he'd never realized how sexy short hair could be. Her hair was blond. Not bottle blond, but a halo of blond curls that fitted her head as if a cap. It gave her a cute pixie kind of look. But then, it was more like cute...and sexy all rolled into one.

Clark shook his head. Sheesh. He was fantasizing now. Get a grip!

He snatched up his coffee and drained the cup, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He stopped half way, realizing she followed his every move, and right now she stared at his mouth. Soft hazel eyes, the ones where flecks of ocean green and the smoldering grey of a humid summer sky slashed across the iris changing the eye color as the owner's emotions changed. They held his gaze. And held *him* captive. His blood heated. God, she was gorgeous.

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Clark placed his empty cup on the table with over the top precision. He offered her a shrug and a smile. "I had best be off. I'm glad you're okay."

A wave of panic washed across her face, and guilt tugged at his conscience. The woman had nearly been run over and all he could think about was getting out of there.

"Do you have to go?" she asked, her voice whisper-soft, tinged with a hint of desperation.

He didn't have the chance to answer her as his mobile chose that minute to erupt into an electronic jangled version of Mommy Kissing Santa Claus. He rummaged in his pocket and grabbed his phone, cutting off the damn song, someone's idea of a joke. It was common knowledge in his office Clark didn't do Christmas. Obviously some smart Alec had switched his phone to ring Christmas songs. Didn't they know he was the boss? He put the phone to his ear only to pull it back for a split second as Jess, his secretary, babbled down the phone line. "Whoa, hold on, Jess. What do you mean you have to go? I've got that deal to put together this week. I need you."

"And my mother needs me, Clark. Dad's had a stroke and she can't cope on her own. I'm sorry, but family comes first. I'll be back after Christmas." The phone line went dead, and Clark sank back down to his seat.

"A problem?"

He shook his head, realizing where he was and who had asked. He faced Angel; saw concern etched in her eyes. She was worried about him, yet she didn't even know him. A new experience for Clark. He was used to people wanting

something, never doing anything for nothing. Not even being concerned, unless there was a payoff.

"My secretary has had to take emergency leave, trouble is it's coming up to Christmas, no way am I able to get a relief temp this late."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too. I have a deal on the table. Jess, my secretary," he explained, "knows all the procedures. I can rely on her."

"What about your wife, can't she help?"

Clark bit out laugh. "Nope. Don't have one of those." He saw the flicker of surprise in Angel's eyes, and the heat of interest. "Well, not yet," he amended. He and Larissa had been dating for...well, several years, but somehow he couldn't seem to take the next step. They seemed...mundane. Settled.

That thought caught him off guard. Since when had he wanted excitement? He'd given up excitement. It brought too much heartache.

Clark squashed the hint of disquiet and fixed his gaze on Angel. A cute name for a gorgeous woman. It matched her bubbly personality. But cute, gorgeous and bubbly spelt danger in his experience.

"So what are you going to do?" she asked.

He frowned. "Try an agency I suppose, though I don't hold out much hope."

"I could do it."

"Pardon?"

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Angel offered a tentative smile that snagged at something deep down inside him. He shifted uncomfortably and wished he had ordered another strong cup of black coffee, or three.

"Me. I could help out."

"Are you sure? Do you know Word and Windows?"

"Of course."

Her answer was confident. He stared at her for a moment, took in her designer clothes. She obviously wasn't a waif from the streets. "I thought you were looking for someone?"

"I am, but he can wait," she said with a slight upward tilt of her chin.

"Do you live around here?"

Her eyes dulled.

"A problem?"

"Could be. I've only arrived in town today and don't have anywhere to live, yet. Christmas is nearly here."

"And there's no room at the Inn," he finished for her.

She offered a crooked kind of smile. It was cute and sexy at the same time. "Something like that."

For a moment silence reigned between them and with each passing second a sense of urgency took hold of Clark. He needed to get that deal, seal the fate of the chain of heritage hotels he intended to upgrade and reinvent as a boutique group. "Stay with me." The words were out before he'd had a chance to even assimilate what his brain thought.

"Great."

Horror and shock collided in one foul swipe at what he'd done. Dear God, she had accepted. Clark cursed. He should

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have thought it through. Should never have offered. Where did that leave him now?

With a secretary, a lodger, and a girlfriend who wouldn't be pleased.

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Bingo, she'd hit the jackpot. Found her man. How easy was that!

"See, faith, 459," Beatrice whispered in her ear.

Angel smiled. Now all she had to do was loosen the guy up, and hey presto, she had nailed somewhere to park her wings. The fact that her target wasn't bad on the eye had to be an added bonus.

"Welcome to my lair."

Angel's head swiveled, her belly doing a nosedive at the same time the slide of ice washed through her veins at tsunami-like proportions. "I beg your pardon."

"Joke!"

Oh. Sheesh she had to get used to these earth jokes. Perhaps she could mention wings and clouds and the Big Bopper. That could get a laugh.

Well, maybe not. She remembered the straight jacket, and decided to take all thoughts of offering her version of a joke off the agenda for the time being.

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Clark dumped a bulging briefcase on one of the two velvet-covered couches and followed it with his jacket. "Your room is the second door on the left. It has its own ensuite so there's no chance of..." His voice trailed off.

"I get the picture," she said saving his embarrassment.

"Are you sure about your luggage?"

Angel's lips flickered, offering a hint of a smile. She had to play this one out. "It's at the railway station. I'll get it couriered later if that's okay," she said.

Clark nodded, dragging a hand through his hair. It was black. Black as any night Angel had seen above cloud level. It suited him. Dark and mysterious and with eyes imitating the best chocolate in the world, he looked good enough to make an angel sin.

Angel squeezed her eyes closed. Bad, Angel. Bad, bad, bad.

"Look, this is kind of embarrassing," he said.

Oh, oh, here goes. "You're married? Or are you gay and when your lover finds out you have a woman in residence it's not going to go down well?"

Shock etched itself across his expression. "No, I'm not gay, but if I was...oh hell, no that's not it. Look, I'm kind of, sort of, nearly engaged."

Angel offered a shrug. "Yep, fine by me."

He said nothing in response, and suddenly Angel wised up. "Oh I get it, you don't want me playing raspberry."

"Gooseberry."

"What?"

"It's gooseberry," he corrected, "not raspberry."

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Realization dawned and a furious heat stole up her neck, coloring her cheeks. Her wings, invisible since she fluttered down to earth, did a trio of flaps offering her own private cooling system. "Ooops. My mistake. Raspberry, gooseberry, strawberry," she shrugged. "Doesn't matter. You want some time with your honey, I'll skedaddle outta here, just say the word."

"That won't be necessary."

"Really? Shame. You're a sexy dude, you know, don't want it going to waste."

"Waste?" He uttered several expletives. "Look, will you put a cork in it." He spun away on his very expensive heels, though not Manolo's. Angel preened as she glanced down at her own expensively shod feet.

Clark stopped at a doorway that led off from the lounge. He turned to face her. "Good night, Angel. Pleasant dreams."

But in true Angel fashion, she just couldn't help herself. She was having a great time. She winked at him, and then what did he do? Clark Lannigan rolled his eyes at her. But, oh what eyes!

"Nite, boss."

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Chapter Three

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead.

A burst of light slammed around all four walls and brought Angel sharply into awake mode. She dragged the covers over her head. "Go away. This cloud is taken. Try cloud 23.8," she grumbled.

"Boy you sure are a deep sleeper. That must be a powerful dream you're having."

Angel burst from beneath the covers and bolted upright. Daylight! A room. Not a cloud. Her head jettisoned in the direction of the voice.

Her room?

Him.

It all came flooding back. She had a job to do.

Find him. Check.

Make him have fun—barely a clue on that one.

Flitting from cloud to cloud and twanging on a harp she could do. Making her target have fun? Hmm. That could take some time.

"We leave in twenty minutes," Clark advised with far too much good humor for this time of the day.

"Leave?"

"For the office, or are you reneging on our deal?"

Angel wasn't quite sure her offer to help had been a deal, but she let that moot point pass. This early she wasn't up to debating anything, at least not until she'd had her first fix of caffeine.

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"Coffee," she managed to croak, hoping he'd take the hint.

"Brewing as we speak." He went to leave.

"Are you always this perky in the morning?" Freshly showered, shaved and dressed, Clark looked even better than last night. Dark trousers, a crisp white shirt open at the neck. Angel swallowed and dragged her eyes away.

"I've work to do, and so do you," he reminded her.

"Okay, okay. I'm getting up." Angel held the covers to her chest, knowing she looked prim and...well...angelic. She offered him the best imitation of a smile she could garner at this hour. "You, Mr. Lannigan better get your cute butt out of here so I can get up and shower."

"Yes ma'am. And here I was thinking I was the boss. Looks like I got myself a bossy boots."

Angel tossed her pillow at him, which of course didn't go anywhere near where she aimed it, but bounded off the wall and tumbled to the floor as he shut the door on her.

"So much for all that cloud tossing Beatrice makes us do," she grumbled, hauling herself from the best night's sleep she'd had in a long while. She thought about life back in the clouds and shrugged. She supposed throwing puffball clouds and tossing the odd hailstone didn't quite match up to earthly exercise.

Out of bed, Angel eyed the clothes she'd worn yesterday. They looked more than a tad worse for wear, the shoes scraped and one heel although sort of fixed, was at a decidedly precarious angle. She slumped down on her bed.

What could she do? She'd promised Clark and couldn't let him down. Besides meeting him in such incongruous

circumstances had to be all tangled up with her 'real' job. She had to keep close to him, figure out how she could make him understand. Make him wake up. Be happy. Have fun.

"Ye have little faith, Angel 459."

"Beatrice?" Angel jumped from the bed, spinning one eighty.

Bad move. Her head spun as fast as her body and nothing stood still. Her boss hovered on the window ledge, which was rather a miracle in itself, given the heavenly angel was no spring chicken and rather more cherubic-like. But then, Angel reminded herself, miracles were what it was all about.

"What am I going to do, Beatrice? He expects me at work. There are no clothes. Well only this lot and they're way past its use by date. I told him I had a suitcase at the railway station, and it was being couriered."

Beatrice stared down her rather precarious nose through frameless glasses. "You lied, 459?"

Guilt shook Angel. Angels didn't lie. It was the first rule of Angelhood. She nodded, color tainting to the tips of her now invisible wings.

"Did you think we would leave you adrift, 459? This is a serious task you undertake."

"I know."

The angel waved a bejeweled hand toward the wardrobe. "Then have faith. Go look."

Angel took heed of the prompt and levered herself from the bed and padded on bare feet across the thick pile carpet to the wardrobe. She hesitated, giving Beatrice a look of uncertainty across her shoulder.

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The angel boss nodded, each layer of her chin joining the other. "Faith, Angel 459," she reminded Angel.

Angel opened the wardrobe door and blinked. Once. Twice. Three times for good measure.

Dresses, skirts, trousers, shoes. Oh yes, and another pair of glorious Manolo's. Not a hanger unadorned, or an empty shelf. "How?"

"This is an important job. You needed a little help, that's all." Beatrice offered her a nod and a wink.

Angel smiled her pleasure right back. "Great help if you can get it."

"Right," Beatrice flicked her wings double time. "My job is done, I'm off."

Shock gripped Angel, forcing her to turn from the myriad of colorful clothes. "You're leaving me? For how long?"

"Long enough."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, 459, you're on your own now."

Angel felt her eyes do that bulgy thing again. "Alone." Her voice came out more of a blubbering plea. "You're joking right?" She glanced around the room. She was in a room, in a strange man's house. Alone. "Beatrice, is this one of those earth jokes?"

The boss angel remained silent, a secretive smile curving the experienced angel's lips. Angel didn't like that look. It didn't bode well.

She rested her hands on her hips, felt the tiny shiver of her wings. "So let me get this right, you've provided the task, the clothes, and now I'm on my own?"

Beatrice nodded.

"What the heck am I meant to do?"

Beatrice smacked her lips together, in a tut, tut sort of way. "You accepted the task, 459."

"Sorry. But, well, heck this is all new to me, at least, it's been a while since I touched down, so to speak."

Beatrice tapped the tip of a long polished nail to her nose. She smiled in that, 'I know more than you know,' kind of way. "You'll figure it out, 459. I have utmost confidence in you."

Angel couldn't believe it. "You do?"

"Absolutely."

Beatrice's confirmation went a long way in boosting Angel's flagging spirits. "Yes, but that was before..."

"Before what?"

Angel struggled to find the right words.

"Don't let him get to you, 459," her boss interceded.

Angel's denial flew from her lips before her wings had a chance to flutter. "I don't know what you mean."

Beatrice's expression took on a pained look, the kind when an angel's wingtips were caught in the washer ring. And that brought Angel to another rather more imminent problem. Computers.

"What am I going to do? He expects me to be computer literate."

Beatrice's brow creased, with as many folds as her chins. "Oh."

"Just, oh? No bright ideas."

"I'm not of the computer generation," Beatrice professed.

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"Well, heck I've been cloud bound for a rather long time too, don't forget. Last time I visited earth they had only invented electric typewriters."

"So how do you propose to work for Clark?"

Angel's eyes widened. "Clark now is it? Anyone would think you've got the hots for him, Bea. I mean how long is it since you fluttered *your* wings?"

A rather becoming shade of scarlet colored Beatrice's cheeks and Angel recognized her embarrassment. She knew she shouldn't be enjoying it, but heck, wasn't laughter the best medicine.

"Not at another's expense."

Angel recognized the Big Bopper's censorious tone anywhere. Even on earth. She looked over at Beatrice still propped on her ledge. "Sorry," she said shrugging. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Yes, well. Clark Lannigan is rather"

"A hunk," Angel finished for her. She smiled up at her boss, though her smile did nothing to counter the tension coiling into a tight knot in her stomach. In the not too distant future, minutes to be exact, she was to play secretary and she didn't have a clue what a secretary did.

Her conversation with Beatrice had transgressed from computers to hunks. Angel knew which topic would prove far more interesting, but right now computers it had to be. "So can you give me a crash course, somehow, Bea?" she pleaded.

"I can flood your brain cells when required."

"You can? Gosh, that's a neat trick."

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"No trick, merely a necessity. We have many angels who visit earth on such tasks as this and they require an information download."

"Topping them up on progress."

"Of course. Now, I must go, and you have a job to do."

"I do. But for the life of me, I'm not quite sure what it entails, or for that matter how I'm going to get from A to B, or is that Z?" Angel said, more musing, than questioning her boss. She had already recognized that apart from the updated information Beatrice promised her, she really was on her own. "How the heck am I going to make Clark Lannigan like playing? The guy is a workaholic, a 24/7 kinda guy. Sexy as sin, but definitely boring."

* * * *



* * * *

Half an hour later, grateful Clark accepted without question her teeny tiny lie that her suitcase arrived while he was taking a call, she had dressed to thrill in killer heels that any self-respecting gal would drool over. Now, as he strode into the headquarters of Lannigan Developments and she struggled to keep up, her heels wobbled. Actually, she wobbled, dangerously close to collapsing on the ground in an ungainly heap. She reached a hand out to Clark. "Whoa there, tiger, do you think you can slow down a tad?"

He tossed her a pained expression. "Can't you speed up?"

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Her breath burned in her lungs and she found herself doing a couple of those hop, skip and jumps every few meters. A dangerous game given her altitude in heels. "Clark Lannigan, are you always this focused?"

"Why not?" He shrugged. "Time is money."

"Said Ebenezer Scrooge," she grumbled. Her heels did a precarious dance and she snatched at his jacket sleeve. "And my ankles are about to snap, so hold on a darn second," she wailed. "Oh, hell. Sorry, BB," she offered quickly. Her legs began to buckle, knees jelly-like.

"Here." A hand snaked around her waist, hauling her upright, and holding her hard against a firm muscled body.

"Thanks." Even to her own ears, her voice sounded all sexy and breathless. The breathless she understood, the sexy, well that was definitely strange as in weird.

Clark didn't let up and she had to focus solely on her feet, putting one foot firmly on the ground to propel herself forward.

"If you didn't wear those ridiculous heels you might actually be able to walk."

Angel's gaze widened with mock horror. "Okay, so they're high."

"They're lethal," he countered.

She smiled, and still holding on tight to his sleeve, wiggled one foot in front of her. "Definitely," she preened. "Dangerous and gorgeous."

"Impractical," he snorted right back at her.

She shot him a disbelieving look. "You don't like them? And here I was thinking any self-respecting man would drool

over them. I mean they're sex on heels really, don't you think?" she asked. She lifted her foot and rested it on his thigh, digging her heel slightly into his flesh for an added bit of fun.

Clark's adam's apple bulged.

For several long heated seconds she simply stared at him, then slowly lowered her foot to the ground, but she didn't let go of Clark's arm. Oh, no. She held on tight. They walked across the skyway that connected the penthouse to the office complex. Angel stabbed the button to call the elevator. "So, Mr. Lannigan," she said turning to him and giving him her best mega-watt smile. "What do you do for fun?"

"Fun?"

"Yeah, play time. You know what they say about all work and no play. You need some fun in your life, Clark baby."

His gaze narrowed on her, centered, and very controlled. It made Angel wonder briefly if she'd gone too far. Too bad. This was her job. She had to succeed. Her new home cloud was dependent upon it.

"Seems to me you're chicken, Clark Lannigan."

"Is that a challenge?" One dark brow arched imperceptibly and then he chuckled. It was one of those deep down rumbling sort that grew and wrapped itself around you. "In your dreams, Angel," he offered.

The elevator doors opened and he summarily stepped in. Angel stared after him, mouth open. She scanned his back. His broad shouldered back, where his torso narrowed to slim hips and long legs.

Lordy this man was definitely dangerous.

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Deciding it was best to say nothing, realizing for the first time that Clark had her on the back foot and she wasn't too comfortable with it, she simply followed him, the elevator doors closing a moment later.

