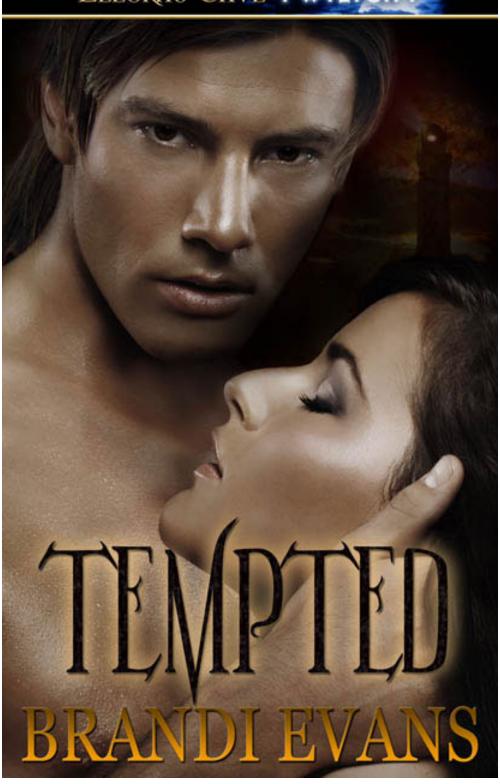
Ellora's Cave TWILIGHT



Tempted

Brandi Evans

The only thing standing between this fallen angel and redemption? The woman he loves.

Eons ago, Seth fell for another angel—literally—and was cast down from the Heavens. Seeking redemption, he works for the Angels of Death, taking the lives of those destined to die, his only desire to return home. But everything changes when a beautiful brunette explodes into his life and plunges his ordered world into chaos, tempting him with something he hasn't experienced in millennia. Love.

A busted radiator strands Lyndi Garrison on a deserted stretch of coastal Maine and shoves her directly into the path of a sexual predator. She fends off her attacker until an NFL-sized stranger appears from the darkness to help. She's instantly enamored of her quiet hero, and before the evening ends, they share a devastating kiss and a knock-out round of sex unlike anything she's ever known. Though she can't help but wonder... Has she finally received a second chance at happiness? Or is Fate being a bitch again?

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Tempted

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Electronic book publication August 2010

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TEMPTED

Brandi Evans

Dedication

To my wonderful husband for tackling kidlet duty so I could write. To Shayla Kersten and Olivia Starke for helping me whip my story into shape. And to my amazing editor for taking a chance on me.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

NFL: National Football League

Chapter One

Seth didn't know which was worse. Spending eternity in hell or working his way out of damnation by becoming a murderer.

Okay, in his defense, he *technically* wasn't a murderer, at least in the terms mortals used. He *had*, however, been responsible for the termination of more lives than he could count—all in the name of finding redemption. And no, the irony wasn't lost on him, but at the moment he didn't have time to contemplate his penance.

He was on the clock.

Franklin Michaels jogged around the bend. Each footfall brought him closer and closer to Seth. To death.

With the dropping temperatures, the coastal park in Redemption Harbor, Maine was all but deserted. Seth was grateful for the privacy. Not because he feared his target might see him—the job was easier if Seth didn't think of his victims by name—but because this termination necessitated solitude.

Why? Because his bosses, The Angels of Death, deemed it so.

Seth's job wasn't to question, but to do. To fulfill his obligations without emotion and with as little deviation from the plan's parameters as possible. Simple.

Ha! There was nothing fucking *simple* about carrying out a person's death, even a scumbag like this one.

For reasons Seth didn't understand, the scumbag hadn't been slated for termination two years ago when he'd had his *first* heart attack, with the coronary Seth would cause tonight being the second. No, fate had allowed him an additional two years of blessed breath. Time to see his daughter get married, to see his son welcome his own child into the world—to rape four more women.

One of the women he'd beaten with such animalistic rage she'd later succumbed to her injuries. Another had died by her own hand when she could no longer withstand the black void Michaels had punched into her soul.

Seth hovered toward the target. A lone spiritual "touch" was all it would take to send this bastard into a lethal episode of cardiac arrest and straight to hell where he belonged. Seth reached out and—

"Son of a bitch! I'm gonna set a blowtorch to your ass and turn you into a damn sculpture!"

Seth pulled back. Curiosity forced him to turn toward the very angry, very sultry female voice—a strikingly odd combination. Just off the main road near the park entrance a woman stood with her back to him, kicking the shit out of the tire of a tiny little hybrid car with white smoke billowing from its engine.

Under the soft glow of the streetlight above her, Seth could make out long chestnut hair with a hint of auburn undertones, as if she'd spent much of the summer camped out on one of the nearby beaches. No pants protruded from the hem of her dark, calflength jacket. The skin of those toned legs set off a creamy contrast to her coat—so okay, maybe no *long* hours spent on the beach.

His mind went wild. Did she wear a skirt or dress beneath the jacket? If so, what did it look like? Would the material cling to her body like a second skin? Or would it fit loose while still managing to show off her every curve?

Or maybe she wore nothing at all...?

Concentrate, he scolded. You're here on a job.

He turned to his mark. Michaels stared at the woman too, his dark arousal filling Seth's nostrils like onions wrapped in ripe gym socks. Beautiful-Potty-Mouth was exactly this animal's type. A brunette with a body that begged men to touch, not look. The Guardian in Seth would be damned if he'd let the fiend hurt her. Not on his watch.

Yet even as the noble notion entered his mind, so did the warning against intervention. Death Code and Angelic Code both forbade intervention in the affairs of mortals, except by Divine Order. Seth had one purpose here tonight. To make sure his target died in the manner his bosses foresaw. No more. No less. To disregard The Code was to risk all hope of ever returning home.

To assure his banishment would indeed be for eternity.

Still, he moved with his target as Michaels folded himself into the shadows. It didn't take a genius to figure out what the other man was doing. Stalking.

Dark anger welled up inside Seth's chest. How was he supposed to sit back while this creep raped and maybe killed an innocent?

Beautiful-Potty-Mouth turned from the car. Toward Seth. And something happened, something he hadn't experienced since he'd lost his wings.

His soul stirred.

Her hair framed a delicate heart-shaped face that, quite possibly, might haunt him well into the next two millennia.

He stood rooted to the spot as she scanned the area. Looking for danger? Smart girl. She couldn't see him while he was cloaked in the Angel of Death's powers. He was pretty sure she couldn't see Michaels either as he sat hunched in the darkness.

After a long moment, she started walking toward him. No, not toward him, but to the phone booth in the corner of the lot. He cocked his head to the side as he watched her. Who didn't have a cell phone in this day and age?

She passed within a couple feet of them, showing no sign she sensed their presence. Seth had to give Michaels credit. Experience had taught the creep how to hide, but he couldn't hide from Seth. And as soon as Beautiful-Potty-Mouth left, he'd make sure this asshole never hurt another woman.

When she stopped in front of the booth, she looked Heavenward. "You have *got* to be fucking kidding me. You fucking piece of horseshit!" She punched the booth. Seth was surprised she didn't kick it too. "You're as useless as the damn car."

Seth moved closer to see what had caused her ire. With cell phone use out of control, many booths sat empty. This was one of them.

"I couldn't help but notice your car's broken down and you have no way of calling for help."

She froze at the sound of the deep male voice.

Michaels...

Seth turned to his mark as the man crept from the cover of shadow and skulked forward. His eyes were round with the dark desire of a predator about to strike.

The woman backpedaled and oh-so-discreetly fisted her hands around her keys so they jutted between her clenched fingers like spikes. "Actually," she said, fear and apprehension mingling in the timbre of her alluringly deep voice. Subtle but present. "I'm meeting some friends here. I just got here a little too early and realized I'd forgotten—"

"And your car always smokes like that?" Michaels kept moving toward her.

"Yes... I mean, no. I mean..."

She flashed a reserved smile, as if trying to hide the undercurrent of terror trying to dampen her expression—no, not terror. Resolution? She looked as if *she* was about to attack. Hmm...

"You wouldn't happen to have a phone I could borrow, would you?" she asked, keeping her voice light. "I'd like to call my boyfriend and let him know my car crapped out again. He's very protective."

Michaels returned her grin. "No, I'm afraid I don't have a cell phone."

Liar. The bastard had put his cell in his glove box before he'd gone on his run. *I* should have taken you then. If only there hadn't been so many people around...

Beautiful-Potty-Mouth worried her bottom lip between her teeth. For one insanely stupid second, Seth found himself *actually* considering conjuring a phone and showing himself so he could let her use it, but he squelched the thought almost as it entered his consciousness. To show himself to a human without Executive Order...

That bonehead move would land him a one-way ticket back to Hell. And this time, it would be permanent.

She glanced back in the direction she'd come. *That's it, sweetheart. Turn and run. As soon as you're gone, I'm free to terminate this bastard.*

"Okay, then," she murmured, "I'll just go back up to the road and wait for my boyfriend. He's a cop. He just won a sharpshooting competition. That's what we're celebrating tonight."

Okay, there *might* be a boyfriend, but Seth doubted he was a cop. And a sharpshooting competition? Please.

"How about you let me give you a ride?" Michaels suggested, turning up the "charming" smile that must have fooled other women. He motioned toward the parking lot. "I promise I don't bite..."

No, you violate.

"That's okay," she said. "I'm sure my boyfriend's already out looking for me. I'll go wait in my car."

"Like I said, it's no problem at all." Michaels took her by the elbow. "This way—"
She jerked her arm free. "Back off, creep!"

Michaels grabbed her again, tighter than before and Seth recognized the look in the other man's eyes. Unadulterated evil.

"This way." Michaels wrenched her toward the parking lot, an easy task considering the woman's petite stature. She didn't look as if she weighed much more than one-ten.

"Let. Me. Go!" the woman screamed.

But no one was around to help her – no one except Seth.

Forbidden, he reminded himself. Death Code and Angelic Code prohibited him from interfering.

A tragic epiphany sliced through his mind. Maybe dying tonight by Michaels' hands was her destiny?

The idea turned Seth's stomach, but he had to find out. He opened his mind and mentally scanned the area. Nothing. No angels, no demons, no death workers. He relaxed a degree. Her *physical* death might not be imminent but dying inside after being raped? Totally different story.

The woman dug her heels into the ground. She punched Michaels' arm with her key-fisted hand, using much more strength than her tiny stature seemed capable of producing, and freed herself. Michaels stumbled.

"Bastard!" She rammed the butt of her opposite hand into his nose. Her knee crushed into his groin and Michaels dropped, hands grasping his family jewels.

Doing a perfect roundhouse kick, she punched him across the face with shoes *not* designed with self-defense in mind and while he writhed on the ground she turned and jogged toward her car.

"Try picking on someone your own size next time, ass-wipe," she called over her shoulder.

Seth smiled as he watched her go. Wow. Just...wow. The Divine had used an interesting model when He'd created that one. Beautiful and a killer body. Literally. The type of woman who could bring Seth to his knees if he let himself get stupid, and he'd be damned if he let another woman ruin him.

Michaels' groan turned into a low snarl. He rolled to his stomach, blood smeared on his face and pushed to his feet with slow deliberation. "Fucking bitch," he mumbled, picking up a softball-sized rock and starting after the woman.