Five seconds of silence.

Ten. Still silent.

Twenty.

The elevator came to a halt and the announcement informed them in a straight-laced tone they had reached the thirty-third floor and to have a nice day.

"You too," Angel quipped as she virtually raced after Clark.

He tossed her a 'are you nuts', look. "Are you always this wacky?"

"Beats chirpy at the crack of dawn," she shot back with a broad smile.

Clark harrumphed and increased his stride down the hallway.

"Wait up."

"Keep up," he shot back.

Breathless, and vowing that she would never wear sex on heels again, she came up hard against Clark's back. "You stopped."

"You didn't look."

Angel felt his heat. And hers. They were a tango of heat. She pushed herself off him. Off his hard muscled back. "This is going to be an interesting day," she muttered under her breath. Interesting in a scary, out of control, sort of way, she rued.

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Clark threw the door open to an office. Not just any office, but an office above ground. Way above ground. Thirty-three floors up from the ground. Angel slammed herself up against the wall. Why now? Heights hadn't mattered last night.

That's because there was eye candy on the agenda.

But now! "Stop! Don't go any further," she wailed.

Clark spun round, hands on hips, the slash of dark brows beetling. "What the heck is wrong now?"

Sweat sparked an instant bead across Angel's forehead. She couldn't move. Not one little itsy bitsy finger even. She stared straight ahead, paling with every passing second. "That," she said, nodding toward the large span of glass haloing the skyline, too scared to open her eyes fully.

Clark's head swiveled and he glanced at the stunning vista behind him. "Prime real estate, if I don't say so myself," he with one of those self-satisfied all businessman type of smiles. "Waited ten years to get this spot."

"Why the heck couldn't you have waited a bit longer? Say, till forever," she countered.

A slow awareness lit in Clark's dark eyes. "You're scared?" he questioned not unkindly, eyes gentling with understanding. He took a step closer to her and Angel realized that in that simple action he used his body to block out the view. "Focus on me Angel. Don't look anywhere but at me."

"Good viewing," she quipped, but really what she felt inside was fair dinkum scared. Petrified. Her gaze moved above Clark's shoulder ever so slightly. Silly move. Her equilibrium took a nosedive.

"You're not looking at me."

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"I know it may be hard to comprehend that a woman doesn't want to gaze longingly at your gorgeous face," she said. Lordy how stupid could she be. Flirting and scared. Great way to hook a guy.

Clark stepped closer and Angel really looked this time. She had no option. The man was so close she could see the fine hairs on his wrists. She could smell him. Her nostrils flared. And by heck, he smelled good too. All heat and spice. Testosterone.

Gorgeous.

Heat scalded her cheeks. Was it hot in here?

His mouth quirked up at one corner. Very sexy. Lights danced in his eyes. Blast the man. He was enjoying himself at her expense.

Angel blinked and the towering edifices of the CBD drew her gaze to the skyline. Bad move. She quickly refocused on Clark.

He was still close. Nice close. Hot close. Sexy close. And Angel was darned sure the feelings Clarke stirred weren't what angels were meant to feel. Not all needy and wanting.

Then, surprising her, his lips touched hers. So soft and gentle. Sweet. And so very yummy. Which just went to show, she reasoned as every inch of her focused on his mouth, that yummy guys had very yummy mouths.

Clark kissed her, and Angel liked it a lot. It had been a long time since she'd been kissed. Her eyes shuttered, all thoughts of clouds and angels twanging harps disappearing the moment his mouth moved over hers, the taste of his tongue against her lips teasingly erotic.

Erotic! Did angels do erotic?

Her eyes flew open, and Angel swore she heard her wings do a tango of excited flaps.

"Did it work?"

"Work?" *Yeah remember, you're meant to be working.*

Angel looked once more over Clark's rather broad shoulder, over the beautiful texture of his jacket and locked her gaze on the panorama. The sky. The clouds. The thirty odd floors fall to the ground. She gulped hard and squeezed her eyes closed.

"Doesn't seem like it worked," Clark confirmed, his breath warm against her ear.

She shook her head, but kept her eyes closed.

"Perhaps we need to try again."

It only took a split second before she realized what he meant, but it was too late. He kissed her. Again. And this time there was nothing sweet or gentle about his kiss. Oh, no siree. This was the real deal, full, passionate, and double on the very, very yummy scale.

Angel wanted it to go on forever. The taste of him zinged through her bones, and yes, her wings did their happy flap dance again. Heck, even her toes did a squeeze of joy that in hindsight wasn't a good idea. She wobbled.

Clark's hands tightened their hold around her waist and he pulled her closer, his lips nuzzling a sensual path along her jaw line to the base of her earlobe.

"Very nice."

Angel's response was instant. "Heaven." *Definitely heaven.* Her eyes flew open. Oh, hell!

"Angel!" Beatrice's warning came on a rush of air.

Flustered, and more than a bit worried she'd be whisked back to cloud base and lose her job, Angel pulled away, splayed fingers pressed against Clark's hard chest. "We can't. I can't." Just then, the phone on the desk at the far end of the room, running at right angles to the glass that caused this whole fiasco in the first place, rang.

Clark stared at her, his face a mask of...nothing. No emotion. No hint of what had transpired between them. But his breathing, now, that was different. It came in short, sharp ragged bursts and definitely showed Clark Lannigan was *not* calm and collected.

Just why that made Angel extremely happy, she wasn't sure. But it did. The question was though, how would it make her task easier?

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Chapter Four

Angels weren't meant to get snappy, or angry, but right now Angel wanted very much to take her pointy toed Manolos and kick the butt of the photocopier to...well hell would be a good place. She gave the beastie machine the evil-eye.

Every five minutes, for the last hour, the darn thing decided to clank its way to non-operational mode. Angel was over this secretary stuff. Harp practice would be a piece of cake after today.

"Where are those reports I asked you for, Angel?" Clark peered around the corner and she jumped to attention.

"Nearly ready. I...um."

"Have you shrunk?" His gaze dropped to her feet and she found herself crossing one foot bare foot over the other.

"You were right. Those shoes are dangerous," she said with a tiny shrug.

His eyes lit up. "Told you so."

Angel propped herself up on tippy toes, trying for some advantage. She failed miserably. "I suppose you're going to gloat now?"

"Probably." He grinned, which confirmed he was definitely gloating.

Offering him her best withering glare, she turned from his insufferable satisfaction, gathered up the stack of papers from the paper tray and handed them to him. "The beast has a mind of its own," she grumbled.

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Clark took the papers, shuffling them into a tidier pile than the scattered heap she'd held out to him. "That's what you said about the computer and using Vista."

"Vista! In my world that's another word for a view. The view out your window is a vista. Not some gobbledygook in a box."

"The terminal?"

"Yeah, that thing," she agreed, though she would have preferred not to even think about the disaster on that front. Five documents already corrupted, and several more disappeared to some place no one knew and couldn't find.

"Are you sure you've done this before?" he asked, tone devoid of any humor.

Oh glory be! "This?" she repeated, trying for time to come up with an answer.

"Worked as a secretary," he prompted.

Angel prayed she could restrain the flush creeping up her neck and very quickly towards her cheeks. "Yes, yes, of course, many times," she bluffed, refusing to lick her finger and cross her heart.

Clark's eyes darkened to that rich chocolate she loved. Actually he tasted kinda like it too, she mused.

"Angel?"

The blush she'd valiantly tried to stem, stole a path across her cheeks. "Um, yes."

"I've a meeting in fifteen minutes. Please organize the coffee, bring in the files and don't forget George Sanson likes decaffeinated, oh," Clark instructed, halting mid-stride

towards his office, "and I want you in the meeting to take notes."

"Notes?" she croaked.

"You can do that, can't you?"

"Sh..." Angel snagged that retort *tout suite*. No use getting another strike against her wings from above. "Sure, I'm a dab hand at shorthand, long hand, dictaphone, you name it," she enthused, though kept her voice as low as possible hoping those in higher places couldn't hear the third lie she'd had to utter since she awoke.

Clark gave her a sharp nod and with that continued into his office. He left the door open and Angel quickly realized he wanted her to follow.

Darn it.

She'd steered clear of *that* room as much as possible, one glance out his window and she became a gibbering idiot.

More like an idiot for taking this job, 459, she chastised herself. Funny how she could fly in her job as an angel, but put her on earth and suddenly heights seemed to take on enormous proportions. Go figure! She quietly thanked the heavens again that her mind, okay, her eyes too, had been on other things last night, and not on the view from Clark's apartment.

They were on Clark, admit it!

Angel tucked that little bit of information away.

Twenty minutes later, Clark's visitors had filed into his office, all dour faced and silent.

"What's got in their croak," Angel muttered as she balanced a tray of coffees on one hand and tucked her note

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pad and pencils under the other. She eyed the door as if it were the devil itself. Perhaps it was better this devil than that other one.

"Take a seat, Angel, we need to get started."

Clark didn't give her time to even breathe and it was only because she realized all eyes were steadfastly fixed on her as she tottered from the sideboard where she'd placed the coffees to the board table that she managed to stifle the retort on the tip of her tongue.

She sank into the seat next to Clark; grateful he'd placed her chair with its back to the glass so she didn't have to stare at the vast space of nothingness.

For the next hour Clark's business guests briefed him on the progress on a boutique hotel he intended developing across the other side of town. As Angel listened to his ideas for the regeneration of the area, she found herself lost in the world of facts and figures.

Finally, Clark gathered his papers together and stood. "Well, gentlemen, I think that's it. Everything is in place; we can go ahead and demolish the buildings at the back of the hotel. It'll make a beautiful park for the guests."

With everyone out of the room, Angel gathered up the empty cups though she kept her gaze averted from the window, then made her way back to her office.

She had a screed of notes to decipher. So much for her note taking skills. She only hoped she could transcribe what looked more like gibberish into good old plain English.

"I need those notes by the end of the day, Angel," Clark informed her before she'd had a chance to even sit at her desk.

"Yes, sir."

And that was how the rest of her day went. Hunched over a computer she barely understood and peering at the scribbles on her notepad that with every passing tick of the clock made less sense.

Hours rolled by and she still had to finalize the meeting notes, print them out and make sure they were emailed to the attendees.

The door to her office, an outer office to Clark's opened. Angel flicked the mouse to the save button and clicked before lifting her head to face her visitor.

Trouble was the visitor didn't wait and already had a hand on the door to Clark's office. Angel scrambled to her feet.

"Hey you can't just barge in."

The visitor stopped, and for the first time Angel managed to get a good look at her. Tall, statuesque, elegant, and rich, were words that instantly sprang to mind, followed closely by cold fish. The woman's haughty stare said it all as she gazed down her aquiline nose at Angel.

"Can't?" Icy eyes slid up and down Angel, who knew instinctively the woman assessed her clothing, adding up the cost in the process.

"Where's Jess?"

"Not here. But that doesn't mean you can simply barge into Clark's office."

"Clark's? Don't you mean, Mr. Lannigan?"

"Yes. I...well, you still can't go in unannounced."

"So announce me."

Angel pulled herself up to her full five foot five inch height and rubbed suddenly damp palms down the sides of her skirt. Whoever this woman was, she was enjoying Angel's discomfort as a supercilious smile stretched over plump lips.

Collagen. Buckets of it. I bet.

"Angel! Not nice," the reprimand came quickly from above.

Tough

Beatrice never had the chance to whisper another word in Angel's ear, as the woman cut into the silence. "What are you waiting for?"

"For you to tell me who you are," Angel shot back.

The woman's tongue clicked her annoyance at the same time Clark's door opened. "Larissa, what are you doing here?"

Larissa! Angel knew her eyes bulged in that weirdo, wacky way she did. She slammed her mouth closed, remembering faintly her earth family once telling her it would catch flies.

"You're his..."

"Girlfriend," Larissa ended for her with a smug smile now firmly plastered on her overly made up face.

Clark ushered her in. "Another coffee, please Angel."

"For her?"

"Yes." His clipped tone dared her to say no, and then he closed the door.

Anger curled in tight balls in Angel's stomach. That Clark and Miss Snob were holed up in his office Angel didn't like one little bit. And that worried the heck out of her. She wasn't

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here to like or dislike, but to fix Clark's problem. What it had to do with Miss Snob, Angel wasn't quite sure.

As questions clouded her brain, Angel made the coffee, tempering her intense desire to lace madam's with salt rather than sugar, but pasting an overly sweet smile on her face she knocked on Clark's door and entered with the coffee.

"You can put it down on the coffee table," Larissa informed her the moment she entered the office. Then she turned back to Clark. "You really must find better staff, darling. She almost shouted at me as I entered."

Angel's knots tightened.

"She's only temporary."

"I can see why," Snob snorted. "Now make sure you're not late tonight, the Franks will be there, and it's so important to make a good impression. He could help your career. Daddy says that with the elections coming up, you're sure to get a placing."

Angel heard Clark's sigh from across the room. "Larissa, I've told you before, I'm not interested."

"Oh, don't be silly. Of course you are. Just think of the prestige, the success." Larissa stroked a hand along Clark's thigh, who in turn cast a quick look in Angel's direction.

"That's enough, Angel, you can go now."

Larissa offered a brittle laugh. "Yes hurry along, you've got work to do I presume."

Ignoring the Snob, Angel tossed her head, running a hand through a recalcitrant curl, and gave Clark her best smile.

"Yes, sir."

Concentration shot, she struggled to transcribe a single intelligible sentence as she found herself alert for voices, a laugh, a cough, heck, anything coming from the other side of Clark's door would have made her relax a fraction.

Instead, she heard zilch, which did not make her a happy camper. Quite why, she still had to figure out.

The woman was a vamp, supercilious, pompous. Angel tried to think of a few more words to describe Ms. Snob.

Finally, as the clock on her computer ticked over the seven p.m. mark, the door opened.

"You're still here?"

Angel heard the surprise in Clark's voice and turned to face him. "You wanted the reports done, so I'm doing them."

"But it's passed home time."

"Not mine," she said, smiling sweetly.

Larissa didn't look too pleased, her pinched face showing her annoyance. Long, scarlet talons caressed Clark's jacket sleeve. "Of course she's here, Clark," the snob cooed, leaning against him. "You pay her don't you, so don't fuss. Now, we've got to get going."

Angel found herself mimicking the woman's actions, only to receive Clark's scathing glare over his shoulder as his girlfriend dragged him towards the door.

Then they were gone and she was alone, facing her computer. Oh, joy! One hundred pages down, only fifty to go. "How the heck am I going to 'fix' Mr. Lannigan if I'm stuck in his office?" Angel growled into the computer screen.

But she said she would get it done, and she wouldn't give up. By nine thirty, thankfully, the job was completed, printed

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and spiral bound as Clark had instructed. That a dozen partially bound copies had already been through the shredder, she ignored. Those darn spirals just wouldn't do what they were meant to do.

With the computer switched off, Angel grabbed her bag and flicked off the twinkling Christmas tree lights on the ornately decorated tree in the corner.

Only a few days away now. She couldn't help but feel the swell of excitement Christmas always generated. As an angel, she'd experienced all sorts of Christmases, but this was the first in the Southern Hemisphere. No snow covered the ground, no children making snowmen. Instead, it was all beaches and barbecues and the lazy hazy days of summer.

About to turn off her office light, she realized Clark's was still on, the glow barely visible beneath the closed door. Reaching to switch it off, her hand stilled and instead she found her gaze wandering around his office. Perhaps if she took a quick peek it would go some ways to understanding the man.

Snoop, you mean.

Angel ignored her inner conscience and took a few steps into the room, quelling her unease. She scanned the room.

All in order. Neat piles of papers were stacked on his desk, books lined the shelves in size order. Nothing out of place. No indication as to who exactly Clark Lannigan the man was, or what made him tick.

On the unit against the far wall, tucked amidst several files, Angel spied a photo frame. It lay face down. Reaching over to set it right, she stilled. A tiny frown creased her brow

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and she turned a slow, full circle, as she tried to decipher the niggle shouting to be heard in her overtired brain.

Her breath stilled for a moment, then she exhaled in a long sigh. Clark was a neat freak. Even his apartment showed that. Nothing out of order. No hint of the real man there either, she mused. This frame however seemed to be the only thing in the room not right. Not in place. Not cared for.

Hidden?

Carrying the picture to Clark's desk, she sat in his chair. For a moment she did nothing. She simply sat. And breathed. Breathed in the smell of him, the rich fragrance of his lingering cologne, reveling in his body heat still infused into the luxurious leather chair.

Echoing up from the ground so far below a horn tooted and shook Angel from her distracted reverie. Holding the picture frame, she pushed herself from the chair and stood on legs she sadly admitted were anything but steady.

Still, she had a job to do.

Flicking the brass switch on the desk lamp, she held the frame up to the light. It was one of those double frames with a photograph on both sides. On the left a black and white photo of a man, woman and a boy and younger girl stared at the camera, eyes shining with joy, smiles at the ready.

Angel leant closer and peered at the faded photo. She traced the outline of the boy with the tip of her finger. Clark?

He smiled. Happy. Contented in his parents' loving embrace.

Turning the frame slightly so she could view it better under the lamplight, she gazed at the second photo. A color portrait

of his parents, obviously taken a few years later, but there were no children in the middle this time. No Clark. No smiles. No sparkling eyes.

"No love?"

It wasn't until the words passed her lips that Angel realized she'd even thought them. She placed the photo frame back on the credenza.

What had happened to the love?

What had changed in those years?

With a sigh, she realized what she thought would be an easy task because she had a Degree in Fun, was proving to be far more difficult than she ever believed possible.

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Chapter Five

At Clark's apartment, Angel sought refuge in a long hot soak in the marbled bath, reveling in the rose scented bubbles. There was something good about a bath, soaking away her aches and pains. She only wished it would wash away the niggles tugging at her conscience.