She had almost reached the street. A semi sped by, giving Michaels perfect auditory cover for his quick-moving approach. He covered the distance separating them in seconds, and with rock-wielding arm raised high, prepared to strike.

A streetlight shined over the pair, illuminating the scene in ghastly hues so Seth could see everything perfectly. And he snapped.

Forbidden or not, he wouldn't – *couldn't* – stand by while that monster attacked *her*.

He dropped his cloak and took on human form. "Watch out!" he shouted, sprinting forward to help.

Michaels turned toward Seth, shock tightening his features.

Without a second's hesitation, Beautiful-Potty-Mouth twirled around and landed a hard elbow against Michaels' ribs. The bastard dropped the rock and stumbled over a curb. Then she leveled him with one last kick, sending him tumbling down the shallow ravine bracketing the park entrance.

Michaels limped away into the night.

"Are you all right, miss?" Seth asked, careful not to get too close. He didn't want her wailing on him next.

She nodded and fixed her fists on her hips, still super-defensive. She had to crane her neck to look up at him. At six-foot-nine in his human body, not many humans rivaled Seth's build.

Her expression flashed from *I had this, dude* to *oh my God, you're fucking huge*. "Yeah, I'm fine. That SOB just didn't know when to stay down."

Seth laughed. That SOB? She didn't strike him as the kind to curb her language for anyone. Did she think he'd be offended? "It's a good thing I came along when I did then."

She pointed to the overhead light. "I'd seen his shadow. I knew he was there. I was waiting for the perfect moment to strike. More precisely, I was waiting for him to reach

the apex of his swing, when he'd be most exposed. So when he turned at your voice...perfection."

Seth shook his head. He'd broken Code to save her and she hadn't actually needed his help. Figured. He should have expected nothing less after her performance earlier. In fact, her stance still conveyed a little defensiveness. Not fear. Anxiousness maybe?

He could imagine how intimidating he must look to a woman so petite in stature, so he reached into the pocket of his black trench coat, conjured a generic badge and showed it to her. "I'm a cop. You can relax now. I'm one of the good guys."

His last sentence almost stuck in his throat. Could fallen angels really be classified as "one of the good guys"?

Her gaze darted from the badge, to him, to the badge again... "You're not a local. I'd recognize *those* badges."

Well, shit. Maybe he should have gone with an FBI badge. "Spend lots of time in police custody, do ya?" he asked, trying to keep things light. Maybe she wouldn't push to find out what precinct he worked for.

She laughed. "No. I teach self-defense and one of my classes is for abuse victims. Battered women, rape victims. I help them take back the power their attacker stole from them."

That explained her ability to kick Michaels' ass back there. *Michaels*. Seth had missed his chance to take the bastard into eternity, but by The Divine, he'd get another opportunity. And soon. He'd *make* another opportunity, and this time he'd *enjoy* taking the son-of-a-bitch's life.

She offered her hand. "I'm Lyndi Garrison, by the way. And you're..."

Lyndi. Such a beautiful name for a beautiful woman. "Seth," he answered, reaching out to take her hand and —

Holy shit. A current of something as hot and intense as Hell's fire shot up his arm. His body stiffened and went into immediate lustful overdrive. Physical touch, in his corporal form was...was...incredible, undeniable. Uncontrollable. Sensations unlike anything he'd ever experienced.

"Well, Officer Seth, aren't you going to chase down that creep?"

Willing his instant hunger back where it belonged—in a vault he didn't have the combination to—he shook his head. Michaels wasn't long for this world anyway, but Seth couldn't tell her that. "Victims are the main priority. What would it look like if I left you here to chase Creep Guy down and you got attacked again?"

She squared her shoulders, lifted her chin. "I'm no victim."

"Obviously." He grinned. "Still...you don't want me to get in trouble, do ya?"

She rolled her eyes and smiled. So breathtaking, so beautiful the sight sent a spark straight into his soul. And into his cock. Good thing he wore a long coat. No doubt about it, Lyndi Garrison was real trouble. The sooner he ditched his human form—and her—the better off he'd be.

How long could he hold out before his desire took over?

He needed to help her fix her car and get out of here, but he couldn't merely offer his help without revealing the fact he'd overheard the conversation she'd had with Michaels. "Forgive the cliché," he said, "but what's a beautiful woman like you doing alone in a place like this?"

She pointed over her shoulder. "Car trouble. I can take down a man twice my size. When my car starts smoking, however... Well, let's just say I'm severely automotivly challenged."

"Why don't I take a look? I know a thing or two about fixing cars." He may not be of this world, but his expertise on mankind included everything from the most advanced principles of quantum physics to rudimentary things like transportation.

"Please..." She motioned toward the car with a quick jerk of the head.

Although she acted casual, a smile tugging her lips, she obviously wanted to keep him in front of her. Just in case he wasn't who he said he was. "Do you have a last name that goes with *Seth*? Or are you like Madonna and Cher? One name does it."

Actually, yes. But his lack of last name would be difficult to explain.

He picked a last name at random. "Jones. Seth Jones."

"And do you normally skulk around parks on Friday nights trying to rescue damsels in distress? Or is this a special occasion?"

"I was out for a walk," he lied.

"Wearing that?"

Seth looked at himself and realized how absurd his answer must seem to her. Going for a walk in a suit, wool trench coat and dress shoes? Yeah, he wouldn't believe his excuse either. He should have conjured himself a pair of jeans and —

His spine tingled. A warm shot of awareness darted to the forefront of his consciousness, an alert he'd fine-tuned over the centuries. Someone like him was watching them. Angel, demon or fellow Death Worker he couldn't tell. The sensations came and fled so fast he almost dismissed them. Almost.

He turned on instinct and looked around, opened his mind. He hadn't sensed anyone moments earlier, when he'd thought Lyndi needed saving. Since she hadn't actually needed help, his actions shouldn't have brought him onto anyone's radar. To be on the safe side, he needed to send her on her way as soon as possible.

"Seth?" Lyndi's uncertain voice called to him. "Did you hear something, someone? Did he come back?"

"No," he said honestly. "It's nothing." He turned back to the road. "What were we talking about?"

"You being out for a walk in dress clothes."

"Oh yeah. I wasn't out for a walk *walk*. I'm a tourist. I was strolling. I hadn't intended to walk this far from my hotel but..." He shrugged. "Everything was so lovely I kept going."

The lie might work. A small bed and breakfast sat about a mile down the beach and she'd already clued in to the fact he wasn't a local.

They reached her car and it gave him the perfect opportunity to shift the conversation away from himself. He couldn't tell her who he was, and he'd rather not lie outright if he could help it.

"Was the smoke white or black?" he asked because he didn't want her to know he'd seen her earlier. "From your car. A black smoke or more of a steamy, water vapor smoke?"

"White," she answered. "Like water vapor I guess."

"Sounds like your radiator could have boiled out the last of its coolant." He turned to the exposed engine, found the radiator reservoir and unscrewed the cap.

Lyndi stepped next to him. The scent of vanilla honey filled his nose, reminding him of the vanilla orchid fields in Brazil where he liked to meditate. Only Lyndi's scent was four billion times more alluring and oh-so-much sexier. Arousal filled his cock, hot and hard, familiar but different than he was used to. A physical need, not a spiritual longing.

The outside of Lyndi's hip and thigh pressed against his as she motioned to the engine. "What's the verdict?"

"Radiator's dry."

And so was his mouth.

Shit, he could only imagine the shot of lust he'd receive if they ever *really* touched skin to skin. "How long has it been since you added any fluids?"

"Fluids?" She worried her bottom lip between her teeth again. "Uh...what kinds of fluids are you talking about? The only liquid I ever *add* to my car is gas."

"Ah...you're *that* kind of car owner." Seth grinned again, amazed how easily she elicited the reaction from him, especially considering how long it had been since he'd last smiled.

A gust of wind blew in from the ocean and tousled her hair. The locks shimmered beneath the artificial light above them, much in the same manner water glistened beneath the sun's rays. Or the moon's beams.

His cock twitched. Manhandling his reactions to Lyndi in this damn human body was apparently not possible.

She shifted her weight toward him, the move so slight most men wouldn't have even noticed it. Hell, *she* might not even notice it, but being in this fucking human body, tactile sensations were magnified. This must be what it felt like when a human encountered a live, high-powered cable. He had to fight to keep his brain from going somewhere it shouldn't.

He focused his attention on the engine. "If we can get some fluids in here right now, it won't fix it, but it'll be good enough to get you on the road again."

"What kind of *fluids*? Dad taught me to always have a couple gallons of bottled water in the trunk in case of emergencies."

"That'll work. It's better to have a mixture of coolant and water, but the water will be enough to get you out of here."

And end the temptation he'd gotten himself into.

Unfortunately.

He turned to her, and wow—she stood so close to him. He should back away, but the vibrant life sparkling in her eyes put his brain on lockdown. If he leaned in a few inches he could kiss her. And he *wanted* to kiss her.

Damn it he couldn't kiss her.

"Good," she said. "I'll still be able to make it to the party my family shanghaied me into. Apparently, I work too much and have no life." She rolled her eyes. "Actually, tonight's get-together is to celebrate my first art show."

"Your first art show? Congratulations."

"Thanks. I still can't believe I lucked into finding someone to back my show. He offered to rent out a big space at the Redemption Harbor Art Gallery, but I wanted to have it at my studio. It felt more me, ya know?" She pushed away and headed to the trunk.

Seth let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"I'm insanely nervous though," she continued. "I keep thinking crazy things like, What if no one likes me or What if I get such bad reviews no one will ever take a chance on me again? It's driving me crazy." She hit a button on her keys and the trunk popped open. "What about you? Got any big plans for your vacation weekend?"

Did Lyndi have any concept of personal boundaries whatsoever? Were all topics open season? He liked that trait. After working so long in a world where all words were calculated, where everyone had an agenda, where everyone manipulated every circumstance to achieve their mission, her straightforwardness refreshed him.

He grabbed both gallons of water and headed back to the engine. "Not really," he answered.

"Geez, Seth...lay it all on me, why don't ya?"

Deep, gravelly laughter bubbled in her throat. God, the sound was so sexy.

"I wonder..." She stared at him for a long moment before continuing. "I wonder if it's possible for you to utter more than ten words at a time?"

He laughed, spilling water as he poured it into the reservoir. The spontaneous outburst felt...nice. "Sometimes. If prompted properly."

"Good to know." She bumped his shoulder with hers. More like she bumped his elbow with her shoulder.

A motorcycle whizzed by, despite the chilling temp, and he screwed the cap back on the radiator reservoir and then slammed the hood. "Remember," he said, turning to Lyndi, "this isn't a permanent fix. You'll need to take your car to the shop ASAP. Okay?"

Tempted

She nodded. "I'll have my dad check it once I get to the party. And speaking of the party..."

Whoa, did she move closer?

Obviously forwardness made up a large portion of her personality arsenal. He drew in a deep breath. He needed out of *this* body, and fast. The physical sensations made him want to do things he shouldn't. Made him conjure mental images of Lyndi's naked body sprawled beneath him as he pounded into her pussy or—better yet—Lyndi on her knees with her lips wrapped around his dick as she sucked him into oblivion.