Angel liked Clark. There was something about him that drew her to a place she definitely thought angels shouldn't be taken.

Encased in bubbles, she thought about her day. About computers and copiers and a certain girlfriend. But mostly she thought about Clark. How he affected her, when she knew he shouldn't. Her lashes lowered and her mind filled with images of him, her body heating, remembering the tingle that zipped up her spine, the coil of something not quite tangible that tightened every time he came close.

As the waters chilled Angel finally climbed out. Wrapped in a robe, she made her way across the lounge, staring out at the view. Funny how she wasn't scared of heights here. Here she felt comfortable, as if Clark held her in an invisible embrace and if she closed her eyes she could imagine his fingers grazing a tattoo along her spine, his closeness.

The sky was a cloudless inky black. The glitter of stars twinkling in the heavens made her smile and think of home. It seemed so far away, another world.

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

It was. And yet, this place, she thought as she turned a slow full circle, seemed like home too. She felt cosseted here, safe and secure.

Angel had thought she would have been homesick, but wasn't. Dropping down onto the luxuriously squishy leather sofa, she drew her feet up beneath her and draped the chenille throw across her shoulders. She snuggled beneath its warmth, inhaling.

Her senses fired. It smelt of Clark. Warm and intoxicating. Whoa! Where did that come from?

From deep down inside. You know it did.

As if she would be caught any moment, her gaze darted around the room, expecting Beatrice to hover, chastising her for such wayward thoughts.

But the trouble was, they were true thoughts. She liked Clark. A lot. More than an angel should.

Just then, Angel heard the click of the front door latch and she jolted alert as a deep-throated laugh echoed in from the hallway. Her stomach lurched as she heard another voice. It wasn't Clark's, but hers! The snob's!

Gathering the edge of her robe together Angel stood, and waited. The light flicked on fully and the room became saturated in a harsh golden glow.

Larissa's sharp intake of breath was only cut off by her shriek. "What the hell is she doing here?" Eyes wide, her lips a blaze of scarlet lipstick, she jabbed a finger towards Angel.

Angel offered her false, but effective smile. "I live here," she said with a brazen authority she fought to dig up from the bottom of her stomach.

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"Live? Since when? Clark, would you kindly explain."

Clark looked from Larissa, then to Angel and back to his girlfriend. "It's only temporary."

Scorn etched across the woman's face. "Like hell it is."

"Have you been there?" Angel quipped. She couldn't help but stir the pot.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Hell," she offered with another smile. "It's a tad hot, but then you think you're hot, so you might as well go join in."

The snob spluttered.

"Nothing to say? That's a surprise. Clark needed a temp, I offered, and I also needed a place to stay."

"He offered?" The woman's shock was clearly evident as her eyes shot wide-open, color suffusing her cheeks until they matched her scarlet lipstick. "Oh, no it's not okay. You are not staying." She turned full on to Clark. "Clark, tell her she can't stay."

Angel cocked a brow, resting a hand on one hip and gave Clark a broad smile. She waited. The air hung between the three of them and thickened with every tick of the clock.

"Your turn I think, Mr. Lannigan."

Clark's eyes darkened on her and Angel felt the heat thrusting out from him; felt its abrasive wash across her skin. Good. She'd got a reaction.

"She hasn't anywhere to go," Clark finally answered.

"Try a hotel. You're not a social worker, Clark. That's your trouble, you're too nice."

"To be with you," Angel hissed.

Larissa's lips thinned. "Stop her. She can't talk to me like that."

"Who says?"

"Clark?"

Clark picked Larissa's hand from his shirtsleeve. There was a firm set to his jaw, stubborn, unmovable. "Look, don't you think it's late, you should go."

"But..."

The woman's attempt to argue impressed Angel. She had grit. But she also knew when she was beat. And that was now.

She gave Angel an evil look, which in Angel's book definitely awarded the woman a place in Hell's hotel. "I was going to stay," she whined, trying for round two.

Clark tossed Angel a sharp glance, then focused back on Larissa. "You can't."

"I can if you toss her out."

Angel's smile broadened. Clark, the poor boy, was being tossed between the two of them. Angel liked a challenge. Let's see who would win this round.

"Larissa, she has nowhere to go," Clark repeated firmly.

"Is that it? You're choosing her over me. I'm your girlfriend."

Angel knew instinctively this was the moment he would, or should, say he loved Larissa, but for some reason the words didn't come. She wondered why?

Larissa's cheeks puffed out. "Well, if that's the way it is, I'll go. But I want an explanation tomorrow, Clark, and I want her out of here, do you understand me?"

"Whatever." Angel added without thinking.

"Shut up! You're the hired help."

"And you're an ogre. Go join Shrek," she countered.

"Enough." Clark held up his hands as if to stay the scene of execution, but just who would be executing who was still to be determined. "If you're going, Larissa, go. I'm not asking you to stay."

No, you're not, but just remember we're expected at my parents for Christmas. And I won't take no for an answer, Clark, especially after this little episode," she sniffed at the air.

"Got a cold?" Angel asked.

Clark's lips curled a smidgen. Larissa may not have seen it, but Angel did, and that made her happy. Clark wasn't wimpy. In fact, the man was a hunk and by standing up to a female version of Attila the Hun he did good in her book.

Realizing he wasn't about to back down, Larissa spun away on her wafer thin heels and sashayed for all she was worth to the door. "I'll phone you, Clark darling," she cooed, giving dagger eyes in Angel's direction.

With Larissa's exit, Angel focused on Clark. "You're no pushover, Clark Lannigan."

"I don't go back on my promises," he said quietly.

"No you don't." She reached up to him, fingers cupping the side of his face and dotted a kiss on his cheek, then quickly pulled away. "Thank you, Clark. Now," she said, deciding it best she change the subject because kissing him might not have been a good idea though it sure tasted good, she rued

quietly. "I know exactly what you need," she said with renewed confidence.

"Really? I would have thought since it's close to midnight sleep is what I need."

"You say that now Lady Attila's gone, but come on, I've a plan." She grabbed his hand, large warm fingers wrapping around hers and tugged.

But Clark didn't move, instead he stayed rooted to the spot. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't be silly. It'll be fun."

"Fun?"

"You say it as if it's a foreign word."

"I don't have time for fun, I work."

"24/7?"

"If needs be."

"Clark. Clark, Clark," she said wagging a finger at him. "You went out tonight," she reminded him.

"Under duress. Larissa's father thinks I'm candidate material for political office."

"And are you?"

"No. I know what I want."

"Which is?"

"Success, but on my own terms. Not those dictated by others."

"Does Larissa know this?"

Clark's full mouth pursed and his eyes hooded a fraction more. He said nothing and Angel unwound her fingers from his.

"So that's where I come in, Clark baby," she chuckled. "I'm not about business, or success. I'm solely about you, Mr. Lannigan." Angel lifted her gaze to the glittering heavens. "Hey, Bea," she said. "Help me out here. Make him understand. " She winked skyward, knowing Beatrice would catch her comment as it drifted into the galaxy.

"Who is Bea?"

"Bea, alias Angel Beatrice," she answered automatically. "Ooops." She slammed her lips closed. "Forget it."

"Angel? But you're Angel."

"Yep, that's me." She shuffled sideways, towards her open bedroom door. "Now just you hang on a sec and I'll get dressed."

Clark's confusion intensified, his brow creased. The man wasn't happy. "For fun?"

"You got it," she called from the other side of her bedroom door. Angel threw the first things on she could find. Skinny jeans and figure hugging polo neck sweater. It may be the heart of summer, but nights could still be chilly. Especially with what she had in mind.

About to return to Clark, she stood at the window and stared across the city. "Beatrice, if you're listening, I need a favor."

"What now, 459? I was hoping to get some extra sleep, Christmas is busy for angels."

"Thought that was Santa's busy time," Angel quipped.

"And ours. You know we're his helpers when the Elves are short on the ground, so to speak," she said eliciting a hearty chuckle at her own joke.

"Yeah, well, I'm playing Santa down here for Clark."

"Clark is it, now?"

"Kinda," Angel admitted, unable to stem the heat coloring her cheeks.

"What is it this time, 459?"

"A bike. A big black and chrome thing. A Harley would be good."

Beatrice's image suddenly sprang to life, propped this time on the side table beside the bed. The woman's jaw dropped.

"A bike?"

"Yeah, all male testosterone power."

"Heaven forbid. What on earth for?"

"Fun," Angel answered simply.

"Fun?" The way Bea repeated Angel's answer sort of had a sickening dread sound to it.

"Look Beatrice, I haven't really got time to explain. Trust me."

"A hard task, 459. You aren't known for your sensible ideas."

"You offered me this job. Don't you think I can do it?" Angel rested her hand on her hips, unable to counter the annoyance in her voice. "So let me do it my way. You and the boss obviously thought I was the angel for the job."

"We did, though I am beginning to wonder."

"Trust me," Angel reiterated.

"Well, if you're sure."

Angel nodded.

"Black and chrome you say?"

"Definitely. Fast and furious."

"Male testosterone?"

"All in one package," Angel added, praying the angel would follow through.

Beatrice blinked her barely visible pale lashes and her heavy sigh washed around the room. "Very well," she said and in the next instant she disappeared.

Angel smiled, turned to the door and pushed her shoulders back. "Thanks. I know you won't let me down."

"As long as *you* don't," Beatrice's words echoed.

Tossing a leather jacket over her shoulders, Angel called to Clark. "Right, let's get going."

But Clark didn't move. Didn't speak. He stared directly at her, eyes wide and darkened with liquid desire. A look that was downright hot.

Then with slow and intimate precision his gaze slid down her length eliciting a shimmery heat that ran at break neck speed through her veins.

Finally, he spoke. "And where is it that you intend we go?"

She gave him her best smile. "Where the wind takes us, Mr. Lannigan."

Angel had Clark beside her in the elevator going down to the ground floor before the poor man had a chance to ask any more questions. Fingers crossed, she held her breath hoping the bike would be there.

"Yes!" Angel's excitement burst from her lungs the moment they walked onto the sidewalk. There, in all its beautiful fast and furious glory was a Harley Davidson, ready and waiting to be ridden.

Resting against the leather seat, she shot Clark a beaming smile.

Two seconds. That's all it took, but in those two seconds every expression imaginable raced across his face. Shock. Disbelief. Horror.

"No way. You expect. No, no, no." He slapped a palm down his thigh. "You can't be serious. This is your idea of fun?"

"It's yours too," Angel said with a sudden and total understanding.

Clark went to speak and then hesitated. His lips pressed closed, nostrils flaring and once again the seconds passed. Longer this time. Slower. He went to turn away from her, then halted and faced her full on, head tilted slightly, eyes narrowing on her. "What do you *think* you know, Angel?"

"That you *used to* love riding a bike. That you want to do it now, although you say you don't."

"I don't," he confirmed.

"Don't believe you."

"Well, hell. You can disbelieve all you like, but I'm not getting on that machine."

"Scared?"

Clark bristled and took a step back, hands bunched at his sides. "No," he shot back.

"Really? Could have fooled me. Where's the Clark Lannigan that snuck out at night and raced up and down Valley Road?"

He took another step back. "How the hell...?"

"A little birdie told me," she interrupted, realizing she'd probably let too many cats out of the proverbial bag with her jabbering, but grateful at the same time that part of the deal

of coming to earth was that she'd get an info dump on her 'client'. "Look, Clark, a bike ride can't do any harm."

"Yeah, right. Unless we end up six feet under," he countered.

"Take it easy then, a few long straights, a curve or two. Imagine it. All that power, and the throb of the engine beneath you."

"It's been a long time," he admitted finally. He stepped closer to the bike this time, fingers grazing across the shiny chrome.

"I reckon it's just like riding a bicycle, you never forget." She pushed herself away from the seat making room for Clark. "Now on you go."

The moment Clark wrapped his legs over the macho machine of all bikes he looked absolutely at home.

"I knew it," Angel whispered.

He directed a firm gaze towards her. "What?"

"That bike fits you."

"Not for long," he cautioned.

"Oh, don't be a party pooper, just rev it up, baby," she chuckled.

Clark flicked the ignition and the engine roared to life instantly, biting into the silence of midnight.

"Move, Mr. Lannigan."

"What?"

"Move up, this gal is coming along for the ride."

The color drained from Clark's face. "You?"

"Absolutely. You don't think you're going to have all the fun, do you?"

"You can't."

"Sure I can. Come on now, mosey up a tad." She gave him no choice. Holding onto his arm, feeling the instant flex of muscle beneath her fingertips, Angel levered herself on the seat behind him.

She was close. Very close.

"You sure about this?" he asked, flicking her a look over his shoulder.

She gave him her brightest smile. "Sure. Give it all you've got."

And unfortunately, he took her at her word.

Through the quiet streets of the city Clark maneuvered the bike like a pro, while the supremacy of the engine vibrated beneath her, the power, all angry and forceful. She let out a whoop as they left the outskirts of the city behind. "This is life. Living," she shouted. She leaned forward, arms around Clark's waist and felt his corded muscles tighten beneath her hold. A wonderful heat permeated from him to her. Angel did what came naturally. She shuffled closer. This was nice. She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. Yep, definitely more than nice. Yummy!

The roar of the engine matched the roar of her heartbeat. Loud. Fast. And very exciting.

But it all came to an end too soon when Clark turned a corner and the apartment came into view. Angel heard the click of the gears shifting down and in seconds he drew the bike to a halt outside the broad steps. He cut the engine and once more the world became silent.

"Wow, if I had known it would be like that, I would..." The words died on the tip of her tongue. What would she do? What could she do? She was an angel for St Peter's sake. She wasn't meant to be enjoying earthly things. Enjoying the fun, the excitement.

Holding onto Clark!

Hold that thought.

Clark dismounted and stood silent, his face expressionless. Something wasn't right. He was meant to be exhilarated. Her job was to teach him to have fun. It looked liked she'd failed. He held his hand out to her and for a moment, Angel hesitated.

Holding his hand? Now that was fun, and exciting...for her!

Oh, dear Lord. This was bad. Very bad. Things were getting a tad out of control here. Beatrice would not like it.

She offered Clark a fleeting smile and alighted without his help. He dropped his hand to his side. Angel noted the awkwardness of the moment, but pushed it away, determined to keep up the momentum, somehow. Teach him life was for living, not to be buried in an office.

"Okay, time to fess up, Clark Lannigan. Did you like it? Did you?" He certainly didn't look like it and Angel's breath stalled, hanging, waiting with expectancy. "Well?" she prompted.

A tiny twitch pulled at the corners of his mouth, slow to ignite, tugging gently as his dark eyes softened fractionally. "I guess."

"Guess? Of course you did. You loved the power beneath your hands, the chance to control such power."

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"You sound like advert for the darned bike," he cut in.

"An advert for fun at least," she chuckled.

"And that's what this is all about?"

"Of course." Didn't he know that? Couldn't he see?

Understand life couldn't be all work and no play. He had to.

Angel struggled to find the right words. Forgive himself?

The answer came from nowhere and she wondered why? But it seemed to fit. Clark had to forgive, and then maybe, he could have fun.

"You must be joking. Fun?" he spat out. "When machines like this can kill at the drop of a hat. Kill and change things forever."

What was going on here? "Clark?" Angel rested her hand on his arm, bare after he'd rolled the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows. Beneath her fingertips his muscles flexed and he jerked away as if her touch burned him to the core.

"I don't need that kind of fun, Angel." And with that he took the steps two at a time to the apartment entrance. He punched in the security code and the door clicked open. He didn't look back. Didn't ask if she was going to follow him. He simply walked in, stabbed at the elevator button and entered. Only a nanosecond before the doors hissed closed did he look at her, though it wasn't sadness and anger she witnessed in his eyes, but desire. White hot and urgent.

Oh, Lordy!

But Angel wasn't about to let him get away with it. She scooted after him and took the next elevator up to Clark's apartment.

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She spied him straight away. He stood with his back to her, his hands hanging limp at his side.

Angel smiled. The best action was offense. She intended to win. "That's challenge one down," she said infusing her voice with as much confidence as she could muster and walked towards him. Okay, it was a lie, but she had to try.

Clark dashed a look of incredulity over his shoulder at her. "One what?"

Angel sidled up to him. "Just that. You've ridden the bike. One challenge down and um...a few to go," she answered realizing she'd have to think fast to come up with a few more ideas.

Clark waved her away, his expression determined.

Tough. She could be stubborn too. She stood quietly at his side, close, but not too close. It didn't take long for him to react.

He gave her a quick sideways glance, and then retreated to staring blankly into night. "Nope. No way. I don't have time for games, Ms. Smith."

"Don't be a spoil sport, Mr. Lannigan."

Clark spun round to face her. "I gave into your stupid idea of fun tonight, but that's it. No more."

Gotcha, she preened silently. "You're scared?"

"Am not."

"Could have fooled me. So why not take up the other challenges?" she teased with a curve of a smile.

Clark's eyes darkened, narrowing on her, making Angel uneasy. And excited. "Because..."

"You don't do fun," she finished for him.

"I'm busy."

She wagged a finger at him. "Not too busy to ride a bike into the night with me, though."

"That was different."

"Was it? In what way?"

Clark went to speak then suddenly clammed up. A visible heat stole across his cheeks beneath his natural tan.

Angel decided to back off and give him a bit of space. She dropped into the sofa behind her, tucking her feet beneath her. "You have to admit, Clark, it was fun. All that power, going around the corners. Heck, I could tell once you got into the groove you were enjoying yourself."

His mouth twitched a kind of smile for a split second.

"Groove? You going all hippy chick on me?"

"Nope, just trying to prove a point."

"And you're not going to give up until to you do."

She smiled at him then, long and slow, a cat that had got the cream kind of smile. "Something like that," she admitted.

But if Angel thought she'd won this round, she was mistaken. Clark went all silent on her again, blinking luxuriously thick ebony lashes over troubled eyes that always seemed to hold everything in check. His hand jerked as if manipulated by a puppeteer and he dragged fingers through his hair.

Through wind-blown hair, Angel noted with a secret smile.

His hooded gaze slid to her mouth and his own crooked in a thin frustrated line. "Why, Angel? Why now, why me?"

"Because," she said, pushing herself up from the sofa and rising to the tips of her very toes. She leaned close to him, so

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close she could smell his aftershave, all hot and potent chemistry that tangled with the throb of adrenaline. "Because sometimes Clark Lannigan, fate just gets in the way." And with that, she kissed him, quick and bold, an angel kiss in the darkness, and then spun away as though her wings were truly on her back. She retreated quick smart towards her bedroom. About to close the door behind her, she stilled, leaning against it. "G'nite, Clark. Sweet dreams."

But Clark Lannigan did not look happy.

"You worried about the challenges, Clark?"

His brow furrowed and his head tipped back a fraction. He fixed a steady glare on her. "Bring it on, Angel!"

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Chapter Six

The brandy slid down Clark's throat, warm and tantalizing until it hit his stomach. Then his gut burned. He welcomed it. His fingers tightened on the crystal goblet, frustration gnawing at every sinewy muscle in his body and paced the length of the open plan apartment.

Deep down inside him where he didn't want to analyze, an edginess warred with common sense. His head said go to bed. Sleep. Or at the very worst, do some work. But sleep, Clark knew instinctively would be impossible. Work was his normal catharsis when he didn't want to think, but would definitely not help one iota tonight.

He lengthened his stride, a hand shoved into his jeans' pocket, drink at the ready. Every few seconds however, he found his gaze darting...nope, more of a lingering drool he chided with personal disgust, towards Angel's bedroom door.

She'd set him a challenge. But promised more.

At first, the thought of riding a bike again, and a Harley for god's sake, scared the hell out of him.

"Don't go there, Lannigan." His muttered curse in no way silenced the dread he had fought long and hard to subdue. Nothing could, or had.

He spun away from Angel's door. Distance and mind numbing thoughts were on order. But it was as if his brain wasn't listening, and instead had a mind of its own.

A bike ride. Shit!

He'd mounted the bike, felt the sudden thrill of power and metal beneath him. Then Angel had snuggled up behind him. Held him.

Damn it, he'd nearly skedaddled right there and then. That was too close. She was too close. Holding him. Using his power, his body as a shield.

It had taken all his strength and focus to stay on the bike. And to his shame as he'd switched off the engine and the silence surrounded them once more, the thunder of his heart told him everything.

He had loved it. Thrilled with the adrenaline. And that shouldn't be. Should never, ever be. He'd promised himself the night Tammy died.

Bikes were death traps. It had been his fault.

Never again would he ride a bike.

And he'd kept his word. Until tonight.

But that wasn't his problem right now. Not the bike ride. Well, okay, part of it was. The part where he'd broken a promise he'd made to himself all those years ago. The other part. That was the *big* problem. When Angel crushed up against him. The soft flutter of her breath, sweet and teasing across his neck had set the hairs on his nape rising straight up, plus another part of his anatomy to boot. That had certainly paid attention. He had a hard on from the moment she squeezed up against him, and it hadn't gone away.

Clark eyed the closed bedroom door as if it were a temptation. "What the hell is wrong with me?" he groaned and grabbed the decanter of brandy. He poured himself a

repeat and downed it in one long gulp, relishing the heat, praying it would ease the heat in his loins.

He knew he was acting strange. Weird even. Definitely not like himself. Hell, he'd been dating Larissa for...

How long was it?

Years?

So why not marry her?

"Why drool over another woman?" he found himself speaking aloud.

"Because." Clark bit off an unspoken answer. Because Angel excited *him*

"Shut up!"

Sinking back into the chair behind him, Clark found himself staring at the still closed door, empty glass in his hand. He didn't drink often. Not now.

Back when life was hard, sad, and he didn't want to face it, he had drunk to forget; too young to figure out another way. But forget hadn't happened and he'd eventually given up a youthful indulgence and instead found a new addiction.

Work. And with it, success.

It had proven to be a powerful aphrodisiac. So much so that in ten years he had risen from the bottom to way past the top of the money tower.

He was a rich man. Loaded. And right now, scared as hell.

He lifted his gaze from the intricate design of the Aubusson beneath his feet and fixed it on Angel's door again. Up until this very minute, or to be more precise, the minute he'd fired the Harley up, Clark had believed life was good. Great in fact.

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His hard work had been rewarded. He was on target. Now it had blown up in his face.

Angel had arrived, and that changed everything.

Shit!

Just then he heard the faint click of a door latch and every nerve ending in his body sprung to attention, alive, waiting. And damn it, yes, hoping. His breath stalled behind his ribs and his mouth became desert dry. He slaked his tongue over his lips, tasted the brandy resin still there. And he watched. And *still* he hoped.

Fool!

The door opened and suddenly Clark found himself able to breathe again. Just.

Hallowed by the reflected glow of a bedside lamp, stood Angel. Once again he was struck by the ethereal halo that seemed to shimmer about this young woman. It hooked him. She had hooked him. Hard.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't sleep," she said, stumbling over her words.

"Me either." Clark found himself grinning, while every part of him zoned in on Angel, aware of everything about her. She wore a dressing gown, a light gauzy thing that outlined her curves. Her feet were bare. Naked.

Don't go there!

Clark floundered. God, she was beautiful. She took his breath away.

"Bike rides do that, I reckon," he finally said.

"You liked it then?"

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There was the hint of surprise in her voice, but it was his answer that offered more of a surprise to Clark himself.

"Yeah," he said drawing the word out, enjoying the sound as each letter crossed this tongue. He really smiled then, easy, even joyful, and suddenly he relaxed, each muscle elongating, releasing. "The buzz was good. It's been a long time since I was on a bike."

"Why?"

Damn. He hadn't expected that. A simple question, but it brought him up hard and sharp. He tried to shrug it off, but his shoulders felt suddenly stiff and awkward again. "Things happen," he said, "Life changes."

"It has a habit of doing that."

"Yeah."

"Are you up for the next challenge?" There was a faint twinkle in her eye when she asked him. A look as if she dared him to say no.

"Depends on what you've got in mind."

A tiny smile curled her lips. He remembered those lips. Remembered kissing them. Wanted to kiss them again. Soon. Now preferably.

"I've got a few ideas."

Oh, yeah. Desire scored a fiery path through him. "Bet you have." He wanted to know exactly what they were, but she said nothing, just offered him another of those secret smiles of hers. His body switched into overdrive, arousal ratcheting up a dozen or so notches.

Angel didn't move and he couldn't resist any longer. He took a step closer to her. One step only. Then he stopped.

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Her eyes widened a fraction, the pupils darkening. He took another step. And stopped. Her eyes widened some more and there was a tell-tale hint of a flush beneath her cheeks. "You afraid, Angel?"

"No." But the tip of her tongue slid across her lips nevertheless.

"Excited?" *Hell, he was. Definitely.*

She didn't have to answer, the twinkling lights dancing across the hazel depth of her eyes told Clark everything. Angel Smith was excited, too. They were both aware of the scorching heat between them. Had been since they met. God, his groin ached for release.

Space between them didn't exist now.

Then Clark kissed her and he realized it wasn't like before. It was better. Wonderful. Earth shattering. He kissed her again. And again. Deepening each one, tasting, savoring everything she had to offer, until with a tiny breathless push with the flat of her palms on his chest she eased back.

Clark stared down at her and couldn't help but smile. "You have that kissed look," he said.

Her shaking fingertips touched a corner of her mouth. "We keep doing that."

"Kissing, you mean?"

She nodded.

"So we do," he agreed. Her lips were swollen slightly. Well kissed. By him. His smile broadened.

"We shouldn't."

"Why not?" *Because he really, really wanted to. A lot.*

She went to answer, but Clark put a finger across her parted lips, stalling her obviously ready answer. "Actually," he said, "for the life of me I can't think of a reason not to kiss you. You taste too good to not kiss, Angel. Sweet and tempting."

"But you already have a girlfriend," she reminded him.

Clark's heart slammed to a halt. Shit! He'd forgotten Larissa. The moment he'd seen Angel, everything had gone from his brain.

You mean it headed south to your groin.

Clark bit out a silent stream of every swear word he could think of, and still felt like shit. He spun away from temptation. What the hell was wrong with him that he forgot the woman to whom he was meant to be committed?

Are you?

He didn't have an answer. At least not the answer he should have

"Clark Lannigan, are you listening to me?"

His head jerked up. Angel stood right in front of him, her accusing glare spitting daggers at him. "Don't kiss me again. It won't work."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's not allowed. Angels don't kiss. We don't, can't." She threw up her hands. "Just don't, that's all. Please don't kiss me again, Clark."

There was a soft pleading in her eyes. It tugged at him. But not to kiss her? Clark wasn't sure he could stop himself. Kissing Angel seemed to be his addiction. "What do you mean Angels don't kiss?"

"We don't make..." her voice trailed off again, the tinge of pink coloring her cheeks.

"Don't make out," he finished for her. "And what's with the royal 'we'?"

Angel visibly shrank away, hands wrapped in a protective clutch across her middle.

"Angel? What's going on?"

She shook her head and refused to look at him. "Nothing."

Clark's jaw flexed. Angel had frozen on him. Changed.

"Like hell," he muttered beneath his breath.

"Don't say that, it's not allowed."

"Allowed? Hell?" He received another of her withering glares. "Kissing, making out. Not allowed. Says who?"

"The Big Bopper," she responded instantly, only to look horror-struck as if she realized she'd said far too much. But as far as Clark was concerned the whole darned lot simply confused him.

"Do you think you could explain?"

Her lips trembled and the color that only moments ago had fused her cheeks, drained away. "I can't."

"Can't, or won't? Don't you think I deserve some sort of explanation, since you're living under my roof."

"Oh, Lordy," she whispered, eyes rolling heavenward as she sank into the chair beside her. "Sorry *guys*, but Clark's right," she said as if she were speaking to invisible people.

Ice slithered down Clark's spine. Something was definitely not right with this situation. "How about you start at the beginning."

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"That's a long way back," she said without really looking at him.

"I've got the time. Can't sleep anyway." What he didn't add was that Angel and her kisses were the cause of his sleeplessness. And his excitement.

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* * * *

How do you tell someone you've come down from heaven? Right now, Angel wished she could swear. It would at least go some way to alleviate the out of control feeling of hurtling down a roller coaster with no way off.

She looked up at Clark, and frowned. "Do you have to tower over me? All macho and he man."

Taking her hint, he folded his arms and seated himself opposite her, stretching his legs out in front of him.

Perhaps she could divert him. "Look, why don't we just go to bed?"

Oops. And that was meant to divert him?

Clark's mouth thinned, but he said nothing. He didn't need to. The man was visibly aroused while her body still zinged from his touch.

She slapped her hands down on her knees. Right. She had to get out of this. Fast. "Okay, so you want to know what I was babbling about?"

"I didn't say you were babbling, merely that what you said was...shall we say, a tad confusing."

Angel made a fuss of smoothing out her dressing gown, picking off a piece of invisible fluff, playing for time, or at least divine intervention. It didn't come, so she guessed she was on her own. "Have you...um...ever lived somewhere else?"

Clark offered no hint of letting her off the hook, his brows creasing, expression remaining stony. This wasn't going well.

"What I mean is, lived somewhere other than here in Auckland."

"No. But you have, I take it."

"Yes I have. I mean I do. I don't live in Auckland."

"You said you were visiting to find someone."

"Sort of." Oh, this definitely wasn't easy. How do you tell someone you're from heaven? "I got sent here to do a job."

"And yet you accepted a job from me."

"Well, it's all sort of connected really."

"Really?" Clark did the brow lift thing again. He clearly wasn't amused, nor did he believe her. She had to try harder.

"This other town you come from is?"

"It's not a town actually."

"A village?"

"No."

"Country?"

"No."

"I think we've run out of options. How about planet?" he offered.

She shook her head.

"Look, Angel, I'm tired. And I can't sleep."

"Neither can I."

"We both know why that is."

"And that it can't happen again."

"It won't, believe me. But I gave you a job, though it appears you don't need one, and a place to stay, yet you say you come from somewhere else. However, the mystery remains and one I'm waiting for you to elucidate on."

Angel took a deep breath, holding it, then exhaled, but as Clark's narrowed gaze fixed on her she stilled. She loosened her fists at her side and shook out her hands. "Okay, here goes. I'm an angel."

Clark's mouth clicked a kind of snort. "I already know your name, Ms. Smith."

"No, no that's not it. I'm Angel 459. I've come from heaven to..."

"Stop!" Clark held up a hand and Angel shut down every syllable on the tip of her tongue. "Are you on something?"

"Something?" she repeated, confusion warring with stupidity. She shouldn't have uttered a word. She should have lied.

"Pills, smoked something?"

"Oh, no, Angels aren't allowed to take drugs."

"Angel, enough!" Clark barked. "You're beautiful, I liked kissing you, but I'm sure as hell not getting involved with a nut case."

Oh, dear. She'd really screwed up big time. How in holly heavens was she getting out of this one?

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Lifting her chin slightly, she looked directly at Clark, using every ounce of determination she had to prevent her turning tail and taking to the hills. "I'm not nuts," she finally managed to say, calmly, precisely, and added a silent prayer at the same time.

"Yeah right."

"I'm not," she reiterated, though she realized just how weird her explanation sounded. "Oh, Clark, I know how it sounds, but sometimes you've to believe there is magic in the world."

"And you're here to make me believe?"

"Actually, I'm here to make you have fun."

"Fun! That's it. I have one hell of a hard on for you Angel Smith, or 459 or whatever you want to call yourself, but I'm sure as hell, oops, can't say that," he said sarcastically, "I'm not getting involved with you. Nope. No way. Do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear. That's all right by me. I'm not allowed to anyway. Angels can't fraternize."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, not allowed to kiss or make out. Ciao, Angel." Clark hauled himself from the chair.

"Stop. Where are you going?"

"To bed. And alone," he confirmed.

"But your challenges." Not that she'd actually thought up any more just right now, but she would. She had to.

Clark spun round then, grabbed her with both hands and yanked her to him. She came up hard against his chest, heartbeat thundering against his. "Try this for a *challenge*,

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Angel." And then he kissed her. So passionately. So beautifully. A definite challenge if ever there was one.

One kiss. One challenge.

Clark disappeared into his room, slamming the door behind him, leaving Angel alone to wonder if she were really up to this particular challenge. Somehow, she very much doubted it.

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Morning came far too soon for Angel. With the banging of cupboards echoing from the kitchen she realized Clark had to be already up and his mood no better than last night.

No wonder! She'd told the guy she was an angel.

Definitely bonkers!

"What now?"

The sudden glow of Beatrice hovering in front of the gilt-edge mirror across the other side of the room, reflecting two of the rather rotund seraph alerted Angel she was in line for a lecture. "You finish the job, 459," her boss decreed.

Angel groaned and pulled the coverlet back up so that only her eyes were visible. "Morning."

"Time to get up, 459. Finish what you started."

"What if I said I had a change of mind?"

"Impossible."

"No, it's not. Just think about it, Beatrice," she said with a large degree of hope and silent prayers to boot. "The guy doesn't believe who I am."

"He doesn't need to."

"So how the heck am I going to get him to have fun?"

"You did last night," she reminded her.

"Yeah, but that was before..." Angel snapped her lips firmly closed.

"Before what?"

"Oh, well, you know."

Beatrice's sky blue eyes widened.

Angel wanted to laugh. Here she was thinking Beatrice was the all seeing, all knowing kind of angel. Maybe not.

"You kissed him," her boss announced her shock.

Maybe yes.

Angel tried for nonchalance, hoping her boss could be foisted off. Unfortunately her cheeks were a dead giveaway. They burned brightly. "Did not."

"Angels do not lie, 459."

Oh, how she wished they did.

Beatrice shot Angel a reproving glare. "Kissing isn't allowed either. Don't get involved, 459," she advised, though her voice softened a smidgen.

The trouble was Angel knew she already was involved. Big time. Whenever Clark came close, her invisible wings flapped ten to the dozen. She liked his kisses.

Wrong. She loved them. Loved the way he held her close; the feel of his heart beneath hers, fluttering just like her wings.

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Angel smiled. It was already too late. She was a goner.

And thankfully so was her boss. With the flick of one wing, Beatrice hot-footed it back to heaven, leaving Angel in a quandary of what to do next.

But lying in bed wasn't going to help. She had to get up. Get moving. And in the process, complete her list of challengers for Mr. Lannigan.

Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, she donned her sneakers, grabbed a backpack and the pad and pen she'd propped beside her before she finally succumbed to sleep in the wee hours of the morning.

She headed to the kitchen and came up with a jolt. "What are you doing?"

Clark sat on a kitchen stool at the breakfast nook, bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other. "What does it look like, having breakfast?" He chomped down on another spoonful, the tip of his tongue swiping at a bead of milk resting on his bottom lip.

Angel's zeroed in on the tongue action, finding herself imitating it, then in double quick time realized what she was doing and bit down on her bottom lip.

"You better hurry if we're to get out of here before eight," Clark informed her.

Angel shook her head. *Get it together angel.*

"Eight, as in a.m.?"

Clark nodded and continued to chew.

"You are joking?"

He shook his head, rinsed his bowl and deposited it in the dishwasher. Wiping his hands on a tea towel he turned to her. "Well?"

"But it's Saturday."

"Yep, all day. Come on."

Angel knew in that moment what she had to do. She stood her ground and shook her head, one damp blond curl falling forward. "Nope. No can do."

Clark did a double take.