"You should come with, Seth. It'll be fun. My family's a blast. And who knows, you might spontaneously spout more than ten words. What do you think?"

What did he *think*?

He thought the suggestion had danger written all over it. In flashing neon lights. He'd already crossed the line by revealing himself to her. No way could he show himself to an entire family.

Yeah, like letting more humans see him was his biggest worry at the moment. His damn dick was fucking out of control!

"I don't know, Lyndi. I've still got some work I need to finish tonight before—"

"Work? I thought you were on vacation?"

Oops. "I am on vacation, but—"

"Come on. It's Friday night! Besides, I need someone to help me fool my family into believing I've actually gone out and found a man. And seeing as you want to bow out of my invite because you've got work to do—on a Friday night while you're on vacation—you're obviously way past ready for a night of fun. Besides, I won't take no for an answer."

She smiled at him and his resolve turned to shit.

Closing his eyes, he turned his face to the sky.

Heaven help me...

Chapter Two

Lyndi and Seth climbed the steps of her childhood home. As much as she hated to admit it, she was glad Seth had shown up when he did. From the second he and his massive body had arrived on scene, his presence had acted as a calming balm that made her feel safe, protected.

Truth was, now that the adrenaline had worn off, she *was* scared.

If Seth hadn't shown up, would she have *really* been able to fight off that asshole? Yes, she taught women to defend themselves against the scum of the earth, but she'd never been in a true life-and-death situation before tonight. Not to mention she'd been on a relatively deserted stretch of highway, no cell phone, no means of transportation. She'd gotten the jump on him, true, when he saw her as nothing but a weak, frail bitch.

What if he wouldn't have stayed down? What if he'd kept coming after her? Even if she'd made it back to her car, nothing but a breakable frame of glass would have stood between them.

A shudder chased down her spine. Would the man have raped her if he'd managed to subdue her? Beaten her? Both?

Killed her and left her body lying in a ditch somewhere?

The fear she'd managed to keep wrangled during the attack broke free with a vengeance. Her hands started shaking—she clenched her fingers into fists to cover the weakness. But it was too late. The tremors were spreading up her arms.

Seth, as if in tune with her emotions, pressed his hand to the small of her back. "Lyndi?" His voice was filled with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," she lied, unable to stop herself from leaning into his big frame. Unable to stop the quivering. "Just...cold."

"Lyndi..."

Her jaw tightened against the sobs that threatened to break free from her chest. Fuck, she needed to get her emotions under control before they went inside. Her sisters were a little like piranhas. They'd pick up on even the smallest amount of emotional bleeding and it'd be game over.

Trying to settle herself, she took a deep breath and let the familiar sights and smells of her childhood home mingle with the calm Seth's company brought her.

"Childhood home" might actually be a stretch. Her father had been in the Marines, so her parents hadn't purchased the place until Lyndi had started high school. Still, she loved the old two-story's beachfront ambience and come-take-a-load-off appeal. Light yellow siding, pale blue shutters with matching shingles and white trim contributed loads to the pastoral charm. High-stretching trees, cobblestone walks and flowering bushes completed the look.

"Lyndi? Are you *really* okay?" Seth asked again, worry darkening his voice. "It's okay to be afraid."

She let out a long breath. Did she lie to him? Say she was nervous about her plan to bring him along and pass him off as her new beau? Maybe. But what was the point?

She turned to him, her gaze falling to the ground. "I was thinking about that man, the one from the park and wondering...what would have happened to me if you hadn't come along. I had no way of getting out of there, no way of calling for help. How long could I have held him off before he gave up?"

Or killed me?

"But I *did* come along." Seth stopped midway up the stairs and turned her. She stood on the step above him but he still loomed ridiculously high over her. "So don't give that jackass another thought, okay?"

She nodded, wishing her mind would comply.

"You shouldn't fear the past, Lyndi. Learn from it, yes...*never* fear it. The past can't hurt you."

And he looked like he knew something about painful pasts. Beneath the soft hue of the yellow porch light, the night's darkness and his shoulder-length hair no longer cloaked his strong features. His brown eyes seemed even sadder, as if he'd witnessed a thousand lifetimes of sorrow.

What tragedies did he have in his past?

"The past might not be able to hurt me," she whispered, "but having you beside me is calming. It's like walking around with my very own guardian angel."

His gaze slid to the ground, his words soft as he said, "I'm no one's Guardian. Not anymore."

Not anymore?

She pressed a palm against his cheek. His nostrils flared, eyes rolled back—an expression of pure pleasure. As if she'd dropped to her knees and started sucking his cock, not simply placed her hand against his face.

She started to pull her hand away, but he caught her wrist.

"Don't," he choked out, forcing more contact. "Don't..."

His cheek radiated warmth beneath her hand, too much warmth. The heat spread up her arm, through her shoulder, then slithered throughout the rest of her body, kicking her heart into overdrive. When it hit her womb, what started as a subtle heat turned into a raging fire. Her pussy clenched against its own leaking moisture and her clit sizzled, so sensitive she feared the mere act of walking might set her off.

And wasn't *that* great. Super-horny at her parents' place. It was like being in high school all over again.

"Seth," she moaned.

His gaze returned to hers—God have mercy. She feared she'd faint from the raw emotion on his face. Sadness. Longing. Regret. Lust. They painted him in the most haunting glow. If only she could duplicate this expression on canvas...

He lifted his hand and traced his fingertips over her lips. "I'm going to kiss you... Is that okay?"

He didn't give her time to answer.

His hands bracketed her face, still feeling much too warm against her winter-chilled skin. Her sluggish brain didn't have time to comprehend much of anything before Seth's tongue bullied its way into her mouth, exploring, tasting, demanding. The moist, textured muscle dueled with hers and fueled their kiss. On autopilot, she gripped the lapels of his jacket and yanked him against her.

Fuck, his touch was unreal.

"Lyndi," Seth moaned into her mouth, his long arms banding and crushing her against his boulder-hard body—the word *rock* was an offensive downsizing for a man of his stature. "I want you."

Then take me.

She wanted to say the words but his tongue filled her mouth again.

Her knees buckled and Seth's strong arms held her steady.

The front door opened. Her father cleared his throat.

Busted.

Behind the deep timbre of her father's *hmm-hmm*, her sisters' giggles confirmed everything. Lyndi and Seth had been spied on.

"I can *still* catch daddy's little girl making out on the front porch," her old man said, humor lacing mock disapproval. "I see I haven't lost my touch."

"Apparently neither has Lyndi," her oldest sister, Mari, called from somewhere inside the house.

Thanks, guys. Way to completely guarantee I'll never get a second date.

She loved her family—just not so much right now. Still, she couldn't help but smile as she stepped into her father's outstretched arms.

"Hello, Daddy."

"Glad you made it, Lynds, seeing as we're throwing this shindig for you." He kissed the top of her head. "Ya know, you need to get yourself a better car. Or learn how to take care of the one you've got."

Lyndi laughed. She and Seth had stopped at a little gas station on the way to top off her reservoir and she'd called her dad to tell him about her delay, leaving out all references to creepy men and ass kickings.

Her dad turned to Seth. "Who's this, Baby? And whoa...does he play football? If he doesn't, he damn well should!"

Lyndi laughed. Her dad made a valid point. Seth probably had to duck and turn sideways to keep from damaging doorframes. For a split second, her naughty imagination seized control.

Considering Seth's large stature, was his cock as supersized as the rest of him?

Her gaze fell to his feet. Well, if that old adage about shoe size was even close to being true. Whew!

"Dad," Lyndi said, shaking off the delightedly impure thoughts, "this is Seth Jones, and he's a cop. Seth, this is my dad, Carl Garrison."

"A cop, huh? Well, isn't this a nice change? You bringing cops home, instead of cops bringing you home."

"Dad!"

But he just laughed and extended his hand to Seth and her fake date didn't hesitate in returning the gesture.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir," Seth said, and damn if he didn't sound like he meant it. "I appreciate you letting me intrude on a family gathering."

Dad waved him off. "If Lynds likes you enough to torture—I mean *invite*—you into the lion's den, then well...you're practically family, Seth."

Shit, Dad. Are you trying to make sure my love life stays nun-approved?

Seth took everything in stride. He smiled, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Garrison. I'm pleased to be an honorary Garrison for the evening."

"I like this guy already, Lynds." Her dad gave her a squeeze then pointed over his shoulder toward the open door. "You kids get inside. I'm gonna take a quick look at your car."

Seth spoke before she could. "Would you like some help, sir?"

"That'd be great, and please..." Dad clasped Seth's shoulder, leading him back down the stairs and toward the driveway, "call me Carl."

"I think it's the radiator," Seth said. "I filled the reservoir but I don't know if..."

Their voices faded into the darkness.

Wow. That intro had been easy. Too easy. Either Dad was drinking again, or maybe she and Seth had somehow been thrust into a parallel reality where fathers were polite to their youngest daughters' dates.

Date? Seth wasn't a real date. Yet after their fabulous kiss on the porch, her fake date wasn't feeling so fake anymore.

She shook her head. Inviting a total stranger to a family function to pretend to be her date? Shit. Her parents were right. She was too impulsive for her own good. The trait served her well as an artist. As a person in general...not so much.

Coming on to men was an art form she'd perfected as painstakingly as the perfect brushstroke, but she'd always employed her boldness in a safe environment—aka not along the side of the goddamned road. Seth Jones could be the next Ted Bundy for all she knew.

She suppressed an immediate smile. Seth? A serial killer? Hell no. A murderer of his own dreams and aspirations maybe—if the sorrow and grief in his soulful brown eyes was any clue.

If he was a monster then she was a saint and "saint" was one thing no one had ever called her. A bitch, a rebel, a slut, a brash feminist, yes, but *never* a saint.

Besides, Seth was a cop—from somewhere anyway. Probably a detective, possibly undercover. She couldn't think of any other way to explain his shoulder-length hair. She made a mental note to find out more about him.

Sighing, she walked inside and braced herself for the onslaught of questions that would begin in three, two, one—

"Lyndi!" Her middle sister's shriek pierced through the entryway, followed not so quickly by the woman herself. At almost nine months pregnant, beautiful blonde-haired Traci didn't move anywhere *quickly* these days.

Lyndi fought down a familiar wave of sadness at the sight of her pregnant sister. After almost nine months of seeing Traci with child, Lyndi would have thought the pang in her heart would go away, but it hadn't. She'd told her sister she was happy for her, and she was.

Please, God, don't let these feelings get worse after the child is born.

For her sister's sake, Lyndi plastered on what she hoped looked like a genuine smile—she wouldn't let her grief overcome her, not tonight.

Not ever again.

"I'm totally skipping the hellos," Traci sang, "and going right to the part where I say, 'Wow, sis! Your date...totally hot in the yellow bug lights on the front porch. Yum!"

"It's nice to know I don't have to worry about my family spying on me from the living room anymore." Lyndi made an exaggerated show of wiping nonexistent sweat from her brow. "What a relief!"

Mari, an attractive brunette who somehow managed to get prettier with every pound she gained, joined the conversation, trying to get control of Traci's annoying little Yorkie, Jo-Jo. "You know, *yum* doesn't even begin to describe him, Trace, so don't insult the man."