"You heard me," she affirmed, and swallowed back her nerves, chin jutting out in a soupcon of defiance. "Have you forgotten your challenges, Mr. Lannigan?"

Clark shrugged on his jacket, a beautiful Armani in the finest of fabrics that fit his broad shoulders and looked every inch the designer price tag it was. "I rode the Harley." He flicked on his mobile phone.

"And you enjoyed it, go on admit it."

He said nothing. The mobile light blinked.

"I dare you, Clark Lannigan. Admit it was F.U.N."

For several silent seconds, Clark simply stared her. His dark eyes darkened even further, long lashes shadowing his thoughts. The silence thickened and wrapped around her, and with sudden sadness Angel began to wonder if she was doing this right. Could she goad a man who thrived on goal setting, to take on these challenges?

A few days ago the challenge had been for her to succeed so she could win a better cloud. Funny, that it didn't seem to be so important any more. Now, she simply wanted this serious, work-absorbed man who seemed to have lost

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something, the light in his life, she wanted to teach him about fun all over again.

"Okay, so it was fun," he finally admitted in a clipped voice. He picked up his briefcase from the table beside the front door.

Time was running out. Angel had to work. Fast. She grabbed the list she'd started last night. Sweaty fingers slid over the soft velum pad. "Here," she said flipping open the cover and tore off the top page and thrust it towards Clark. She yanked her arm back. "No, wait a minute." Reaching for her pen, she scribbled on the paper, the tip of her tongue sliding over suddenly dry lips as she frantically reorganized the list. Satisfied she had it all in the right order, she tapped the tip of her pen on the paper, smiled, and then held it out to Clark once more.

Suspicion colored his gaze to almost black and spread across his tightly controlled features. "What is it?"

"Your challenges," she said with a light smile and a gigantic dose of hope.

"I've done the bike ride."

"And last night you said, and I quote. '*Bring it on, Angel!*' So, here we are, Clark. I'm bringing it on." She stood her ground, hands on hips as she waited for his reaction.

And waited.

Lordy, if she held her breath, she'd be flaked out by now.

The corners of his mouth curled downwards as his gaze flicked over the challenges. "You've got to be joking."

"Nope." And she continued to smile sweetly, while inside she called on Beatrice and the gang to nudge this guy in the right direction. "Come on, Clark. You up for it?"

Clark recited her list, incredulity tingeing his voice with each item. "One. Bike ride. We already did that," he said with some satisfaction.

"Yay for you, so strike that one off."

"Two. Bungee jump. Are you nuts?"

"Could be," she agreed good-humouredly.

"You want me to jump off some building with a rubberband around my ankle."

"Scared?"

"Hell yeah. Funnily enough I value staying alive."

"Try cloud jumping," Angel quipped.

He shot her a 'here we go again' grimace. "You going on about angels again?"

She shrugged and offered him a crooked sort of smile.

Clark read aloud the remainder of the list.

"Three. Get a puppy from the SPCA. Angel, do you know how much dogs poop?"

"A tad," she admitted. "But Clark, how can you say no to such pleading eyes." She fluttered her lashes at him, feigning innocence.

"Are we talking about the dog's or yours?"

"The puppy's of course," she chuckled, knowing he didn't believe a word she said, which was okay, because neither did she.

He continued. "Number four. Not go to work on Saturday."

"A day of rest," she offered.

"That's Sunday. Or didn't your boss on the cloud tell you that?"

"Ah, so you do believe me?"

"I didn't say that," he cut back. "But Saturday is out of the question. I have a meeting to attend, board of directors to appease and Larissa."

"Is going shopping."

Clark's jaw dropped. "She told you?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you. She left a message on the answering machine."

"Since when?"

"A while back," Angel fibbed. *Just a little one, Beatrice. No more I promise.*

"I never heard the phone ring."

"You were busy, and I picked it up on the first ring," she answered quickly.

"One fib too many, 459," Beatrice intoned in her best Angel Boss voice in Angel's ear.

"Come on, Clark. One Saturday. That's all I ask."

"One?"

Yay, she had him hooked. "You sound as if you don't believe me."

"I don't know what to think, Angel. You say all this weird stuff, and you make me want..." Clark's stopped speaking mid-sentence

"Want what, Clark?"

"You."

Oh, Lordy. No. No. This wasn't meant to happen. She backed away. "Nope. No can do. Angel rule 750.2, paragraph

A. No canoodling." Angel spied a kind of pained expression flitting across Clark's eyes. "Well, you know what I mean. It's not on the agenda."

"It was earlier."

"Well, yes," she agreed, coloring, "that was a mistake."

"A good mistake."

Terrific, she agreed silently. Just peachy. Yummy in fact. But she had to be strong and just do her job. Otherwise the cloud she had her eye on would go to another angel and that was NOT going to happen, not if she could help it. "Read the list, Clark," she prompted, desperate to change the subject.

"Five, girlie shopping."

"Just undies and things. I mean you do buy Larissa gifts don't you?"

Clark bleached of color and clammed up.

Realizing she needed to move this hunk fast if she was going to get the job done, she swiped the list from his hands.

"Hey. I was reading that."

"Yes well, how about we make some of the challenges remain a surprise."

"This is one big surprise, if you ask me."

"I didn't, but glad to know it anyway," she quipped. "Now, let's go, Mr. Lannigan. Time to tie that rubberband to your ankle." Stuffing the list in her bag, she grabbed Clark's elbow and guided him out the door, down the elevator and out into the glorious early morning sunshine of an Auckland about to give full vent to summer and Christmas all rolled into one.

From the Viaduct, an area once home to fishing boats and a market, now housing luxurious apartments, they walked

towards the waterfront. High priced yachts bobbed on the gentle swell of an almost aqua waterfront, while above gulls circled in the cloudless sky.

"Where exactly are we going?"

"Wait for the surprise." Angel stole a secret peek towards the bridge spanning the central business district and the northern shores of the city, but kept mute.

They reached the base where the bungee company operated a tiny kiosk at the southern end of the harbor bridge.

"Whoa." Clark pulled back, yanking his arm from her grip. He held up his hands in protest. "You trying to kill me? This is over the top. What about my suit?"

"Oh, baby," she cooed while trying to stifle a giggle at the same time. "Give me your jacket." In double quick time she had it off him, fingers caressing the exclusive fabric. His body heat still radiated off it, almost burning her hand. "Now, up you go to the very top," she said dramatically, "and over you go."

"Me? What about you? If I go, you go."

"Really? A tandem jump, now there's a thought." Angel tapped a finger to her chin in mock humor. "Okay."

Clark's pallor turned decidedly pale. "Okay?"

"Definitely."

A lighthearted chuckle rose up from the pit of Angel's stomach. "You thought, Mr. Lannigan," she said poking the tip of a long buffed nail into his chest, "that I wouldn't do it. But heck, you forgot one thing."

"What's that?"

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"I'm an angel, Clark. I fly all the time." And with that, she grabbed his hand, linking her fingers in his, which really was a dumb move for this particular angel. For a fraction of a section, she felt the zing of his warmth radiate all the way down to her toes. Angel she shut down the excitement, reminding herself she had no time for lovey dovey stuff. Clouds were a premium in heaven. This was her one shot at the ultimate cloud deal.

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Chapter Seven

The air flew passed him, the tug on his limbs intense, exhilarating. Fun!

Clark jolted up and down, the swell of the blue-green ocean below him taking on a distorted roller coaster effect. He turned his head slightly, delighted it actually didn't fall off, and spied Angel. She'd gone over with him, whooping her joy the moment they were airborne.

But that was the funny thing. Angel seemed to take to being airborne as if she knew exactly what it felt like, was a pro at it.

Clark shook his head. Damn it, this upside down stuff and all the blood surging to his head was making him think things. Silly things. Unreal things.

Like there could be angels.

He didn't have time to reflect on that particular theory however as the bungee crew slowly lowered him to the waiting boat and hauled his sorry confused butt back to ground zero. Beside him Angel seemed to almost float.

Get a grip. Clark shook his head again. Forget it. "Totally and utterly impossible."

"Well," Angel bubbled at his side. "Did you like it? Go on," she enthused, almost jumping up and down. "I bet you did."

For a moment Clark said nothing. He couldn't get a word in. But then he smiled. He couldn't help himself. Angel Smith was infectious. She tugged him in places he'd closed off for so

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long. How could he disappoint her? "Yes," he laughed with her, taking her hands in his. "It was fun."

"See," she beamed. "I told you so. Oh, Clark." And despite his hold on her she jumped up and kissed him. Not his cheek. Oh, no. She kissed right smack dang on the lips, and blow me down if the world didn't stop. His world, at least.

It slowed, stopped, then spun and spun as her warm lips stayed attached to his. Teasing him. Holding him. His groin acknowledged the temptation. Hard and wanting. Then she pulled away and Clark felt an instant sense of bereavement.

"Right, let's go." She tugged at his hand, but he balked and rolled back on the balls of his heels.

"How about a repeat performance?" Clark was definitely up for it. Kissing her. Oh, yeah. The thought excited him, which in turn scared the hell out of him. He *was* having fun. Somehow, he'd forgotten how. Too many years and too much grief had closed off any thoughts of fun. Guilt and grief did that.

"No, silly," she said laughing up at him, and then lifted her gaze heavenward turning slightly towards the Harbor Bridge. "You've succeeded with this challenge, Clark. You can tick that off your list, too."

Clark considered her statement. This blond haired nymph had somehow wrought a change in him. A hint of what was long gone and buried. Maybe it was time to bring *him* back. The old him.

Maybe.

The realization filled him with a confusing mix of joy.

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"Give me that list, Angel." Clark witnessed the faint frown of worry across her brows, but she silently dug in her voluminous bag and passed the crumpled list to him.

He took it, making a ceremony of straightening it out, smoothing out the creases. "Pen," he said perfunctorily.

She passed him a pen, still silent, still obviously worried.

He couldn't disappoint his Angel. "Bungee crossed off," he stated, crossing it off.

"And it's Saturday and you're not at work. Cross that off, too," she prompted.

He did as he was told while a surprisingly warm fuzzy feeling took over the second she moved close, almost touching. She leaned over and scanned the list with the tip of her finger. "Only six to go."

"Six? Angel, either you've missed one off, or don't they teach math in heaven?"

She looked at the list, then up at him. "Oh." Her mouth formed a perfect circle, but all Clark could see were her lips. Luscious, pink and angelic. And definitely perfect for kissing. He wanted to kiss her. A lot. And definitely right now.

"I missed one off," she said with a shrug. She lowered her lashes and looked away from him.

"Don't do that," he said, surprised that he pleaded. He traced a finger along her cheek and she turned to him. "I love to look in your eyes, Angel. Seeing your excitement, the life and vibrancy of Angel Smith."

She offered him a shy smile.

"What did you miss, Angel?"

Her blush heightened and she glanced down at the list.

"Um...just a silly one."

"Silly? How about you let me judge that."

"No. Forget it. Leave it at nine."

"You said ten challenges," he prompted.

A distinct flutter of a breeze wafted around him and Clark automatically lifted his gaze to the tree-lined street they walked along. Not one single leaf stirred, and yet he'd felt the breeze. Warm. Teasing. A soft caress of a wing.

"Hey what is this?" Angel stirred him from his considerations. "An inquisition. Nine. Ten," she shrugged, refusing to look him in the eye. "What does it matter?"

"It mattered to you last night."

"That was last night."

"So what's changed, Angel?"

"Everything."

Now it was Clark's turn to be confused, but just as quickly, as if a light bulb went on in his brain, his barely functioning brain since Angel arrived, he clued up. "Was it because I kissed you?"

She said nothing.

He had to know. "Angel?"

She nodded this time, but still refused to look at him, while he desperately wanted to look into her eyes. To understand.

He watched as she swallowed and her teeth grazed across her bottom lip. A lip he would really love to taste again.

"Come on, Angel," he encouraged. "It's me, Clark, the guy you want to teach to have fun. So give me the tenth

challenge. Or don't you think I'm up to it, huh?" he chuckled. "Bungee jumping, playing hooky on Saturday."

"Don't forget the bike ride last night," she added.

"So I haven't done too bad so far, have I?" he asked.

"No," she said with a tiny smile of agreement. "You've done pretty darn good."

A wave of pleasure washed over Clark. Satisfaction that he'd risen to her challenges; that he'd pleased Angel. "So hit me with number ten."

"You sure?"

"You scared I'll knuckle under?"

"Oh, I think perhaps number ten could challenge us both."

"Really? Sounds intriguing."

"Number ten, Clark, is NO KISSING allowed. Do you think you can handle it?"

Talk about a king hit he hadn't expected. It sure had come out of left field. And it hit bloody hard.

A challenge? Shit, it was impossible. He wanted it to be impossible. He wanted to kiss Angel. To keep kissing her. Even though he knew he shouldn't. Every part of him fought against it. Kind of. Especially his subconscious. The guilt part. The part that said he shouldn't be having fun. But his body ruled right now and Clark wasn't sure how honorable that was.

He took a couple of steps back, again aware of the instant loss of closeness. That hurt, too. He liked to hold her, touch her. But he liked kissing her more.

With such a confusing conundrum warring through his brain and testing his body, Clark watched the expectation on

her face. She wanted him to accept the challenge, and yet, he knew from her reaction she liked his kisses. Hell, she liked them a lot.

But these were Angel's challenges to him, damn it, and he wasn't about to let her down. He offered a conciliatory smile. "Hey I can do it, if that's what you want. No sweat."

Bloody liar.

His body roared with life, an urgent thread of need traveling to every nerve ending. For god's sake, he wanted Angel. Wanted to kiss her, again. And again. Unending. He wanted to trail his hands through her silken curls. He wanted to make love to her, an emotion so strong it raced up to meet him head on. And that scared the hell out of him.

He'd dated Larissa for a long time without feelings this deep, and if he were truthful, and that came as a blast of cold brutal reality, he and Larissa had drifted from lust to existing. Both business orientated, Larissa determined to network, get ahead, always prompting him to attend business functions. She was the consummate go-getter. He got, but he worked through business channels. He was his own man and had resisted Larissa's attempt to mold him so far. Sometimes he wondered if she used him. But whenever he thought it, he felt guilty and blocked it out.

Then there was Angel. All she wanted was to give him some fun. And she'd done that.

Easy really. A laugh. A smile. A kiss. All that, plus a rubberband tied around his ankle as she threw him off the bridge. Fun, when you know how.

"Right. A puppy is next on the list. What do you fancy?"

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"Who knew you could get so much from four paws and a ball of energy," Clark chuckled as he tossed the small soft ball for the puppy once more. It bounded across the hardwood floors, feet slipping and sliding in all directions, unable to gain leverage. Its tiny yapping bark filled the apartment, along with Angel's giggles.

"Did you have a pet as a child?" she asked.

Clark shook his head.

The puppy dropped the ball at his feet, all expectant black eyes and a tongue hanging out. Doggie drool dripped to the floor. Clark laughed at its antics and wiped up the mess.

Watching Clark as he played with the dog tugged at Angel's heart and a sudden silence circled her.

Clark tossed the paper towel into the bin, and then realizing he was being stared at, he looked over to her. "What?"

"You. You are really having fun, aren't you, Clark?"

"I am. And do you know what? It feels good. At last." That he didn't even hesitate in his answer swelled Angel's heart with happiness.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Oh, Clark." She sprang from her seat and hugged him, an automatic reaction she should have thought about first. But that she had begun to succeed, brought a

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single bolt of joy to her, and so she did what made her happy too. She reached up and kissed him. Kissed him on the mouth.

Clark responded, arms twining around her waist, bringing her to him.

And still she kissed him. Angel didn't want to let go.

"Rules, 459. Rules."

Disappoint seared across her heart and she pulled away a fraction, her breath rushing from her lungs in sharp bursts. She rested her palms flat on his chest, felt the thunder of his heartbeat, and when she lifted her gaze to his all she could see was a blatant, white-hot fire of desire she had to somehow put out.

She pushed hard against him. For a moment he kept holding her tight, then his fingers unhooked from around her waist and she was free to move away.

She didn't want to. No siree, not one bit. But she had to. She turned from him and retreated her seat, wrapping her arms across her chest. She needed somehow to protect her heart. It hurt.

Damn the rules.

Angel knew disappointment. It tasted so real, scoured at her heart. The intensity surprised her, but shouldn't have. She hadn't expected to fall in love on this job. But she had. Really and truly and full of excitement and lust and all those wonderful things she had heard about from other angels. Now it was her turn.

But there lay the BIG problem. It wasn't actually her turn. This was simply a job she had to do, then she'd be gone and

Clark would be here, and she could watch him and Larissa while she, Angel 459 perched atop the cloud she'd coveted.

Fun? Not likely!

But whether she loved Clark, or was even allowed to love him, she still had a job to do.

Swallowing back the lump in her throat, she shoved her shaking hands beneath her. "Have you thought of a name for the puppy yet?" Angel asked, deciding it best to try for neutral ground.

Clark reached out and tickled the puppy behind his ears. "Bingo," he said, and then lifted his questioning gaze to hers. "What do you think?"

"I think Bingo suits him, sort of bouncy, just like him."

"Yeah it does, doesn't it?" And he began to whistle. "*And Bingo was his name-o.*"

For the next while she sat opposite Clark, patting Bingo, tossing the ball for him to retrieve and when the puppy finally curled up in Clark's lap, exhaustion taking over as it fell into a contented sleep, they simply sat and talked about work and life in general. But through it all Angel kept her distance. Too close and she'd want to kiss him again. Heck she wanted to kiss him anyway. Instead she did noting, and Clark, blast it, did the same. Why couldn't he just kiss her?

The sound of a key in the front door lock dragged Angel from her relaxed stupor, but before she could scramble to her feet Larissa walked in, coming to a shocked halt when she spied Clark sprawled on the floor and Bingo still snoozing as if he had no cares in the world.