Mari turned to Lyndi, her grin wide. Seeing Mari smile was such a relief. Since her horrific divorce from Paul, who'd be forever referred to as "the cheating bastard", Mari hadn't been herself.

"Details," Mari said. "Give us lots and lots of details."

Yep, the piranhas were definitely out for blood tonight. Too bad Laurence wasn't here—her twin brother always had her back. Especially against their older sisters. And she had his. She was the only family member that called him by his full name—not Larry. He *hated* being called Larry.

Still, Lyndi couldn't help but smile at Mari's and Traci's envious teasing. It had been a while since she'd had a date, let alone brought one of them home to meet the family. "Well, his name is Seth Jones." Making her sisters sweat for a few more seconds, she shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it over the staircase railing. A quick neckline check assured her the low-dipping "V" of her dark blue dress was in place. "And he is pretty hot, isn't he?"

"Um, yeah!" Traci linked her arm with Lyndi's as they walked through the house's interior. The decor hadn't changed much since Lyndi had called this her primary residence. Lots of space accented with hardwood floors, seaside brown and green walls that complimented the rustic furnishings her mom adored. To the left was the living area, to the right the semi-formal dining room and along the back way, bay windows and fluffy pillows invited anyone to come and enjoy the beauty of Redemption Harbor Bay where it backed up to the yard.

Lyndi pointed at Jo-Jo as Mari finally put the dog down, the creature barking in a high-pitched yap reminiscent of his owner. "What's mutt-dog doing here?" Lyndi asked Traci.

"Mom and Dad are doggie-sitting him for me until I deliver or Manuel gets home. Whichever comes first. I'm getting tired, and quite incapable, of chasing after the idiot dog every time he gets out of the apartment, which he seems to do *all* the damn time. Now enough about my dog." Traci hooked her thumb toward the front door. "Dish. We need to know everything. We're living our love lives through you right now."

Lyndi laughed. With "the cheating bastard" finally out of Mari's life and Traci's husband on active duty somewhere in the mountains of Afghanistan—in the same unit as Laurence—none of them had had much excitement in the sexual arena lately.

Her earlier thought came roaring back. What was Seth's shoe size anyway?

Traci grabbed Lyndi by the arm and gave her a shake. "Come on! Dish it, sista. Don't you know better than to keep a pregnant woman waiting!"

Lyndi fought the urge to roll her eyes. Traci's sentence would have been more accurate if she'd replaced "a pregnant woman" with "me". With child or not, Traci was an admitted gossip addict.

"Well, Seth and I haven't known each other long." Lyndi had to raise her voice over super-active Jo-Jo, who was circling at her feet like a crack-mutt on a supersonic carousel. "Our relationship started rather abruptly. Just *wham!* Now here we are."

Okay, that was mostly true. So far, so good.

"Hmm," Mari sighed, her voice whimsical. "Why can't *I* get *whammed*? I could use a really good *wham* right about now." She laughed, the sound bleak. "Hell! I don't even remember the last time I got *whammed*!"

"Does he have a brother?" Traci butted in.

Lyndi cocked her head and stared at her middle sister. "Why do you care? You're married."

She held her hands up, palms toward the ceiling. "I'm curious...for my big sis' sake."

Lyndi rolled her eyes. "Uh-huh. But I can't help but notice you didn't ask if he had a sister. Ya know, for your younger *brother's* sake."

Traci shrugged and the three sisters shared a laugh as they reached the kitchen where their mother's smiling face greeted them. Erika Garrison looked the way she did in all of Lyndi's childhood memories. Simple red button-down shirt and comfortable jeans. Bare feet. Flour-stained apron around her waist. Blonde hair swept back from her face and tied with a scrunchie. Makeup that underscored her natural beauty instead of covering it.

A content warmth seeped through Lyndi's veins. Yep. I'm home...

"Lyndi, I'm glad you made it safely."

Her mom enveloped her in a hug that betrayed how strong a five-foot-two woman could be, and Lyndi hugged her back with an embrace just as fierce. Her mom might be petite but she set the standard for feminine strength. Everything Lyndi was she owed to her mother. Even the bad, tactless remarks that sometimes, okay often, leapt from her mouth.

"Maybe this will serve as a reminder to take your phone out of your pockets before throwing them in the washer. Then you'd have a way of calling for help when your car breaks down."

"Ah, Mom..." Lyndi pulled back, smiling. "I love you too."

She rolled her eyes, another trait Lyndi had picked up.

"Hey, Mom," Traci said, "you're gonna love this."

Traci paused for dramatic effect. Lyndi hated that.

"Lyndi brought a date!"

"A...date?" Her mom's voice pitched a few octaves higher.

"Oh, come on!" Lyndi threw her hands into the air. She'd known bringing Seth along would cause a bit of an uproar, she'd planned on it, but geez. "My love life isn't that abysmal. Is it?"

No one answered but their silence spoke volumes.

And wasn't that great? Her family thought she was a man-less loser, which was only partly true. A loser she wasn't. But man-less? Guilty as charged.

"His name is Seth," Lyndi said, banishing all thoughts of loser-ness. "And before you ask...no, we're not super serious. Don't go rushing out to buy bridal magazines, okay?"

"But they *were* making out on the front porch," Mari added. "We're talking massive touchy-feely. Dad caught them. Traci and I peeked. A little."

"A lot actually," Traci confessed. "But this is *Lynds* we're talking about. With. A. *Guy*."

Lyndi shook her head. "What is this? Gang up on Lyndi night?"

"Of course not." Her mother put her arm around Lyndi. "We're just happy to see you with someone other than the men you paint."

"Or the men you sculpt," Mari added. "However, that statue you created last year, the Greek god in the loin cloth? I would have totally done him if he'd come to life."

Another eye roll threatened to seize control. Luckily, the front door squeaked open and Seth's and Dad's...laughter carried into the kitchen. Wow. Didn't sound forced either.

"What about college?" her father asked. "Did you ever play in college?"

Lyndi shook her head. Apparently, Dad hadn't let up on his football inquisition.

"No," Seth insisted. "I've never played before. I was raised to be more of a conscientious observer. I prefer reading and writing to tackles and touchdowns. That doesn't mean I don't enjoy a good game though."

Her dad laughed. "Reading and writing? No wonder my Lynds likes you. She always had a soft spot for those tall, sensitive types."

The two men rounded the corner and Seth's eyes found Lyndi's. Bright emotions filled Seth's. Not the same melancholy that had dominated the brown tints earlier. The

darker feelings were still there. They'd simply taken a backseat to the glimmers of cheerfulness and contentment. His lips actually curved into a smile that spoke of ease and comfort, not hesitation.

He was enjoying himself?

Seth strolled toward her and, like a good faux beau, put his arms around her and pulled her close. Without her jacket on, he seemed even larger, stockier than before. His embrace made her feel as though she was tied with a rope of fire. Only the fire didn't burn—it inflamed.

What would it feel like if she held him skin to skin?

Did she want to find out?

"It's definitely the radiator," Seth said, "or at least something related to your radiator. The reservoir is almost dry again, but it's too dark to get underneath the chassis and locate the leak."

"O-okay." She swallowed hard. "I'll, um, take it to the shop tomorrow."

"Why don't you hold off on that," he said. "Your dad and I are going to look at it tomorrow morning and, if the problem is simple, maybe we can fix it. Save you some money."

"Tomorrow? You?"

One-word questions were apparently the most complex inquiries her mind could form at the moment. Her *fake* boyfriend was making plans for tomorrow with her father...?

This was either a fantabulous turn of luck or the makings of a bad horror movie. *Psycho boyfriend burrows his way into unsuspecting girlfriend's life by connecting with her family.* Insert sinister music.

"Yeah," Seth whispered, leaning close...closer. "Unless you don't want me to, and I'll step back."

"No. It's not that. I just thought—"

He didn't let her finish. More precisely his lips didn't.

His kiss, a brief caressing of lips, sent her zooming down a spiraling slide of confusion and damn if she didn't want to grab hold of him with both hands and go for the ride of her life. However, since her entire family was watching, Lyndi didn't fight when Seth pulled back.

* * * * *

After dinner, Lyndi and Seth headed to the family's oceanside deck to enjoy the moonbeams as they danced on the harbor. Her family stayed inside to clean up and, most importantly, to gossip.

After all, what was a Garrison family dinner without gossip? And boy had Lyndi given them a lot to talk about.

She looked sideways at Seth as they traversed the steep steps leading from the back door to the beachfront deck.

What am I going to do about you, Seth Jones?

The man was a complete mystery. He'd looked content as they ate. He'd answered all questions directed at him. Hell, he asked questions of his own too, even if most of his questions seemed strategic, as if he were trying, nonchalantly, to turn the focus of the conversation off himself. Someone would ask him about his job, and suddenly they'd be discussing politics.

Was it her imagination seeing diversions that weren't really there?

She hoped so because she wanted to get to know the enigmatic man better.

As they stepped onto the deck, Seth draped an arm around her. A square terrace butting right up to Redemption Harbor Bay, the "deck" didn't attach to the house itself. On nice summer days she liked to sit on the edge and dangle her legs into the water, the ocean so clear she could see the sand below.

Two small lighthouses bracketed the bay and gave the entire area a movie-set quality. Places this beautiful shouldn't exist without the aid of Hollywood magic. Many

times, Lyndi had set her canvas here and tried to capture the idyllic scene. And failed. She just couldn't get it quite right.

Tonight, however, her place of respite felt anything but serene and peaceful.

Anticipation and something akin to fear crawled inside her skin like an army of red ants. The evening was winding down—okay, it was really over and she was procrastinating—but she was Seth's ride. That meant she'd have to take him back to his hotel.

And just what would they do when they got there? To fuck, or not to fuck? The question of the hour.

She didn't want to say goodbye yet, but she didn't know if she was ready for naked conversations in bed either.

Seth pointed to the inlaid fire pit. "Would you like me to start a fire?"

"No thanks." At this point, the flames would be overkill. With Seth's arms around her, even the polar icecaps wouldn't be enough to cool her.

"Okay. Then will you at least tell me what you're thinking? You were so quiet on the walk out here and you don't seem like the kind of woman to be silent unless something's bothering her."

She smiled. "Guilty as charged."

But what *did* she tell him? That she was pondering the pros and cons of taking their relationship to the bedroom?

Yeah, that'd go over well.

He leaned in close, his breath hot against her skin. "If you're worrying about that man—"

"No. No. Not at all," she interrupted, shaking her head. "I'm...just trying to figure you out, Mr. Jones."

His forehead wrinkled. "I didn't think I was hard to figure out. I'm a workaholic loner in desperate need of a life. I thought you caught onto that already."

She laughed. "I might have deduced that, yes. Mr. Works-On-A-Friday-Night-While-On-Vacation."

"See? Nothing to figure out."

Yeah right. She kept the reply to herself. There was plenty to figure out about this man.

Seth moved to the railing and, elbows resting on the wide ledge, looked out at the water. "You said you have an art show opening soon... Do you have a particular theme? Or is it a free-for-all? A conglomeration of all things Lyndi Garrison."

Imagine that. Seth changing the subject. The man truly didn't like talking about himself.

Lyndi plastered on a smile and forced laughter into her voice. If their relationship progressed, she'd press him for information. "Wow. That had to have been, like, well over twenty words. And totally spontaneous. I'm impressed!"

A grin tugged at the corners of his lips. "Glad I could amuse you."

She gave his back a playful rub. "The theme for my show is *Light and Dark*. My take on contrast. Good and evil. Life and death. Angels and demons."

"Angels and demons?"

Did his voice just get higher? Or was it her imagination?

"Yeah," she answered. "Angels and demons have always fascinated me. How they were the same until the War of Heaven. Now the fallen are forever separated. What's not to find fascinating?"

"And you...believe in all this?" The hesitation in his voice was slight, but it was there.

She'd said too much. Her crazy beliefs probably freaked him out. She spoke quickly to assure him she wasn't a nutcase.

"I don't know if I believe it all in the purest sense, but the concept, mainly, is what captivates me. The idea all beings are created with lightness and darkness inside them.

Even angels. And we all have to fight every day to keep the lightness in our souls greater than the darkness, lest the darkness overtake us. What's not to find fascinating?"

"Profound."

"I've been known to have deep thoughts every once in a while." She moved closer to him, leaned her head against his shoulder. "Mind if I ask *you* something?"

"Of course not."

"I know you're a cop, but what do you do on the force? Most cops I know don't have long hair unless they're undercover or something."

He hesitated. "What I do is...complicated. I'd prefer not to discuss it right now. It'll just put me in a bad mood."

"If your job makes you so miserable, why do you stay?" She couldn't stop the question from spilling out.

He laughed, the sound forced. "It's been a long, long time since anyone's even cared enough to want to know what's going on inside my head."

"Then talk to me. Get some of that horrible weight off your shoulders. I'm a great listener."

"I want to," he whispered. "I really do. It scares me a little how fast you've..."

He let his sentence trail off, but Lyndi knew what he'd been trying to say. "Me too," she admitted. "What I'm feeling for you is strong. Stronger than it should be considering how long we've known each other."

"Tell me about it."

With a gentle push, he wedged her into the corner of the railing. His strong arms lifted her onto the wide lip of the barrier, and sitting on the chest-high railing—well, chest-high for humans of *her* stature—their heads were almost on the same level.

Seth's lips took immediate advantage of the situation, his tongue slipping inside her mouth with leisure, as if they had eternity to explore each other. Passionate. Perhaps enchanted. That was the way he kissed her, as if she were the first woman he'd ever kissed and he wanted to enjoy and elongate every sensation.

The same heated sensation flooded her body, as if a sexual warmth passed directly from his mouth to hers. Like the man *was* pure sexual energy.

Then she stopped analyzing the sensations and started enjoying them.

"Have I told you how much I *love* the way you smell?" he whispered into her mouth, his hands sliding up and over her breasts, finding the top of her jacket's zipper and tugging it away. "Vanilla honey. Intoxicating..."

Her traitorous zipper surrendered, inch by inch, until he was free to slide his hands inside without obstruction. Despite the frigid temp, her skin sizzled wherever he touched her—waist, back, belly, outer thighs, breast...

He hooked his left arm around her waist as his right hand eased aside the low-dipping "V" of her dress and exposed a naked nipple to the cold air. And to his hot gaze. The peak hardened, although she wasn't sure if the cold or her anticipation was the true culprit.

"We shouldn't do this here, Seth. My family—"

His thumb traced over the erect nipple, derailing her thoughts.

She sucked in a breath. Hundreds of electric pinpricks shot from the pebbled peak and he lowered his face to her breast. He didn't go straight for the nipple like she'd expected. Instead, he laid his clean-shaven cheek against the mound. And sighed.

"I love the feel of your skin," he murmured. "So soft. So pliant." His breath filtered over her nipple. "Do you *really* want me to stop?"

She buried her fingers in his hair, pulled him even closer. With every nanosecond his bare skin touched hers, her intoxication grew. She never made good decisions when she was drunk. Might as well continue the tradition, right?

"No," she finally answered, her lips brushing the top of his head. "I don't want you to stop. Please. Don't. Stop."

"Don't stop? Fuck, Lyn, I don't even know what I'm doing here..."

He clamped his mouth onto her nipple and sucked her hard.

Oh sweet, beautiful fuck.

Seth mouthed her breast as if starving for something only her body could provide him. And damn if she didn't want to give him anything, everything he needed. All of her body. All of her heart. The notion was insane, but she couldn't have stopped the intense connection between them even if she wanted to.

And she didn't want to.

His hand found the inside of her knee, dipped below the hem of her skirt and moved upward. His fingertips glided over her skin with spiderweb softness. The touch shot heat up her leg and straight into her pussy. Her core flooded with moisture, igniting her clit.

She pushed her legs as wide as possible, letting Seth have the access he wanted. And shit, shit! The man didn't disappoint. His enormous hand covered her panty-covered sex and squeezed.

"Heaven you're so wet. I want...no need...can't wait..."

With jerky movements, as if he were losing control even faster than she was, he forced his other hand up her skirt and ripped the crotch out of her favorite barely there thong.

"Shit. Seth, what are you -"

His lips recaptured hers and his fingers dipped into her wetness. He eased apart her folds, smearing her juices all along the length of her pussy in slow, thorough swirls, stopping only to give special attention to the super-swollen nub at the apex of her slit.

She jumped, her hips moving against his hand, seeking more contact and forcing her to plant both hands on either side of her to keep from falling.

"So wet..." he mumbled into her mouth, his tongue as explorative as the fingers probing her clit.

Fuck, she had to put a stop to this. At least until they found a private location. A little petting in public was one thing, but...God, she was already so close to coming—

No! Not here...

Her toes curled. Her fingers clamped around the railing as the first eddies of her climax swirled in her womb.

She pulled back from Seth's blazing kiss. "Seth, stop. I'm about to—"

Too late. Like a blowtorch to a rain-starved wheat field, she went up in flames.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck," Her head rolled back, her back arched, every muscle in her body going stiff as an orgasm rocked her. Hundreds of detonations went off simultaneously, strategic explosions set up for her complete and total destruction. And they worked. She definitely felt demolished.

Air huffed in and out of her lungs as she fought to regain control. Her too many months without sex acted like an intense accelerant to the sensations Seth's experienced hands created.

The sound of an unbuckling clasp forced her eyes open. Seth's belt was already undone and he was working on his pants.

Her pussy hummed with the need to take him inside her, to ride him—or be ridden by him. But not here. Not with her family less than fifty yards away.

"Seth," she panted, "we have to—"

A high-pitched scream cut through the night.

Chapter Three

Seth had never been so thankful for a catastrophe in all his life.

If Traci's little dog hadn't made a run for it and sent the residence into a panic, he was certain—absolutely, positively, without-a-doubt certain—he would have taken Lyndi right there on the deck. In her parents' backyard. He'd been so caught up in the pure physicality of the sensations he'd experienced that he'd lost the ability to think straight.

Her scent, her skin, her purrs of pleasure. Not to mention how incredible it had felt when *she'd* touched *him*.

Damn this body!

Now everyone except super-pregnant Traci was pounding the cobblestone on puppy patrol, and Seth was grateful. Maybe he'd be able to regain some of his teetering control.

He looked to the Heavens. Everything he'd done up until this point had taken him one step closer to his goal. To return home. Tonight, however, being with Lyndi and her family, he'd actually forgotten about his quest and how much this one night could cost him.

Showing himself to a single human, let alone a family, could sabotage everything he'd worked toward. If anyone ever found out...

No, he didn't want to think about what would happen. Angels—Archangels, Seraphs, or Angels of Death—were forbidden to reveal themselves unless instructed otherwise by The Divine. Yet, to his surprise, when he pictured Lyndi's flushed face on the railing beside the ocean, he didn't regret his choice.

Yet.

He glanced at Lyndi as she walked beside him. Romantic relationships between angels were different than relationships between humans—less physical and more emotional. More like communing rather than raw, sweaty bodies locked together, an act he *knew* but didn't *know*.

He fought back the physical urge stiffening his cock and tried, unsuccessfully, to banish thoughts of how Lyndi's juices had coated his fingers when he'd slid them inside her.

What would it feel like to lose himself in Lyndi's softness, in the slight vanilla and honey scent of her body as he sank balls-deep into—

Heaven, what was wrong with him? If he kept having thoughts like these, his cock would never stop aching. Shit, he was a cart rolling downhill and nothing short of his sheer destruction could stop him now. He should be stronger than this.

But how strong could he be if a single, incredible woman could bring him to his knees?

Again.

Lyndi turned to him in the near darkness, her voice hesitant. "What happened earlier...on the deck...that wasn't part of some insidious plan to make my family think—"

"No," he said, realizing what she was asking. "My actions weren't a ploy to assure your family we were an actual couple. None of it, Lyn. I mean... I didn't expect for it to happen. I apologize for—"

"You don't have to apologize," she said. "I just wanted to be sure." She stopped walking and turned toward him. The overhead light illuminated the seriousness in the blue of her eyes. "You're gonna break my heart, aren't you?"

Her directness stabbed at his chest. He didn't want to break her heart but how could he not? He wasn't even human.

"I don't plan to, Lyn, but—"

Tempted

"How long are you planning on being in town?"

Truth time. At least white lie time. "I don't know."

I shouldn't be here at all...

He looked away from her examining stare. Her emotion-filled eyes were so intense, as if she could look into his soul and see the entire pathetic truth. He was a fallen angel destined to spend eternity trying to find redemption for a past he'd never be able to change.

"Okay, here's the thing, Seth. I like you. You know that. But I don't want to move forward thinking we have a future when, in reality, we only have a week or two. Or even one glorious night. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He nodded.

She tucked her auburn hair behind her ears. "Give me a ballpark. A couple days. A week."

"This...vacation was impromptu, so I don't know how to answer your question, Lyn, because I honestly have no idea how long I'll be here in town."

"Okay, then. At least now I know." She turned and started walking again.

Seth's chest ached. He was hurting her and her pain was the last thing he wanted, but maybe it was for the best. Hurt her now, before things went too far, before he caused her a much greater heartache. If he were a better angel he *would* go...

But he *wasn't* an angel anymore.

"Lyn, wait." He took her by the arm and pulled her back to him. Body to body. No air between them. "I'd like to go into this relationship without a looming expiration date on anything we start. I want you to know my being noncommittal has nothing to do with my desire for you. It's just...I have...obligations that dictate my life and—"

"Are you married?" Her face remained neutral.

He wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the question, but to her, the concern was legit. "No," he breathed, leaning down and resting his forehead against hers. "There's no one else. No one who makes me feel like this, Lyn."

"God, I *really* love the way my name sounds in your voice." She wrapped her arms around his neck, intent on pulling his mouth down to hers.

He stopped her. He still had more he wanted to say. "I've been alone so long I've forgotten how to open up, how to share myself with someone else."

Lyndi didn't hold back. "There was another woman, wasn't there? She hurt you. Badly. It's part of the reason you can't—"

"Yes," he answered before she finished her question. He had to be careful. He could only tell her so much. "I lost *every*thing because of her."