"What is *that*?" The woman's shock matched her voice. Shrill and acerbic. She jabbed a finger towards the dog who woke, all renewed energy and charged towards her.

Larissa's screech echoed through the apartment as she dropped her bag and backed up to the door. "Get away, away you silly...dog." She glared from the dog, to Clark. "You've got a dog!"

"It's a puppy," corrected Angel.

Her glare swiveled from Clark to Angel. "This is all your fault. You shouldn't be here, and neither should that...mutt," she protested.

"His name's Bingo," Clark said quietly, speaking for the first time as he stood up.

"Bingo! What sort of dog is it? It looks like some back alley mutt."

"It's a Jack Russell cross," he informed her

"Crossed with what? Beast. Get it away from me, Clark."

Clark clicked his fingers and instantly Bingo switched his attention to his new master and padded on floppy feet that seemed far too large for his puppy body across the floor, returning to sit at Clark's feet. He picked the dog up, tickling it under its chin which in turn rewarded Clark with a slobbery lick to his cheek.

Larissa's eyes bulged. "Disgusting."

"But you've got to admit he is cute," Clark countered. He held the dog out to her and she promptly took another step back until she was hard up against the closed front door with nowhere to go...except out. Which was exactly where Angel hoped she would go.

"You're not allowed dogs in the apartment. It's against the rules."

Clark shrugged. "Tough. He's staying. Besides, I own the building."

Angel's head jack-knifed in Clark's direction. "You do?"

"Yeah, it comes with the hard work on Saturday's," he quipped offering her a secret kind of smile.

Larissa's gasp could have sucked all the air out of the apartment. "But I don't like dogs. You don't mean that."

Clark grinned at Bingo, then looked steadily at Larissa. "Yeah," he admitted with another smile to the dog and a wink in Angel's direction. She smiled back at him, hoping it would encourage him to stand up to the she-devil. "I do mean it, Larissa. It's nice having him around, makes life fun."

"Fun!" This time Larissa voice reached decibel levels. "What has got into you, Clark? You're acting weird. Is this some kind of mid-life crisis or something?"

He lowered Bingo to the ground and the puppy scampered around the room, closing in on Larissa. The woman shuddered her disgust.

"Could be the or something," he admitted readily, which only went to fuel her anger even further.

She wrapped her arms across her chest, flattening her meager endowment even further.

Miaow! Catty. But fun!

Angel knew she shouldn't take sides, but the woman got on her nerves.

"Either that dog goes, Clark, or I do."

The air stilled around them all and Angel noted the sudden rigidity to Clark's stance. He may have seemed a patsy in Larissa's eyes, but the man wasn't about to be pushed around.

"It's a puppy, Larissa, that's all."

"No it's not, it's...it's her fault," she said pointing to Angel again.

"Don't blame me, Clark chose him."

"He did?" Incredulity, sparked across Larissa's dour expression.

"Yep. And named him too," she added for emphasis. Okay, so there had been a tad of prompting on her part with the challenges.

"Go home, Larissa. Cool off."

"No. No I'm not going to cool off. Why weren't you at the office? I called and your voice mail said you were out of the office. Why?"

"It's Saturday."

"So?"

"Saturday, Larissa. It's part of the weekend."

"Since when has that been an issue for you, Clark. You're like me, you work hard."

"Time for a change."

Larissa's jaw slackened. Angel could tell the woman knew she'd been beaten. She felt sorry for her, wished she could help, but she'd only been sent to give Clark a taste of fun.

Without another word, and with a dignity Angel quietly admired, Larissa retrieved her bag from the floor and tucked it under her arm. She turned to the door, halting as her hand

rested on the handle. "Give me a call when you come to your senses."

And with that, as the door closed behind her, Bingo suddenly began a busied round of yapping and racing around the floor.

At least someone was happy she was gone. Make that two, Angel thought.

"Don't be mean, 459, that's not very becoming of an angel."

Angel stared at the closed front door. "How about you send someone down for her, Beatrice. The woman could do with a large dose of help."

"Never fear, 459, help is already on the way for Larissa."

"Goody."

"Pardon?" Clark's relaxed tone infiltrated Angel's heavenly conversation.

"Sorry, just talking to Beatrice."

"Your boss angel?" Clark clarified.

Angel offered him a beatific smile. "So you get it?"

"Not particularly, but it seems it won't go away, so let's say I'm living with it."

Just then Angel's stomach rumbled loud and clear. She slapped a hand on her offending anatomy

"I guess that's telling me to feed you," Clark chuckled.

"Well, put it this way, food in heaven is kind of a luxury."

"You mean you don't get fed?" Clark's stride halted. "Did I just ask that?"

"I guess you did," she parried back.

"Woman," Clark exhaled, "I don't believe what you've got me doing, or saying," he said and continued on his way to the kitchen, with an already adoring Bingo chasing at his heels.

Angel spied her bag where she'd left it when they'd arrived home with Bingo. "That reminds me."

"What?" There was a definite suspicious tone to Clark's voice.

"Our list. I mean your challenges," she corrected, pulling the list from the bag. "I've got to nip out for a few minutes. Won't be long." And before Clark could stop her, she raced out the door, his worried call echoing in the increasing distance.

Breathless lungs burning for more oxygen, Angel reached a corner store she'd spotted earlier about four blocks from the apartment building. It was one of those tiny shops that sold grocery and magazines along with fruit and veggies and was just what she needed.

Inside, Angel found she had to force herself to concentrate on the task at hand rather than salivate over the variety of chocolate and cookies and everything decadent a girl could die for.

Paying for her goods, she backtracked to the apartment, chuckling as she entered and heard Clark's humming off-tune to his 'Bingo' song. In the kitchen she deposited her plastic bag on the counter and Clark looked up from the skillet where something rather aromatic was cooking. Angel licked her lips

"Where have you been, or shouldn't I ask?"

"I have a surprise for you."

"Told you I shouldn't ask."

"Never mind. Now put that aside," she instructed, though really disappointed she would have to wait to sample whatever he was cooking.

"But dinner is nearly ready."

"Doesn't matter. It has to wait."

"Can't, unless you like it char-grilled."

"Anyway is fine by me, but do what you're told, Clark Lannigan."

His eyes widened in mock horror and Angel struggled to stifle the giggle bubbling from deep down in her belly. Clark with a skillet and a tea towel tucked into the waistband of his trousers was a real treat for sore eyes

"A bossy angel, no less. Maybe you should get your wings clipped, missy."

Suddenly, his change of heart regarding her origins put a different spin on things. "Can you see my wings," she asked. She wriggled her shoulders slightly, knowing her wings would vibrate a slivery outline

"Nope. Should I?"

"They're quivering," she advised.

"Sounds intriguing."

"The vibration gives off a glow. That's why in books when you see drawings of angels they have this halo of light behind them."

Clark shook his head and wiped his hands on his makeshift apron. He peered straight at her, and then walked a slow circle about her. With his closeness, Angel felt her wings flap faster and faster.

He came to a halt in front of her. "'Fraid not," he advised

Disappointment resonated through every part of her. She wanted so much for him to see them. Believe her.

He reached for the skillet.

"Stop that. No dinner. Well at least not yet," she confirmed.

"I thought you were starving, if those noises you were making were anything to go by."

"I am, but I've a surprise first."

"Oh, hell. Ooops sorry." He gave her a lopsided grin.

"Don't worry, I don't think Beatrice will chastise you. She fancies you."

Clark's brows rose in tandem. "Really?"

"Yep. Said you were a hunk."

"Did she now." Clark tossed his tea towel to the bench.

"And what do you think?" He stilled, then turned one way, then the other, as if he expected her to inspect him.

She did. And she liked, no, more than liked, what she saw. "I think it's time for the next challenge."

"Changing the subject, Angel?"

Angel didn't trust herself to answer and instead reached inside the plastic shopping bag and drew out her surprise.

"Dessert," she offered.

"Great, I love ice cream," Clark admitted, "but what's the challenge? Or is it to see how much I can eat at one sitting? Because if it is, let me tell you, when I was a kid, I was the local ice cream gobbler champion."

"Impressive."

"Yep. And I got the belly ache to prove it too," he added.

"So what changed, Clark?" she said, suddenly wondering where the little boy had disappeared.

He didn't answer straight away; instead he stared at the two litre container of hokey pokey ice cream, all vanilla and crunchy golden honeycomb candy. There was a distinct sadness in his eyes, mirrored by the quiet tone to his voice when he finally spoke. "Life got in the way, Angel. It does that when you grow up."

Angel didn't know what to say, realizing the frivolity of only seconds ago had vanished completely. She had to get it back. Get Clark on track. "Right," she said trying for light-heartedness. "Put dinner aside, you've another challenge to meet."

"What?" His tone softened a fraction, but held a definite hint of wariness.

"Well, let's put it this way, it's not as scary as jumping off the bridge."

"Amen to that."

Angel began to dish up lashings of ice cream, chocolate sauce, wafer biscuits and a sprinkling of nuts to top it off

"It'll melt before we get to it."

"Oh, no, that's where you're wrong. Don't you get it? This challenge is that you eat dessert before dinner."

"Huh?"

Angel put the remaining ice cream in the freezer and turned back to Clark, hands on her hips. "Didn't you ever want to eat dessert before your dinner when you were a kid?"

"Sure."

"So what stopped you?"

"My mother, for one," he announced.

Angel made a theatrical gaze around the room. "You're a big boy now, so go eat, and I won't tell."

Clark eyed the dessert, and it was all she could do to halt the tinkle of a laughter threatening behind her pursed lips

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart," she said, using one digit to make a cross over her heart

"You're an angel, can you say that?"

"I just did."

"Okay, I vote we attack this challenge of yours." And he scooped up their over laden bowls and strode to the dining table. "Come on, let's see who finishes first."

It was no contest really. Clark won hands down. He groaned as his spoon rattled in the empty bowl. "Remind me never to do that again."

"I guess you won't want dinner," Angel suggested with a chuckle.

"How many more of these challenges are there? And please tell me none involve food."

"Only two foodie ones."

Clark's jaw dropped

"Breakfast for starters," she informed him

He looked horrified which delighted Angel. "You're not going to make me eat ice cream for breakfast?"

She shook her head, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. "You always eat Cornflakes."

"No thinking required," he said easily.

"Tough. Time for a change, Clark my boy. Muesli. Weetbix. Eggs. Anything, just not Cornflakes."

He shrugged, but the sparkle had returned to his chocolate colored eyes. "Easy, I can do that. Can't you come up with something harder?"

"Are you challenging me?"

"Could be," he winked.

"I'll just have to try then, won't I?"

Actually, Angel thought she had. The no kissing had already proven to be very difficult on her part, because right now as she watched Clark relax with Bingo reclining across his feet, the man looked decidedly desirable and she really, really wanted to kiss him.

Blast that Angel Rule.

* * * *

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Chapter Eight

Ice cold fear ripped through Angel's veins and her stomach balled into a vengeful knot. She punched Clark's private office number into the phone and began to pray. "Come on, Clark. Answer."

"Lannigan." He sounded so business-like. Severe. The hint of fun and excitement she'd heard in his voice the last few days absent.

"Clark, it's me."

"Angel? What's wrong?"

"It's Bingo, he's all sad and not moving."

"He's tired."

"No. It's more. I don't know. He's just lying there. I tried to get him to eat and drink, but he wouldn't. He's sick, Clark." The moment Angel voiced the words her panic escalated a thousand-fold. "You've got to come home."

"I'll be home in five."

The phone line went dead and Angel sank back to the couch. She lifted Bingo onto her lap, one hand stroking him under the chin, the other along the ridge of his back. He didn't move.

True to his word Clark strode into the apartment five minutes later. "Where is he?"

Angel simply looked to her lap. Clark squatted in front of her, his broad hands trying to coax the puppy into a semblance of alertness.

Nothing worked.

"Right. Get a blanket," Clark barked. His mode was all business, but his eyes said something else. Panic and fear and love all rolled into one as he gazed down at the ball of fluff that had in just a few days become such an integral part of their strange little unit.

Within minutes they were in Clark's car racing towards the veterinary clinic he'd already phoned to advise they were on their way.

"Has he eaten something rich? Chocolate perhaps?" the vet asked sometime later.

Angel shook her head. "Oh, dear God." Her knees shook and she sagged against Clark. "I ate some chocolate." She looked at Clark. "We don't get it...well, you know where. I wanted to indulge." She looked directly at the vet. "He'll be alright won't he?"

"Dogs can't eat chocolate. It contains theobromine that in sufficient quantities, is toxic. But the good news is that it takes a fairly large amount to cause such a reaction. You'll need to leave Bingo with me overnight; we'll make him bring it up. He won't be happy, but it's important we get it out of his stomach."

Leaving the sad little puppy at the vet's tore at Angel's heart and once back at the apartment she couldn't raise any enthusiasm whatsoever. She lay sprawled across the sofa ignoring everything except the hollowness in the pit of her stomach. How had she come to love him in such a short time?

Easy. He was cute. Loveable. But Angel knew she wasn't only thinking of her love for the puppy, but for Clark. She loved him.

Blast it. Another Angel Rule broken.

As tiredness enveloped, the tears she had held at bay for so long began to flow. She couldn't stop them. Didn't want to. They eased the pain. And the guilt. Just a little.

"Angel, don't cry."

She lifted tear-filled eyes to Clark. She hadn't heard him come close. "What if?"

"Shush, don't say it." Clark pulled her to her feet, cradling her in his arms.

"But, it's my fault. I was greedy. One of the seven sins you know," she said as a fresh wave of tears taking over.

Wrapped in Clark's embrace time stood still until somehow, sometime, something changed. A moment. Like a breath that washed against her skin, Angel slowly became aware of his hold on her. Aware of the comfort. The joy. And the temptation.

She snuggled closer, burying her face in his reassuring shoulder, taking in his strength. His hand caressed her head, fingers twining in the tangle of curls at the base of her neck. It elicited a shiver of heat racing from that very spot to the tips of her nerve endings.

And still he held her. So very close. As he whispered soothing and breathless words of comfort, Angel held on tight, taking comfort from the ridges of rib and muscles beneath her hands. From the beat of his heart.

Then Clark kissed her and right at that very moment Angel decided rules were made to be broken and kissed him right back.

She couldn't hold back any longer. Too many days and nights spent thinking about Clark, reliving their kisses and all the new emotions he invoked. Thinking about now. About afterwards. The what ifs.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Clark murmured into the curl of her ear.

"I know."

"Do you want to stop?"

She shook her head slightly. She didn't want to miss one minute of Clark's lips on hers.

"Good." And he deepened the kiss, the tip of his tongue sliding across her lips. "You taste good."

Her lips parted allowing Clark's tongue to dance with hers. He cupped a breast, the nipple hardening instantly.

Lost in a world of heat and lust and delicious torment, Angel gave herself up to the sensual delights Clark's lips wrought and his hands teased alive.

"You're beautiful, Angel."

"And you're not a bad looking bloke either, Clark Lannigan," she chuckled.

He took both her hands in his, examining the tips of her fingers then matched hand for hand, fingertip for fingertip. He stared down at her, dark eyes, the color of the richest, darkest chocolate captivating hers, searching into her soul.

"You know I want to make love to you, Angel."

"I know."

"You don't have to."

"I know that too," she answered with a whisper. "But I also know I want to, so very much."

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

For a long minute, where everything seemed to stop except the frantic beat of her heart, Clark said nothing. He looked deep into her eyes, as if he wanted to make sure.

She had to make him believe her.

A tiny smile tugged at Angel's lips. She'd been trying that a lot lately where he was concerned.

Reaching up on her toes, she cupped his cheek with her hand, drawing the tips of her fingers across his stubbled jaw. The texture of his skin against hers was erotic in the extreme. Then she placed a finger across his lips. She felt his gasp, the warm air washing across her finger. "Shush," she said, "not one word. Believe me, Clark." And she reached up and kissed him, wanting to give back so much, reveling in the longing she felt for this man.

It happened suddenly, and yet so beautifully. Their clothes came off quickly, tossed to the floor with abandon. Angel heard her wings flutter.

Clark stilled. "What's that?"

"My wings."

His brow creased. Then he smiled one of those broad, slow smiles of his that creased right to the corners of his eyes and made his eyes twinkle as if they were circled with gold dust. "So that's what they sound like?"

"You can hear them?"

"Yeah, a sort of soft flutter, like the gentle breeze that wafts through a garden."

"Very poetic."

"I am, aren't I, but right now I have a different sort of poetry, Angel 459. Poetry in motion."

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

Lowering her to the exotic rug in front of a fireplace that though not required because it was summer, Clark had quickly ignited using the in-built wall switch. He lay beside her, fingers trailing down her stomach, across each breast, caressing her nipples that peaked the moment he touched them.

He kissed her lips. Her eyelids. Her breasts. Butterfly soft kisses that made Angel think she had died and gone to heaven, which given her circumstances was kinda funny, but she wasn't laughing. Oh, no. She was *definitely* in heaven right now.

Clark levered himself over her, skin touching skin, his arousal edging the tip of her womanhood. Then he stopped, and Angel's heart plummeted. He saw her shock and dotted a kiss on her lips. "Don't worry, just making sure we're protected."

Protected?

Heat stained Angel's cheeks. She'd not even thought about protection and condoms or babies. Lordy, it had been far too long.

Clark reached for a foil from his jeans and Angel's brows arched. "You were that certain?"

"Call it hopeful, sweetheart," he chuckled as he guided the condom down his length. Satisfied all was in place, he shifted slightly above her. "Now, where were we?"

Angel reached up and traced the contours of his face. "About to make love, I think." she smiled up at him.

"So I suppose we better."

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

"Absolutely." Her legs parted and he lifted her bottom in the broad span of his hands as he entered.

She was no virgin angel, but it had been a long time and everything felt new and wonderful. Just right. She held him to her, wrapping her legs around him as he slowly entered, then stopped.