"Tell me about it. Share your pain with me."

"I want to." And he did. "But I don't know how to—"

"I guess that's good enough for now," she interrupted, tightening her arms around his neck and pulling his mouth down to hers. For the briefest instant, Seth froze before meeting her full-on. The softness of her mouth, of her lips, flash-boiled the tiny amount of control he'd managed to regain and he melted into her.

Melted. Damn good way to describe this. He could hardly discern where he ended and Lyndi began.

He traced his tongue along the flesh of her bottom lip and her mouth opened in immediate surrender. With no hesitation. And he claimed what he wanted.

Lyndi Garrison.

She tasted of unrestrained desire. The way her tongue slid along his, as if she wanted to crawl inside him, sent a jolt of need straight to his groin, a need he wasn't afraid to let her feel. Running a hand along the length of her back, he cupped her ass through her jacket and yanked her against his straining cock. *Shit*. He was going to explode.

"Mmm," she moaned into his mouth. "I think we need to, to find some privacy, don't you?"

All he could do was nod—all he *wanted* to do was nod.

Taking his hand, Lyndi tugged him away from the road and all its evenly spaced lights and toward the dark space between the two nearest houses. Too bad he couldn't *poof* them somewhere private. The Eifel Tower. A mountain resort in the Andes.

Lyndi's bed.

Hell, he would have if his mode of transport didn't have one lethal drawback. Lyndi wouldn't survive the molecular reintegration process. Human bodies were too fragile.

Damn pity.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"The house to our left. That's the Maybrooks'. Every August they leave for Ireland for two months."

She stopped next to a small shed, a miniature replica of the main house. Cute but with one big problem for them. "It's locked, Lyn," he felt compelled to point out. Like she didn't notice the —

His spine tingled. His mind hummed with a warmth that betrayed the presence of another immortal. Like earlier, the sensations fled at almost the same instant he'd experienced them—as if someone purposely got close enough for him to sense their presence. Which was crazy.

He shook his mind clear. What was up with his senses tonight? Oh, yeah, the beautiful brunette in front of him.

Lyndi's voice called to him. "And the Maybrooks used to hire me and other neighborhood kids to tend their yard while they were gone. They'd clean their shed out, leaving only the bare essentials for lawn care and change the lock combo so we could

get in." She punched the numbers one, two, three, four, five and six into the digital keypad. The lock flashed green and the door opened.

The tiny room was nearly pitch black. In the near darkness, he noted a workbench to the left, empty shelves along the far wall and a lawn mower and a couple rakes sat on the right. Bare essentials had been an apt description.

Her smile was pure sin as she tugged him inside. "I know this isn't exactly romantic but—"

"I don't want to wait either." He pulled her into his embrace. "I can't wait..."

"Good." She kicked the door shut.

Absolute darkness encased them. Not one sliver of light slipped through around the door or the base of the shed. Good thing he already held her or it might take him a moment to find her, a few precious seconds that would have kept him from touching her the way he hadn't earlier.

The way he shouldn't.

But he was tired and he was lonely. He wanted to feel something other than the sorrow that bred the constant misery in his chest. Tonight, he was just a man—figuratively—with a woman he couldn't resist.

What the fuck was wrong with that?

"Lyn," he breathed, pinning her against the door. His impatient fingers found the zipper of her jacket, tugged the hook free, and she rolled her shoulders, letting the coat fall away.

"Oh my God!" she gasped. "It's fucking freezing in here."

He grinned, his lips against her neck. "Tell me. How is it such a beautiful woman has such a dirty mouth?"

She laughed. The sound was beautiful, almost as beautiful as her voice. "The short version? I grew up on Marine bases."

"Ah. You'll have to tell me about that. Later."

Her dress fell away. She pushed his jacket off, pulled at his shirt. "Much later," she agreed.

Lyndi pulled him down for another amazing kiss. His hands explored her body. Greedy palms slid over the curves of her hips, her waist, the firm swell of her ass, and he pulled her against him, his throbbing cock caught between them.

Oh yeah.

He found the shredded remains of the underwear he'd ripped apart earlier and grinned. "Sorry about this," he lied.

She giggled, a heady amount of sinful mischief saturating the sound, making him wish he could see the expression on her face.

"And this was my lucky thong too, but seeing as I'm about to *get* lucky, I'd have to say it served its purpose."

"What do you mean about to get lucky? So the orgasm on the deck...?"

"In this particular instance, *lucky* only happens with penetration." She reached between them and stroked his erection through his pants. "To get lucky, I need your cock inside me, and earlier there was *no* cock."

Holy Heaven, that dirty mouth of hers drove him nuts. "I guess I'll have to remedy that."

"I fucking hope so. And soon."

Dropping to his knees, he slid his hands down her body, keeping her close in the darkness. Since her panties were already trashed, he ripped them free of her body—a body he wished he could see right now. Especially from this position, with her pussy inches from his face.

He stuck the slinky underwear in his pants pocket, a little memento of the night since it would probably be the only one they had. It would be if he were smart, but considering he was here right now, his brainpower was obviously malfunctioning.

Brandi Evans

"You call this hurrying?" she murmured. Her breathy, high-pitched tone was so sexy his erection tightened to the point one touch, one stroke could set him off.

"Tilt your hips forward and stand with your legs wide for me," he instructed. "I'm a big man. I need lots of room to work."

She obeyed his command without hesitation. The sound of her laughter was so breathless, so fucking sexy he probably had about two minutes before the need to cram his cock into her scorching wetness overpowered him.

Palms flat against the skin of her lower belly, he eased apart the folds covering her slit, exposing her clit to the cold air. *Mmm*. He drew in a deep breath, letting the musky scent of her arousal fill his nostrils, and then pressed a gentle kiss to her distended clit.

"Seth," she moaned. "Still haven't gotten lucky yet. I want to get lucky. Need to..."

"I'm getting there," he told her before finally making full mouth-to-pussy contact.

He kissed her slowly, thoroughly, his tongue exploring her folds before sliding into her channel—in and out, in and out, in and out. Wet and hot didn't even begin to describe her core. She was fucking ripe, so past ready for his cock.

Her juices dripped from her opening and he couldn't help but lap up as much of the honeyed liquid as he could. Her sticky sap intoxicated him. The sweetness of strawberries with a hint of blissful tang. He didn't know which he liked best—her taste or her *smell*.

"Almost lucky," she panted, her voice soft above him, her fingers twining in his hair and pushing his face deeper into her center. "Almost..."

He pulled her hands from his hair and moved them to her own pussy. "Hold yourself open for me."

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"Seth-"
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"Now."

This time, she complied and his mouth latched onto her clit again. He slid a hand to the apex of the curls he was getting to know so intimately and eased two fingers through her cream-slicked folds and deep into her cunt.

"Jesus," she moaned. "Sweet fuck... I'm about to come again."

So was he.

His cock pulsed hard against his pants, begging to join in on the fun. He'd planned to torture Lyn a little bit longer before taking her, but he didn't think *he* had the willpower to deny his dick any longer.

But then he realized Lyn was coming.

Her inner muscles convulsed around his thrusting fingers and she pumped her hips forward. "Yesyesyesyesyesyessess."

He drove his fingers deeper into her wetness, stroking her inner walls. Her knees wobbled. Her hand slapped the edge of something hard and metallic—the shelving maybe?—as if she were trying to keep her balance.

Afraid she'd fall, he pushed to his feet and held her limp form against his hip while unbuckling his pants and shoving them down just far enough to take her. "Wrap your legs around me," he ordered, grabbing hold of her ass and lifting her.

She responded slowly, but she did respond. She even went a step further by reaching down and holding his dick steady as he thrust upward.

His glans slid tightly into her ripe pussy. The wetness was...she was...so...so...

"Fucking perfect!" he groaned.

Lyndi moaned, a hint of laughter in the tortured sigh. "Fucking perfect," she echoed.

A mixture of hormones and total, blinding pleasure clogged in his throat. The reaction of his initial thrust was so intense he feared he'd stop breathing—and he wasn't even fully inside her yet. How could he have gone forever without *this*?

Arms straining, he lifted her then slid her deeper onto his length. No wonder humans preferred sex as their method of copulation. Seth finally saw the wisdom in the Angelic Code that forbid angel-human interaction. If other angels knew how damn good it felt to take on a human body and take a human lover they'd never get any work done. The angels would turn into an army of sex-addicted maniacs. They'd spend all their time seducing their next mark instead of helping, protecting and guiding people.

"So hot." Lyndi released his cock and wrapped her arms around his neck as he eased her farther down his length. "Every time we touch...feel like I'm touching the...business end of an i-i-iron—oh God!"

Her body clenched as if she were in pain, as if his size was too much for her.

"Relax, Lyn," he breathed. "Relax."

She did, and with one more lift-and-slide along his member, his cock filled her. Her extreme tightness wrapped him in wet, willing pussy.

"Seth." She gripped him with her entire body. "Shit! Shit!"

Sudden fear seized him—the words she'd spoken moments earlier swirling in his brain. *Business end of an iron*. What if, because of his angelic physiology, some weird physical or chemical reaction occurred when they touched? What if he harmed her with a passion greater than her body was designed to withstand?

And the greatest question of all...

Why in the name of The Divine did he think of all this *now*, while he was buried so fantastically tight inside of her?

Chapter Four

Sweet.

Heavenly.

Fuck.

Seth was *huge*. Not that she was complaining but a little lube would be nice right about now.

There's a thin line between pleasure and pain.

She never knew how accurate the saying was until Seth's enormous cock was jammed so exquisitely inside her pussy.

Lyndi squeezed her arms around Seth's neck, like a boa constrictor devouring her first meal after a year-long fast, while simultaneously relaxing her inner muscles. She tilted her hips forward, grinding herself against him as best as she could given her position, which didn't allow her to do much more than get fucked.

And she was okay with that.

She smiled into the crevice of Seth's neck. "I definitely consider myself lucky now," she breathed, her lips brushing against the point where his neck met his shoulder. "You feel so fucking incredible inside me." She pumped her hips forward again, tightening and releasing her legs around his waist. Shit, she needed more friction! "Are you waiting for an invitation to start banging me? If so, *please* consider yourself invited already."

"I'm afraid I'm gonna hurt you," he whispered.

He said what now?

Her forehead found his in the darkness. "Is this because of your size, Seth? Sure, I might be a little sore tomorrow but—"

"No. It's... I've never done this before. I mean, like this. With someone like you."

Someone like her?

Brunette? Short? Easy?

She wanted to lash out, but nothing in the inflection of Seth's voice sounded judgmental or negative. If only she could see his eyes, his expression.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"It's complicated, Lyn."

"No, it's not," she countered, trying to salvage a moment that had been fifteenstars-out-of-ten until a moment ago. "You're here. You're cock's inside of me, which feels fucking incredible by the way. Things don't get any simpler than that."

"What if I—"

"Hurt me? Then I'll tell you to stop, but right now, stopping is the last thing I want you to do, okay?" She tugged on his hair to make sure they were face to face, even if the darkness made the move symbolic. "Let go of whatever is tethering you to this insanity and fuck me."

That did the trick.