"Do you want to back out?"

Was he joking? Her legs clenched tighter around him, and he winked. "Reckon that's the only answer I need," he said and plunged into her, filling her, taking her with him, until Angel felt as if she had landed back on her cloud.

"Heaven," she breathed into his ear.

"Definitely." Clark thrust faster, harder, kissing her, drawing from her everything she could give him, and more. She squeezed her eyes shut as sensations, so glorious that she could barely breathe, rocked over her. And yet she wanted to see Clark, look into his eyes, witness the depth of his desire.

She blinked them open. She saw it. Desire, blatant, potent, and overwhelming was mirrored in Clark's intense gaze.

Angel's body zinged alive, the precipice of urgency within her reach as her body arched into his, toes curling. Pleasure thundered through her veins, heart hammering wrapping her in the pure bliss of Clark's arms. Her orgasm shattered, Clark's release pulsing a milli-second later.

"So that's heaven," he murmured in a breathless chuckle into her ear. "Pretty darn good." he added.

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

With night falling and the curtains open Angel had a direct view to heaven. "Wonderful," she agreed. He lay beside her, his heartbeat matching the frantic dance of hers, an arm across her middle in an action of proprietorship. She rather liked it. A lot.

Clark pulled her to him, their bodies spooning together. "We really should go to bed."

"Bit late for that, isn't it?"

He peered over her shoulder, the sheen on his brow glistening under the moonlight as it peeked out from behind a cloud. "I was talking about sleep."

"Oh?"

"Angel," he chuckled. "I'm shocked. And here I was thinking you were so very...ah...angelic."

"I've broken the rules for a change."

"Nice to know. Fancy breaking them again."

Angel gasped, though excitement stirred instantly. "Already?"

"Hey," Clark laughed with her, holding his hands up in mock innocence. "I'm a healthy guy."

"Good to hear it."

"So, how about it?" His brows wiggled.

Angel didn't answer straight away because she wasn't sure she could trust her voice. She was doing something angels weren't allowed to do, but just this once she wanted to experience life, and love. Just once. For a few days. Then her job would be done and she would go back to her cloud.

Pushing herself up on her elbows, she stared down at her lover.

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

Lover. Even the word sounded deliciously decadent as it slid silently behind her kiss-swollen lips.

"First one to the bed is a dirty rat." And she jumped from their nest in front of the fireplace and sprinted to the bedroom, laughing as Clark's protests echoed behind her.

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Chapter Nine

Christmas loomed, though the hectic whirl of the wind-up before the festive season seemed to pass them by, their days rather normal, mundane even, while their nights became pleasure incarnate as they made love, delighting in each other's bodies.

The challenges?

What challenges?

In fact, Angel had kinda forgotten the challenges for a while. But time was running out and this morning a convulsive sadness swept over her as she walked away from checking the kitchen calendar.

Christmas Eve had arrived and soon her job would be done. Clark would complete his challenges, learned, she hoped, how to have fun. But she didn't want to go home. She loved Clark. She wanted to stay.

"Angel, where's the Cornflakes?"

The faint hitch of disquiet in Clark's tone conveyed to Angel she'd done the right thing. The challenges were back on. She answered him without hesitation. "Gone."

"You're not still intent on that challenge are you?"

"Why not?"

"Because I like Cornflakes."

"But a change is fun."

"And you want me to have fun?"

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

She nodded, though very aware her cheeks colored bright red. She knew Clark wasn't referring to the breakfast kind of fun. "Oh very definitely," she answered.

From behind the box of muesli bars she'd bought him, she retrieved the alternative cereal, and without saying a word Clark took it, filled his bowl and ate it. Angel walked over and grabbed a pen from beside the pad. She ticked a box on the list. She offered him her best angelic smile. "Three to go."

"Determined angel. How the heck do they manage without you in heaven?"

"Probably not very well. I imagine harp practice will be a chaotic chorus of off-key strumming."

Clark snorted his agreement. "You're not ready?"

"I...I don't want to go in today. I'm not well," she lied, struggling over her words. She turned away from him, not wanting him to witness the lies she knew would be mirrored in her eyes. Right now, she needed some time and space. She needed to think.

Love and angels didn't go together. And definitely not sex. She wasn't one of those cupids with the bows. She was a good deed angel. There one day, do the deed, gone the next. Except that her one day had become a few, and with it, consequences.

As Clark shrugged on his jacket, his brow creased with concern. He pulled her into his embrace an action that nearly broke Angel's resolve as he stared down at her into her face, searching. "You sure? I could stay home."

Angel shook her head and twisted from his arms. She pulled her lightweight dressing gown tighter across her chest,

wondering if it could close off her heart. She should be happy. She was in love.

In truth, she was downright miserable.

With a wave and a kiss that tore from her everything she could give him, Clark departed for work. The door closed behind him and Angel could have counted the seconds on one hand, not even long enough for the taste of his scorching hot kiss to disappear from her mouth, before Beatrice made an appearance.

"Lying again, 459."

Angel rounded on Beatrice's intrusion. "What would you have me do? Tell him I love him. That's not going to work."

"Humph. Silly girl. Why did you kiss him in the first place?"

"I couldn't resist," she said with blatant honesty.

"You're an angel for St Peter's sake," Beatrice chided.

"Now what?"

Angel threw up her hands. "You tell me, you're the boss."

"Some days, 459, I really wish I could be demoted."

Angel lifted her gaze to a hovering Beatrice. "I'm sorry. It just kind of happened. Love is like that, it sneaks up on you."

"Yes, yes. So they say. But you're going to have to leave."

"I know." *But she didn't want to know; she didn't even want to hear it.*

"Right now."

"What?"

"Time to leave Mr. Lannigan. I think he's learned his lessons."

Desperation warred in Angel's gut. She needed an excuse. "He hasn't completed his challenges yet."

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

"Enough is enough. You can't put heaven in a bad light. All this love. It has to stop."

"How can I stop loving him?" she pleaded.

"Get back to harp practice. Christmas is upon us and the boss needs a harp to accompany the birth reenactment."

Angel determined she would crawl if she had to. "One day, Beatrice. Please."

Beatrice eyed her, the older angel's red cheeks puffing in and out as she considered Angel's plea. She smacked her lips together, but her eyes definitely had softened, a gentle blue that said deep down, beneath the bluster, she really did understand. "One day. That's it."

Angel jumped up from her seat, clapping her hands. She had one more day, and night, with Clark. Somehow she'd make him understand. What exactly she wasn't sure, but she had twenty-four hours and that was all what mattered.

"There's a condition," Beatrice intervened.

An ice bath couldn't have killed Angel's excitement any faster. Her wings stopped their flapping and she dropped to the floor with a heart-rending thud. "What?"

"You can stay earthbound for another day, but not here, not with him."

"Not with Clark?"

"No, Angelica," Beatrice said, her voice gentling as she used Angel's full name for the first time in such a long time. "Stay on earth, but not in this apartment, not with Clark. Leave now. Take some time to think on things before you come back."

"And what use is that? It won't change anything."

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

"You never know, 459. Trust and believe." With a flick of her wings Beatrice disappeared, leaving Angel to lick her wounds. And to think.

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Christmas Eve and she had nowhere to go. Angel began to understand how Mary must have felt with no room at the inn. Trouble was, Angel didn't have a donkey.

Summer down under, so hot and humid, the night sky dotted with a million diamond-like stars. But all the beauty above couldn't drag her from her problems. Instead, she concentrated on putting one step in front of the other, uncaring where she went. She just had to think.

Go back upstairs, a.k.a., heaven. Leave Clark forever, knowing she hadn't fulfilled *her* task.

Clark hadn't completed his challenges. He had to. Only then would Angel believe he would be happy and be able to find his way from somewhere dark he hadn't let her be privy to.

He'd enjoyed the challenges—eventually, though she knew when he first spied the bike, every inch of Clark stiffened, balking silently. Though he'd not once taken the bike out again, and she didn't know why. Perhaps if she'd questioned him it might have gone some ways to understanding him and help her task.

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Now it was too late. Love had gotten in the way.

Just then, a posse of kids shoved her aside, slamming her into the side of a building as they raced past. For a few seconds she could have sworn, if she were allowed to, that stars danced before her eyes. Hugging the wall she counted to ten slowly, until her feet and head reconnected and her equilibrium rebalanced.

"Stop you little hoons," a fragile wail vented from behind her.

Turning one eighty degrees, Angel spied an elderly man shuffling forward, his cane shaking precariously in a hand gnarled with the swollen joints of arthritis.

Tired dark eyes, hooded by the wariness of age looked up at her. "Young rascals took my bag, got my ham in it," he wheezed as he came up alongside her.

Angel didn't like the sound of that rattly wheeze. "It's late, you should be at home," she admonished with a kindly smile.

"I know, but I get the ham just in case." His bony shoulders shrugged.

Angel peered down the street. The youths who'd taken the man's bag had reached the corner. Once out of sight there would be no getting it back. She lifted her eyes to the heavens. "Beatrice, you there?"

Angel heard the flutter of a dozen wings at once, and smiled. She wasn't alone. "How about it? I know you're not meant to, but hey," she offered a suggestive smile, "it's Christmas Eve."

"You okay, dear?" The old man patted her hand.

"I'm fine, just wishing for divine help."

"Oh, don't you worry, it doesn't matter about the ham. He probably won't come."

"Who?"

"My son." A glisten of a tear trickled down his wrinkled cheek.

Angel looked towards her home cloud. "Okay, do your stuff."

A thunderous flap of wings crashed in the heavens and suddenly, as if propelled by an unseen force, two boys stood in front of them. One held out the bag. "I'm sorry, mate. We shouldn't have taken it."

The man reached out, caution warring with delight across his lined face. "No. You shouldn't. Do you have homes to go to?"

Both boys nodded.

"Then get home, go help your parents. Hug them. Love them. Because right now, they need it more than anything in the world. Not all of us are so lucky."

Their relief visible, the boys spun away and retreated.

Angel turned to the elderly man. "I'm sure your son will come. It's Christmas, after all," she said praying she was right. There was something terribly sad about being alone on such a special family day. Family and Christmas went together.

He shook his head. "He hasn't come for years. Ever since his mother died. My fault really, he couldn't forgive me, and he thought I blamed him." He directed his tear-filled eyes at her. "I didn't blame him. I didn't."

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"I'm so sorry." And she was. No one should be alone on Christmas. Angel made a decision. "How about I see you home."

Delight brightened his face. "Are you sure? What about your family? It is Christmas Eve, as you say."

"Don't worry about that. I've got time." And sadly she did. Twenty-four hours of it.

The old man only lived a few blocks away, and pushing aside a rickety wrought iron gate they walked the short path, coming to a halt outside his front door. Eyes that only moments ago looked sad and worn with disappointment sparkled dark brown with flecks of gold. "Would you like a coffee? Tea? Something to warm you up."

"You don't have to."

"I know, but it's the least I can do. Humor an old man at Christmas, eh?" he chuckled. "I don't often have a beautiful young woman to visit. You're my guardian angel," he said.

She offered him a soft smile. "Could be." And she followed him inside.

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Clark couldn't concentrate. The figures on the stack of spreadsheets in front of him meant nothing, and for the first time in his life he couldn't care less. An overwhelming sense

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of claustrophobia had wrapped itself around him the moment he walked into his office that morning—without Angel.

Somehow, she'd brought life to *his* life, which was kind of weird in that psychobabble sort of way he hated to even consider. He had a life. A life he'd worked hard to achieve. Success was good. But today it seemed empty. Empty of Angel.

It had been so bad he'd escaped his office, taking up residence in the small onsite office at the first of his boutique hotels.

But damn it, he couldn't wait another hour and a half. He had to go home. He wanted to talk to Angel. But first he had a phone call to make. He punched in the number he knew by heart, but half way through tossed it back on the cradle. He would phone while on the way home.

Trouble was he hadn't counted on the rush hour traffic of Christmas Eve. Hot. Humid. Clogged roads. Nothing went right. And especially not his phone call to Larissa.

He tried to be gentle, but hell, how gentle can dumping someone be? Angel had woken him up. Life was for living. Not accepting a half life. Funny how he had done that with his personal life, but not in business.

Not now though. Now he wanted the best of both worlds. Now, he wanted love. He wanted Angel.

He didn't bother to park in the basement garage, instead parking outside and took the steps two at a time, waved to the building superintendent and made for the elevator.

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Mrs. Parker and her hoard of children entered before him and unfortunately her little darlings punched every button on the elevator panel, so they stopped at every floor.

Clark found his foot tapping out his frustration on the marble floor, hands clenching and unclenching at his side.

"Angel." Her name flew from his lips the moment he entered the apartment only to be returned with silence.

His disappointment was instant.

He moved from room to room, hoping she'd sort of pop out of somewhere. Bingo scampered up to him, tiny tail wagging his delight in seeing his master return. Clark scooped him up and held him under his arm as he continued his search.

Nothing.

Standing in front of the window in his lounge he stared out at the cloudless sky. No clouds. No Angel? "Now you're being fanciful, Lannigan," he argued.

Desperate, more like

And he didn't like it; the experience more than uncomfortable. There was an insidious ache deep down inside him that had a hold on his heart. Angel had gone. He knew it. Not just out shopping, or planning his next challenge, but gone for real. Bingo seemed to know it too. Instead of a frantic dance, yapping, bringing a now well-chewed ball for him to throw, the puppy snuggled in tight under Clark's arm

Yanking off his tie, he tossed it to the coffee table before he sank down onto the sofa. He stared at the view spread out beyond his apartment. At the real world. The world he'd shut out...until his Angel turned up.

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In the distance a lone cirrus cloud scraped across the tip of Rangitoto Island, the volcanic landmark at the center of the city's harbor.

Dread insinuated itself into his mind.

Angel had gone. Left. Left him. Back to heaven?

Clark snatched up the phone book, flicking to 'S', then dropped it to his feet. "Smith. Angel Smith." How many Smiths could there be? Hundreds? Thousands? Besides, he didn't know where she'd come from. "Or where she's gone to, you fool," he choked out. Of course, he did know. He just didn't want to admit it, believe it. But she *had* gone.

Hauling his sorry arse up from the sofa, he made his way to the kitchen. He opened the fridge. Not even a can of beer to drown his sorrows in. As he shut the fridge door, his fingers brushed against a piece of paper held there by one of those kitsch magnets.

"The list." Simply saying the words sparked his brain cells into gear. Clark ripped the list from the fridge door, and stared at it.

He'd ridden the bike.

He'd taken Saturday off.

He'd bungee jumped.

Changed his breakfast cereal

Eaten ice cream before dinner.

And Bingo? Clark smiled down at the puppy sniffing around his feet. Easy challenge.

That officially left four. He remembered the tenth. No kissing. He'd failed that one and was glad. If he hadn't, he wouldn't feel like he felt now. Good. And very desperate.

Actually, they'd both failed, and it had tasted wonderful.
Three challenges remaining.

Number seven. Go girly shopping.

Number eight. Eat with his fingers

Number nine. Sit and smell the roses.

An idea began to bloom inside Clark's frazzled brain. Okay, so it was nuts. Hell, everything about this whole scenario was nuts. But Angel Smith was his angel and he wasn't about to let her go. No way. Not now he had found her.

Grabbing his jacket, Clark hightailed it back outside to his car and gunned the engine. He had one thing on his mind. Well, not one thing. Three things. Three challenges. He had to find Angel, but he had to complete the challenges so he could prove to her that challenge number ten didn't matter.

That he *could* kiss her, because he really, really wanted to. He roared out a deep roll of belly laughter. It filled the car. Felt good. Wonderful. He felt as if he was a schoolboy in heat with his first major lust. And right now, lust had definitely won, tangled up with that other emotion. The other 'L' word.

As he drove the first few kilometers in a daze, Clark searched the heavens, wondering which glittering star belonged to Angel.

"Listen to me!" he laughed. Who is nuts now?

Tough. It felt great.

Waiting for the streetlights to change, he scanned the list. Food, flowers, and girly shopping. Turning left he drove down towards the CBD and parked at the first space he could find, taking the elevator into the department store, grateful they were into late night opening hours. Breathless, he found the

lingerie department. Garters and thongs, teddies and lace and silk slithered across his skin. The concoctions overwhelmed, yet at the same time he imagined Angel wearing them.

Yep, he really had to find her.

"Can I help you?"

He hoped. "I don't know."

"Is it for your wife, girlfriend?"

"My girlfriend," Clark answered, realizing it was the first time he'd admitted it to anyone, while he silently thought the other 'tag' of 'wife' sounded better. Much better.

"Is it something lacy, a teddy perhaps, or perhaps you are looking something very sexy?"

Heat roared through him. "Definitely," he agreed without batting an eyelash.

The sales assistant laid a few selections out on the counter.

Black satins and lace concoctions that really weren't meant to cover anything, then the pink chiffon with something akin to a boa constrictor attached to its hem.

Quick. Pick one. Anyone.

Clark grabbed his mobile camera and passed it to the assistant. "If I agree to buy all three, will you take a photo of me?"

For a moment, a flash of panic colored the woman's expression. She probably thought he was some transvestite looking for a quick thrill. Too bad. He was in a hurry.

"Please."

"Are you trying to prove something," she finally asked with a lilting giggle as she eyed Clark with a great deal of interest.

"Absolutely. She thinks I can't do girlie shopping, I'm about to prove her wrong."

Within minutes Clark had his parcels all tied up with a pink bow and heart shaped stickers, but more importantly he had his photos to prove it.

Outside the store he ticked that particular challenge off his scrunched up list, which gave him a great sense of satisfaction.

"Now to the next one."

The public rose gardens were closed this time of night, so how the heck could he sit and smell roses now? Clark plonked himself down on the curb, uncaring that it was in the middle of the city, or that other late shoppers were passing him by. The only thing that mattered was the next challenge and sadly he had no idea how to fulfill this particular challenge. Hope seemed to be fading fast.