He wedged her against the wall—holy shitting sheepdogs that was *cold*—and let himself go. He took her fast, hard, pumping his cock into her. Each thrust stretched and stimulated her pussy. Every plunge stole nearly every ounce of breath from her lungs.

"That's more...like...it," she panted.

He kissed her neck, traced his lips along the thundering vein in her throat. "I'm about to blow." He sucked in a breath. "Come for me, Lyn. Come for me now."

His words...sweet, agonizing ignition.

Her climax crashed through her, the absolute intensity sending massive shock waves of pleasure through her body, and Seth's quick-moving thrusts acted like an overpowering accelerant.

She went up in flames, screaming his name, every muscle in her body paralyzed with pleasure.

"Lyndi," Seth panted, his body going stiff as his own orgasm seized him. "Lyn!"

A bright light burned to life behind her closed eyes. So bright she feared she might never see again. Her head spun as if she might black out, but she didn't care. How could she?

Nothing existed except her and Seth.

Her head rolled back, the excruciating bliss suspending her in time. If she died right now, she'd die a happy woman.

When she could wrench her eyes open again, blackness greeted her. Whatever "light" she thought she'd seen a moment ago must have been her imagination. Still, she had to ask.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?" Seth whispered, his voice brimming with the aftereffects of his climax.

"A brilliant, white light. There for a second...then gone."

His body stiffened. "A light?"

Great. He thought she was crazy now. Hell, she probably was. "Never mind. I was caught up in the brilliance of my orgasm. I'm sure it was my imagination."

But she hadn't noticed anything odd when she'd orgasmed on the deck. That climax, however, hadn't been close to the same intensity as this one.

Seth nuzzled her neck. "Is climax always like that for you? With you?"

"Never. With you, it was... I don't know. Fifty degrees hotter than any sex I've ever had?"

He drew the lobe of her ear into his mouth. A familiar wanting buzzed to life again between her legs, where he was still embedded within her. Did they have time for another—

No. No. Of course, they didn't. They'd been gone too long as it was. Much longer and her sisters would surely send out a search party. Why was she even considering the sordid idea?

Because sex with Seth was no-words-did-it-justice intense.

"We should get back out on the hunt," she whispered. "Hopefully, they've already found Jo-Jo and we can go back to my place for round two. You can make me come in an actual bed. Novel concept, huh?"

He laughed but didn't seem too keen on leaving yet. His incredible lips were on the move again. They connected with her mouth for another of those otherworldly kisses she was growing addicted to. The kind that made her forget her senses and sent her body screaming into uncontrollable overdrive.

She clenched her pussy muscles around his dick, enjoying how slick their joined bodies had become. Seth was still hard—or maybe getting harder again. She couldn't be sure. The only thing she *was* sure of was that she wanted him again. She wanted him naked and in her bed, to explore his incredible body. She wanted to discover him in the way her artist's eye discovered the often unobserved colors and textures of the world around her.

She pulled back from their kiss. "Why don't we press the pause button for a minute, just long enough to make our excuses to my family." She couldn't keep her fingers out of his hair, her lips away from the muscles of his corded neck. "Then...round two."

"I don't think I can wait that long before I take you again." He withdrew his mostly hard cock about half of its length then slid back home. "I want to make you *lucky* again."

The wet friction of his sliding length stoked the still-simmering fire in her womb. "Seth," she sighed. "My family—"

"Can wait. I can't. Being with you is pure heaven, Lyn. And I've been away from Heaven so long..."

* * * * *

Lyndi held Seth in the wake of another climax and tried to keep from grinning like a drunk college student. And failed. Then again, three mind-altering orgasms in a one-hour span—four if she counted the one on the deck—could do that to a girl.

Somehow, their second time had been infinity times better than the first. Lasted longer too. But none of sweaty physical moments were as moving as what Seth had said to her during their sexual intermission.

Being with you is pure heaven, Lyn. And I've been away from heaven so long...

Maybe she was crazy, but the absolute bliss in his voice when he'd spoken those words was unlike anything she'd ever known. As if he'd never uttered a truer statement in his life, as if being with her *was* close to heaven for him.

The notion might be crazy, but something about the man made her want to act with her heart instead of her head.

She might as well admit it now—she'd fucking fallen for Seth Jones. Hard. In one night. Was she an emotional idiot?

Seth nuzzled her neck in the darkness, pressed a series of kisses from her shoulder to her lips. "Mmm...that was incredible. Again."

"You don't have to tell me. I was the one on the receiving end of your cock, remember? The one that kept screaming your name."

Laugher rumbled in his chest. "Oh, I most certainly remember."

His lips claimed hers in another thorough kiss and she tightened her arms and legs around him. How would any other man ever be able to measure up to this man? Literally.

Smiling to herself, she reveled in the way his spent cock still filled her so exquisitely. If she didn't know any better, she'd swear he was already hard again. Seth had a mega recovery thing going on, and if they didn't get out of her *right now*, they'd probably be fucking again in about ten seconds.

No. No *probably* about it. They *would* be fucking again.

"We have to get out of here," she whispered. "We've already been gone too long."

"I know. I just don't want to let you go yet."

"Me either. But look on the bright side. The sooner we tell my family bye, the sooner we can get to my place and you can make me come again."

He kissed her. "Sounds like fun."

"Yeah," she drawled. "But I think I'll go down on you first. Ya know, even up the orgasmic count for the night." She squeezed her feminine muscles around his length. "I'm dying to get my mouth on your cock, Seth."

More laughter. "I think I've discovered the one thing dirtier than your vocabulary, Lyn. Your mind!"

"What?" she returned with mock innocence. "Are you saying you *don't* want a blowjob?"

"Lyn, Lyn. What am I going to do with you?"

"I can think of a few things."

She liked him this way, all joking and flirtatious, not brooding and subdued like he'd been during the pre-sex portion of the evening. Not that she'd found *that* Seth unattractive either. Obviously. She'd pretty much wanted to do him from the get-go.

"But not here," she said.

Keeping her arms tight around his neck, she released the death grip her thighs had on his waist and his cock slid free. Her pussy immediately missed the warmth of him, just like the rest of her would when he left to go back to wherever it was he lived.

A sudden flow of tears threatened to break free. Why was Fate so cruel? To send her a near perfect man—near perfect because he *was* keeping something from her—then make sure his presence in her life was only temporary.

Fate was a fucking, kill-her-own-mama bitch.

Glad Seth couldn't see the sudden sadness she knew must have seized her features, she held his hand as she knelt and felt around for her dress. She'd known walking into this shed that anything between them had an expiration date. Too bad her heart hadn't heeded the "Caution: Beware of Falling in Love" signs along Ecstasy's highway.

Found the dress.

Her suddenly sour mood was of her own making. Seth wasn't to blame. She'd protect him from knowing how much she was—

Motherfucking shit-storm!

Protection! She and Seth hadn't used any.

No, no, no, no, no! She was such an idiot. Right this minute, one of his sperm might be getting frisky with one of her naïve little eggs. No wonder everything had been so fucking lubricated after they'd had sex. He'd come inside her.

Twice!

Oh, this was *not* happening. Not now, not when her life was going well again—when the past's dark hold on her didn't feel as if it would suffocate her with every breath she took.

Seth's hand dropped on her shoulder. "Lyn, what's wrong? I felt you—"

"We forgot to use a condom, Seth. Shit. I can't believe I forgot. Oh fuck. What if—"

"Hey." He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "It's gonna be okay, Lyn. Whatever happens, we'll figure it out together. Okay?"

She nodded, but his words didn't exactly bring her comfort. Together? How were they supposed to deal with this kind of potential pitfall *together* once he went back to wherever he called home? After all, Daryl had bolted at the first mention of pregnancy. Why wouldn't Seth? Unlike Daryl, she and Seth weren't in any kind of committed relationship.

"We have to get out of here." Her voice sounded as if it had flatlined. Would she ever stop screwing her life up?

She pulled on her dress, her coat. She wasn't ready to be pregnant again. Maybe she'd never be ready. Losing her child had just been too painful.

When they'd dressed, they exited the shed and Lyndi re-locked the door. In the glow of moonlight, Seth looked calm and a little *too* collected. How could he be so unruffled by a potential pregnancy, especially when she was about to crawl out of her skin?

"If it makes you feel any better," Seth began, "I'm clean. Disease-wise."

Great, one terror off her plate. "What if I get, ya know—?" She couldn't even say the p-word out loud.

"Like I said," he whispered, his voice soft, gentle, "we'll figure it out when, and if, we reach that bridge, okay?"

She nodded, and when he wrapped his arms around her, she let him pull her close. She felt so small in his embrace. She also felt safe. So much so she wanted to believe him. She truly did. But men weren't wired to—

Seth tensed—and all Lyndi's still-lingering hope for a happy-ever-after came screeching to a halt. Here it came. The freak-out she'd been expecting all along.

"I'm so sorry, Lyn, but I..." He cursed. "I have to go."

Now she knew why he'd been so calm earlier. He'd been planning to flee the entire motherfucking time. Just like that son-of-a-bitch Daryl. And to think she'd thought Seth was one of the good guys.

What excuse would he give for needing to cut his vacation short?

He'd forgotten his mother's birthday was tomorrow and he needed to fly back to Whereversville for her party. Surely, he wouldn't be that cliché.

He kissed the top of her head. "When we met earlier, I still had one more...errand I needed to do for my boss, and if I don't finish by midnight, he's going to have my ass."

Red flags waved in her mind. "Boss? I thought you were here on vacation?"

"I am, I mean... It's a long story. I'll explain later. Right now, I've *got* to go." Soft hands tilted her face up and Seth pressed his lips to hers in a kiss that was both slow and *very* thorough.

When they finally came up for air, he murmured, "I don't know how long it'll take me, so what do you say to breakfast tomorrow, say around eight-thirty? I'll cook, but seeing as I don't have a permanent residence here, it'll have to be at your place. Is that okay?"

Lyndi closed her eyes. *I don't have a permanent residence here.* Just another reason their relationship—such as it was—had been doomed before it even started.

* * * * *

Franklin Michaels was dead – not a moment too soon.

Seth had never been so close to missing a deadline before. As it was, he'd barely had time to transport the bastard's sorry soul to the waiting area before the midnight hour had struck, the deadline for this particular termination.

Death Code dictated rules all Death Workers must abide by. The biggest—assigned deaths should take place within predestined timeframes and in the manner foreseen by an Angel of Death. Granted, Workers had the limited authority to intervene and tweak deaths but *only* if the prescribed death somehow couldn't happen as instructed. Like tonight.

Michaels' death was supposed to take place at the park while the target was alone. Why alone? Seth had no clue, but apparently, that facet had been important. When Lyndi'd arrived, the prescribed plan had to be revised.

The adjusted plan—Michaels died of heart failure while watching rape porn in his home, his wife asleep in their bed.

Close enough for death work.

In a rush of cold air, Seth materialized in the *Mourez*, the circular "staff room" where he and the rest of the recruited received their updated list of targets. The room's

gray walls and tile were not very original, a perfect blending of light and dark. The Angels of Death weren't known for their exquisite taste.

Light and dark...

Seth's thoughts shifted to Lyndi. Given her fascination with the subject—light and dark, angels and demons—she'd probably get a kick out of this room and the décor's absolute blandness.