He glanced down at the list in his hand.

Eat with your fingers.

Clark's mouth curved into a pleased smile. He knew exactly how he could do that. Fifteen minutes later, despite breaking the road rules, he sat at his usual table at the Kashmir Curry House and ordered without even looking at the menu.

Eat with his fingers.

Waiting for his meal, his fingers drummed a frantic beat on the white linen tablecloth. He didn't say a word to the staff. He didn't have time. He had to do this. Do the challenges. Find Angel.

"Your meal, Mr. Lannigan." A proficient waiter placed the aromatic curry and rice in front of him. Clark stared down at the steam rising from food, and the side serving of poppadoms.

He grabbed his napkin, flicked it out and placed it on his lap. Okay, so he was doing something abnormal for him, but he didn't have to ruin his suit, or get a scalding lap in the process. What use would he be then for Angel? He smiled at that thought.

Picking up poppadom he broke it, then halted, hand mid-dip. He grabbed his mobile and waved the other hand towards the still hovering waiter. "Could you do me a favor?"

"Anything sir."

"Take a photo."

"A picture?"

"Sure." He proffered his mobile to the waiter. He was getting used to weird looks tonight, but no longer cared, not if it would deliver what he wanted.

Clark nodded to the waiter and dipped the crisp poppadom into the curry. He scooped up a portion, bringing it to his mouth.

A shocked waiter gaped at him. "Sir, there are utensils.

Clark's gaze dropped to the silverware either side of his plate. "Yep. I know, but not this time. This time I'm trying something different."

"Different?"

He nodded, chewing on the fragrant curry. "I'm challenging myself."

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The waiter took several photos and once Clark checked them out, smiling with what he saw, he motioned the waiter again. "Box it up would, you. I have to go."

"Is everything alright, sir?"

He gave the young waiter a pat on the shoulder.

"Absolutely. But it'll be even better when I find her."

"The woman you came in here with last week?"

Clark's gut churned and then nose-dived. "You know her? Have you seen her?"

"I saw her earlier."

Hope bloomed in Clark's chest. He held his breath.

"Where?"

"She was helping an old man; some ruffians had tried to steal his bag."

Angel. His angel helping another. Fear, sudden and nauseating coiled deep down inside Clark's belly. He shouldn't have been surprised, but was she safe? The thought that she could be hurt, needing him, pressed him into action.

The waiter pointed towards the end of the road, where the high-rise apartments gave way to suburbia, where the villas of a once elegant age stood in derelict grandeur

Clark ignored his parked car and took off on foot. He didn't need the distraction of driving when he wanted to simply find Angel

Street after street, and still no sign of her

Under the pall of a single street lamp, he wiped his forearm across his brow. The night air hung thick and heavy, the click of the cicada's, an intense chorus along an otherwise the silent street. Lifting his arm to the light, he checked his

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watch. One thirty a.m. Christmas morning. "Merry Christmas."

He dropped his hand to his side and his shoulders sagged. Was this it, then? The end. Even thinking it, an enveloping tiredness that he'd battled to staunch for hours began to take over as he drew to a conclusion he had waged so very hard to ignore. He wasn't going to be able to find Angel. She'd gone forever.

Damn it. Desperately he fought a failing battle not to cry. Clark Lannigan didn't cry. At least, he hadn't for a long time. Back then, the tears had been a miasma to loss, and guilt

Succoring all his willpower to bring his emotions, and long lost memories under control, Clark steadied his breathing. One after another. Slowly. As he exhaled, his eyes opened. "Maynard Street?" The words slipped from his lips before he had time to recognize them. It was the name on the signpost highlighted by the street lamp

His street. His home. Once. A long time ago, when things were simple and love and laughter ruled his world. Back when his mother was alive, and when he hadn't been responsible for his sister's death.

Thirty six Maynard Street

Leaden feet led Clark back to a place he hadn't been in a long time. Far too long

Surprised to see the house lights still on, he stood outside for what seemed an eon. Had his father forgotten to turn them off? He also wondered if his father had forgotten the one thing that had cauterized their father and son relationship. Or forgiven?

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Clark rested his fingers on the rickety gate, swinging it open. The creak of hinges long eluding the slick of a soothing dose of oil protested aloud in the sleeping silence

The front door lay slightly open and Clark's mouth pursed, stomach erupting into a concern he readily admitted had been there all along, all through the years, just beneath the surface.

Yeah, but what have you done about it?

"Not a lot. Maybe now." This was Angel's fault he smiled as he stepped into the dark hallway. Angel had challenged him to try new things. To reach out.

"Dad? Dad?"

The word he hadn't spoken for so long was met with silence. Not surprising really. Clark blamed himself for his sister's death, though his parents didn't. But he'd seen their sadness, and that had made it worse. Guilt had eaten into him. Still did. But when his mother died, his father sank into a depression spurred on by a bottle of whiskey, or whatever he could lay his hands on. Words had been spoken. Angry, pain-filled words, full of vitriolic blame. Clark had walked out and never looked back.

That was ten years ago. Ten years with no contact, but still the blame. Self-inflicted guilt. Ten years where work had taken the place of everything else. Buried everything. Until Angel.

"Dad?"

"Clark? Is that you?"

Clark recognized his father's voice, but the old man that shuffled to meet him at the door was not his father. Not the

sprightly man he remembered. And yet there, staring at him with utter surprise were the same dark eyes, but instead of anger and blame mirrored in their depths, there was remorse. And love.

Clark took the two steps between them and wrapped his arms around his father, hugging the frail bony body to him. He held on and squeezed his eyes closed for the second time that night as he tried to stem the threat of tears.

"I knew you would come, son."

"You did? Then you knew more than me. I'm..."

"Don't say it, Clark. Not now. It's over. You're here. That's what counts. And on Christmas Day. The perfect day for father and son to be together, don't you think?"

"Yeah, Dad. Perfect." For Clark, perfection would have been Angel too, but seeing the joy on his father's face he pushed away as best he could thoughts of Angel. She was a mystery, now gone. He had to get used to that. He had no way of finding her. Maybe he should have asked Angel Beatrice to help.

As he closed the door to the night chill, Clark lifted his gaze momentarily to a sky littered with the luminous glitter of the galaxy. No, not the galaxy, the heavens, he corrected. Angel always called it heaven. There were a few more clouds now, small striated puffs of white stark against the blackness, and then a larger one. Voluminous. It chased the smaller ones away.

The boss cloud?

Clark's brows arched as he wondered. Could it be possible?

"Hell. Okay, okay," he corrected. "Anything is possible." Angel had taught him that. He stared directly at that fat cloud. "Beatrice, come on girl, you understand love. I mean isn't heaven all about love ever after, forgiveness? Can you give me another chance? But this time I need Angel to make it happen. She makes it all okay. So, give a guy a break. Let me find her. Please."

"Clark, the kettle's on, you want a coffee, or maybe some of my brew."

With a heavy-hearted sigh, Clark closed the door on hope. He'd tried. That's all he could do. Try. He walked into the lounge, following his father's voice. "You still making that homemade beer?" he asked. Then he stopped. He couldn't move, nor utter a sound. His breath too seemed to have evaporated, coiled in his lungs, refusing to release. His body temperature froze and his blood turned to ice. Then the roar of fire raced through every part of him, burning, forcing him to wake. "Angel?" Clark took a few steps towards her, but the moment she moved, pushing herself from the rickety leather chair beside the small bookcase, he came to a halt.

The chair had been his mother's. She loved sitting there, reading her romances. "Everything will be alright with the world, with a little bit more romance," she used to say

"What are you doing here?" Clark turned to his father. "Dad, how do you know Angel?"

"Good name isn't it. Very appropriate. She was my guardian angel today. Got my ham back."

"I heard you had helped someone, but I had no idea it was my father?"

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An uncertain smile flickered at the corners of her mouth.
She nodded

"Do you know each other?" his father queried as he brought in three cups of coffee on a tray. He sat it down and deposited himself on the sofa opposite Angel.

"We do," Clark advised

Then for the first time Angel spoke and Clark relished the sound of her sweet voice. "Clark rescued me from the wheels of a car."

"Sounds a bit like tit for tat, don't you think? You rescue her, and she rescues me."

"Is this part of the challenge?" Clark asked.

Angel's eyes turned to his father. Clark took the hint.

"Dad, Angel and I have a bit of catching up to do, we need to talk for a moment. We'll be right back." Clark reached for her hands, holding them both in his, noting the wonderful warmth from her hands to his, the touch, the joy simply just holding them brought to him. He drew her towards the French doors and out onto a patio.

Closing the doors behind them, he wondered for a moment about closed doors. Opening the door to his father's house and closing the door to his old life as he hoped, no prayed, he was about to venture down a new path in life.

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To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

Clark stood in front of her. Angel thought she felt her wings flutter, but wasn't sure. It didn't seem right. No breeze, no tingle of excitement with each flick of a wing, though right now, none of that mattered. Only the real, true joy bringing every part of her alive the moment Clark stepped into the room mattered.

"What are you doing here, Angel?" he demanded the moment they were alone.

The tone in his voice elicited a flurry of warning bells. "I helped your father, he offered me a coffee, that's all."

"That's all? Seems kinda a fluke doesn't it? You here. Me."

"Or divine intervention."

"You mean from your boss?"

"Could be," she countered with a great deal more confidence than she truly felt. "Miracles do happen."

"And this is one of them?"

"Well you rode a bike didn't you? You did some of the challenges. Pretty darn miraculous if you ask me. I mean, the great Clark Lannigan, business supreme, Mr. Moneybags has actually taken a Saturday off work. You played hookey, Clark. Isn't that a first for you? I came here to do a job."

"I didn't ask you to."

"Tough. Were you happy working 24/7 and playing tonsil hockey with Ms Workaholic when your business meetings allowed? All so you didn't have to think, or live a real life."

"I was, am, living," he corrected.

"Could have fooled me. It's Christmas Day. Where were you going to be today?"

Clark's jaw dropped, then closed, and she saw the realization in his eyes and something inside her softened too. She didn't want to hurt him, just make him understand. "You would have gone to work, Clark. Work. On the one day that family should be together."

"I'm here now."

"Because you want to be, or because fate led you here?"

His eyes darkened to that darkest richest Hershey color. Angel couldn't help herself. She reached out and touched him, lifted his hand in hers, her thumb caressing in circles across his palm. "Oh, Clark, all I wanted to do was to help."

"You have. I've given away the guilt. When you arrived wanting fun, you reminded me so much of Tammy."

"Your sister?"

Clark nodded, though Angel noted his surprise that she knew his sister's name. "Your father told me about her," she informed him.

"You're so much like her," he said drawing a hand through Angel's curls, the tips of his fingers massaging her scalp. The sensation elicited shivers curling down her spine and she had to force herself to concentrate and not simply grab Clark and kiss him. And definitely more than once.

"That you were so alike scared the hell out of me. You wanted to have fun. So did she. She bugged the hell, well, you know what I mean. She hassled me to take her out on the bike until in the end I gave in. That's when it happened."

"Your accident?"

Clark blinked away the sadness and Angel linked her fingers through his, holding his hand to her heart. She smiled up at him, trying to offer him her silent encouragement.

"I had to tell my parents she had died. It was my fault. She was too young."

"She was happy. To be free to ride, to feel the wind in her hair."

"That's Tammy," he said in a choked out chuckle. He breathed a warm sigh across her cheek and Angel thought he was going to kiss her. He didn't, instead he continued. "Mum was never the same. Then she died, and every time Dad looked at me I saw my own guilt."

"But he never blamed you."

"No. But I blamed myself enough that I couldn't stay. I took to the hills, determined to forget fun, to work until I dropped. Nothing was worth the price of having fun."

"Nothing?"

"Until I met you."

"Really?"

He nodded then, eyes crinkling, and inside Angel melted. She expected to hear her wings flutter, but felt nothing. Zip. Nada.

Fear, excitement and wonder sprang to life in one tangled roll. She concentrated. Harder. Harder again. Still nothing. Not a hint of a flutter. She turned round full circle, spied a stone bench at one side of the patio and climbed up it. She crossed her arms, squeezed her eyes shut, and jumped

She landed in a heap at Clark's feet.

"Angel?" Clark crouched down beside her, holding her in his arms. Concern washed across his gorgeous features.

"Angel what's wrong?"

"They're gone, Clark. Gone. My wings. They've disappeared."

"Are you sure? Try again. Flap." Clark dragged a hand through his hair, as he stood up and brought her with him, not letting her go.

She liked that. Wanted it to go on forever. Felt safe in his arms. Safe and secure.

"What is it that you do to make them work, Angel?"

"Exactly what I just did," she answered, brows beetling as she struggled to concentrate on her wings and not on the man holding her. Darn it. It was just too hard. "It's kind of standard angel flying procedure," she added.

Clark nodded, hand rubbing across his jaw, an action he did when in deep thought. Angel remembered the feel of his stubble against her skin. Its rough texture. Erotic. Wonderful.

She didn't want to go into the whole rigmarole of explaining Angel Flight 101 right now so cut to the chase. "No wings, means no heaven."

"Oh."

Yeah, oh, she thought. Oh heck, hell, heaven. All of the above

A slow smile spread across Clark's face. Slow and very sexy. It tugged at Angel's heart strings.

"But that's it, don't you see?" Clark chuckled. "It doesn't matter about your wings."

"Really? And how am I meant to cloud jump, or get to harp practice."

"You can play the harp still."

"Pardon."

"Here. Down here, Angel. With me. You can stay. No wings. Means you're allowed to stay. Angel, I don't want you to go. You've woken me up."

"Bout time."

"True," he agreed. "But I must admit there is one thing that makes me more alive than anything else."

Angel didn't need to ask. He showed her. He kissed her. Long, sweet and delicious kisses that she wanted to go on forever. But she had to ask, and so pulled back a fraction, resting a fingertip on Clark's mouth as he made to protest. "Forever? Can it happen, Clark?"

He stared down at her, dark eyes filled with the love and desire she recognized. Wanted to see. To experience. "We can make it happen, if you want to. It's a lot to give up, heaven, and all. I can't imagine what it's like."

"Wonderful."

"Can you give up wonderful?"

She took a tiny step back. Not too much, she so much wanted to be close to Clark. She looked at him. He was gorgeous. Loving. Successful. Caring.

And had she mentioned gorgeous.

Her mouth curved into a full smile. "Give up, huh? That's a lot to ask."

Clark's worry lines deepened. "It's okay, I understand."

Poor boy. She had to put him out of his misery. "No, Clark, you don't. You see heaven is great. Fabulous. Lots of big names. I mean Ghandi, Mother Theresa."

"Elvis," he prompted.

She smiled. "Yep, him too. But Clark, there's one person who isn't there. One person I can't live without. The person I love beyond having wings and going to harp practice."

"Even cloud jumping?" he asked, the tension easing in his eyes.

"Yep, even that. Oh, Clark Lannigan," she said, fingers caressing the curve of his cheek. He captured her hand, holding it in his and brought her fingers back to his lips. He kissed each tip slowly. Angel's toes curled. "I can live without wings, but I can't live without you."

"Really?"

"Really," she reiterated. She leaned against him, her breasts rubbing against his chest eliciting a heat that coiled way down low. She smiled. "Wings are fun. But you are *a lot* more fun."

"Hey, I can attest to that. I have a list to show you and some photos."

"Of what?"

"Some challenges."

Love swelled in Angel's heart. "You mean you finished them?"

"Yep. The lingerie, well, that's a surprise for later."

"Sounds exciting."

"Definitely, Angel darling. A treat worth waiting for."

"And the other tasks?"

"Food tastes so much better with your fingers. See," he said and he lifted up his fingers for her to kiss.

She did. Each and every one.

"Very yummy," she laughed.

"I even sat amidst the flowers."

"But it's dark."

"Doesn't matter. I finally found a florist open and sat surrounded by her roses and inhaled."

"Oh, Clark." Angel couldn't think very much, except for how much she loved him.

"But you know there were ten tasks. And I've only done nine."

Heat stole across Angel's cheeks. "But the tenth one was..."

"No kissing," he offered.

"How about we scrap that one."

"Good idea," he agreed with mock severity. He wrapped her in his arms.

Before she had felt safe and secure. Now she felt love.

"Angel, I have a suggestion."

"Hmm," she murmured with a secret little smile and a quick prayer to her boss. *"Thank you. For everything."*

"How about we do some of that kissing stuff. They say, practice makes perfect."

"True."

"So let's practice."

The End

* * * *

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

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www.janebeckenham.com

Author Bio:

Author Jane Beckenham found literature at a young age. In books she discovered dreams and hope, stories that inspired in her a love of romance, and travel. Years later, after a blind date, Jane found her own true love and married him eleven months later.

Life has been a series of 'dreams' for Jane. Dreaming of learning to walk again after spending years in hospital. Dreaming of raising a family and subsequently flying to Russia to bring home her two adopted daughters. And of course, dreaming of writing.

With her family growing up, life is a round of playing mum's taxi service, all the while wondering what her hero and heroine are up to behind her back! Writing is Jane's addiction—and it sure beats housework.

You can contact Jane via her web site www.janebeckenham.com or email her at neiljane@ihug.co.nz Want to join her newsletter, a monthly chat about books, authors and fun. Go to Jane's Newsletter or her myspace page.

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Red Rose Publishing
The Sheikh's Proposal
No Sex Neccesary
In Love With The Sheikh-coming soon

To Kiss an Angel
by Jane Beckenham

Desperately Seeking Santa
A Traitor's Heart-coming soon

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Cerridwen Press
Love in Waiting
Treble Heart Books
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Woman of Valor (Janelle Benham)
Linden Bay Romance
Hiring Cupid
He's The One