How would she transpose this scene to canvas if he were to tell her of the room's existence and purpose but give her no other details? Would she picture the space as a room split down the middle? One side white, one side dark. Or perhaps as a series of contrasting images, like the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Creation, last judgment and everything in between. Maybe a serene mountain backdrop, like in Switzerland? Complete neutrality.

Or would she paint the room the way it appeared? A bland, featureless place where humanity's deaths were foreseen and arranged without regard for good and evil.

But he'd never know because he couldn't tell her of the room's existence, of who he was.

She'd tried to get him to open up, but he'd avoided her questions. What choice did he have? He'd broken one of the angels' fundamental laws when he'd revealed himself. Despite the potential pitfalls of his decision, however, he was surprised he didn't regret what he'd done.

Being with Lyndi, lost in her kick-ass body, had been as close as he'd come to Heaven in—shit, he didn't even know anymore. And, Heaven help him, he wanted her all over again.

He should disappear from her life, he knew that. Leaving was the selfless thing to do, the angelic thing. Working for the Angels of Death might keep him bound to Angelic Code, but it didn't make him a true angel anymore.

He was a selfish, needy being so undeserving of a woman like Lyndi.

Guilt clogged his throat. She'd been upset last night when she'd realized they hadn't used a condom, and he couldn't even assure her they had nothing to worry about. Yes, he'd told her he was "clean". What about the rest of it?

As a near-angel—he hated thinking of himself as a demon—he was incapable of fathering a child with a human, at least not in his spiritual form. But he'd been in a corporal form when— Shit.

He raked shaking fingers through his hair. Could he have *actually* gotten Lyndi pregnant?

A heady dose of wonder filled his chest. What if they *did* have a child? What would the baby look like, *be* like? Would he or she have any of his powers? Or would the child be completely human, with Lyndi's creative streak?

Smiling, he closed his eyes and tried to picture Lyndi walking around with his baby inside her. To have a family, to be connected to a group who cared about him...

It had been a long time since Seth had had *any* kind of loving support he hardly knew how –

"Well, well," a familiar, much-hated female voice sang, "someone certainly looks chipper today. What an incredible—no *sexy* surprise."

Kaia. The bitch who'd been responsible for his banishment. At least indirectly responsible.

Seth's smile froze. He hadn't seen Kaia in several millennia, and he liked his life—existence...he had no life—that way. Every time he looked at her beautifully hideous face, the blonde hair flowing down her back, he remembered how much she'd broken his heart. Broken his spirit.

How naïve he'd been to ever see anything good in her.

"Kaia," he said, opening his eyes and clearing his face of all emotion. The less ammunition she had to make his life even more hellish the better.

Please, make her go away, he prayed.

Of course, she didn't.

"Oh, come on, Sethy. No hugs for your lover?"

"Former lover," he corrected. "Emphasis on former."

She glided closer. "It's been how many millennia since our breakup? Can't we have a conversation like normal demons?"

"Demon?" He forced down a sudden furious flare-up. "I am not a demon."

"Demon. Fallen angel." She shrugged. "You say tomato. I say—"

"I'm *not* evil. Not like you and the rest of *your* kind, and one day I will make it home again. Mark my word."

Kaia rolled her evil eyes. "Why do you even want to go back? Too many rules, regulations. Restrictions. Down here, we're free. We can do whatever we want."

"I don't want free, Kaia. I want family, the family I lost when I blindly protected you instead of—"

He shook his head. What was he doing? The liquid malevolence running through her veins made it impossible for her to remember, let alone *comprehend*, the love they'd once shared. At least the love he'd had for her.

What a fucking fool he'd been.

"Goodbye, Kaia. See you in a few more millennia. *Never again* if I'm lucky." He turned to go.

Kaia wasn't finished. "I have a proposition for you, Seth."

"Not interested." He kept walking.

"Maybe not now, but I have a feeling you might be interested in what I have to say once you see your list of terminations for the day. And if not—and you get lonely again—we could always meet at that little shed I saw you at last night."

He froze in mid-stride.

No.

Kaia couldn't know about what he and Lyndi had done. No way -

Memories from last night came roaring back. He'd sensed someone watching him. Several times, in fact. He'd dismissed the feelings as nerves, anticipation for what he'd done and what he'd been about to do, but the sensations hadn't been his anxiety playing tricks on him. Someone had been watching him.

Kaia had been watching him.

Fear closing in on his heart like an invading army of the Dark One's minions, Seth turned back to his ex. "What the fuck did you do? She's an innocent."

"Innocent?" she shrieked. "Humans are not *innocent*. They're pests, and if it wasn't for The Divine's pathetic obsession with his little...pets, we'd still be in Heaven now."

"Unbelievable, Kaia. Absolutely fucking unbelievable. You and *your kind* are the reason we were banished. You're all selfish and cruel and—"

Seth stopped. He shouldn't be focusing on the past—it didn't matter anymore. The only thing that mattered now was Lyndi.

He sucked in a calming breath. "You said you had a deal. What kind of deal?"

Kaia smiled—naïve, flirtatious—the same smile that'd had him committing the unforgivable sin all those millennia ago. "Just a little *quid pro quo*. Simple."

He doubted it was anything but simple. "With Lyndi's life in the balance, I'm gonna need a little more to go on than *quid pro quo*! Give me details."

"When you're ready to *listen*—and not give commands—I'll contact you. *Ciao*, babe."

She blew him a kiss then poofed into nothing.

Seth scrubbed his palms over his face. After all this time, Kaia was still finding ways to ruin his life, but this time, it wasn't really *his* life she was destroying. It was Lyndi's. And all because of a choice he'd made last night.

A choice he hadn't regretted until now.

He looked to the Heavens. What had he done?

Chapter Five

Bastards.

All of them.

Fucking, *fucking* bastards.

Lyndi's clock chimed nine and her loft was still sans Seth Jones. No phone call, no flowers with an apologetic note. Nothing.

Suddenly realization struck.

Lyndi stopped pacing. Maybe it wasn't that men were fucking bastards. Maybe it was that she just had an incredible knack of fucking men who *were* bastards. Who knew she was such a masochist?

"Come on, Seth. Where are you?"

Maybe he just forgot to set his alarm and is still asleep in his hotel bed.

Like a desperate loser, she grabbed onto the positive thought with both hands. She didn't want to believe the worst about Seth. To accept he *was* like Daryl. More precisely, she didn't want to admit the fact she'd chosen two losers in a row.

God, maybe she should join a nunnery. At least then she'd stop being disappointed by men.

Even if Seth *did* show up, they had other issues to work out. Long distance relationship anyone? Then pile on the they-hardly-knew-each-other complication, and yeppers, this was a recipe for relationship failure if she ever saw one.

She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. She didn't want their relationship to fail. She wanted to get to know the man she'd slept with last night, wanted him to tell her about whatever demons haunted his past. But first, to protect herself, she needed to

take a step back with her heart and keep her emotions in check while she figured everything out.

Walking to the railing where her loft apartment overlooked her studio, she sighed. At least her art would never disappoint her. Each piece, each labor of love, was a child to her and in three days people would fill that lower room—hopefully anyway—to peruse, to judge and to buy her babies.

Her babies...

Tears formed in the back of her eyes and she turned back to her loft. She would *not* cry, not over something that had happened years ago. She'd put those painful months aside and for years she hadn't let herself think about it or let the memories blacken what she'd worked hard to regain. A life free of depression and self-hatred.

Besides, she had other, more recent issues to stress over. Like Seth and whether or not his sperm had gotten too friendly with any of her eggs.

She couldn't believe she'd forgotten to use protection. It was unlike her. The entire condom debacle was definitely going on her Bonehead-Moves-of-the-Century List. If she could actually take birth control pills without getting sick, it wouldn't be such an issue. She could get the morning after pill, but after already losing one child, that action left a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She grabbed the yellow throw pillow from the recliner beside her and hurled the thing—it was called a throw pillow for a reason, wasn't it?—at the sketch of Seth she'd freehanded last night. The drawing portrayed Seth as her guardian angel. She planned to put the sketch to canvas and surprise Seth with the last-minute addition to her show. Now she didn't know what the hell to do with it.

Burn it in a symbolic act against the wickedness of all men?

"And just what did that naughty little sketchpad do to deserve being punished with yellow fluffiness?"

Lyndi jumped at the sound of Traci's high-pitched voice then almost fell backward from her loft. "What the...how did...?"

"Easy, sis. The door was open. Again. Ya know, you've really got to remember to start locking that thing." Traci rubbed a hand over her very large belly. "Now, would you like to tell me what's going on? Or is throwing pillows at your artwork a normal thing for you?"

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"No, it's not. I'm just—"
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"Having a meltdown?" Traci waddled toward the sketchpad and tried to pluck the canary-colored sham from the floor, but bending or kneeling at this state of her pregnancy was practically out of the question. In the end, she settled for kicking the pillow toward the couch.

To Lyndi's surprise, the same wave of sadness she always felt when seeing her pregnant sister didn't hit her. Hmm... Probably had something to do with the fact her emotions were playing a wild game of pinball in her chest.

Ping!

Bang!

Tilt!

Game over, loser.

"So," Traci continued, "would you like to tell me what prompted you to start throwing pillows at your artwork?"

Because I'm a fucking idiot. "Not really." Lyndi grabbed the pillow from the floor and smashed it over her face.

"Does it have something to do with Mr. Handsome McMuscles, and what happened in the Maybrooks' shed, you naughty, *naughty* little girl?"

After Seth's departure last night—he'd insisted on taking a cab to his hotel—she'd told her sisters everything. Well almost everything. From how she met Seth, to asking him to be her fake date, to the incredible and reckless sex in the shed and, finally, to her and Seth's plan to meet for breakfast. She'd left out the deck make-out session and the creep who'd attacked her in the park.

Mari and Traci had both scolded her about her "unprotected sex with a stranger" lapse—repeatedly—but for the most part, they just wanted to keep hearing details on how big Seth's, uh, prowess was.

Lyndi slammed the pillow onto her lap. "Why am I prone to such fucking idiocy, Trace? Why?"

"Oh, sweetie. You're not an idiot." As she tried to sit, Traci grabbed the arm of the sofa to keep from going down too fast. "Are you impulsive? Yes. Wild? More often than you should be. Stupid? Absolutely not."

Lyndi wished she had her sister's opinion of herself.

Traci took hold of Lyndi's hand. "Do you think, just maybe, you might be jumping the gun here? Ya know, in hating Seth. He's late. He's *not* Daryl."

Lyndi rested her head on the back of her couch and closed her eyes. Maybe she *was* letting her unresolved issues with Daryl cloud things where Seth was concerned. There could be a multitude of logical reasons why he hadn't arrived yet.

"And for what it's worth, Lynds, Seth *will* show. Eventually. Do you know why I know this?" Traci didn't stop talking long enough for Lyndi to pretend to answer. "Because he was at Mom and Dad's bright and early this morning helping Dad fix your car, which *is* fixed now by the way. They replaced some hose somewhere, and since Mom and I had to drive close to your place on the way to my doctor's office, I thought I'd return your car, but I digress." She gave Lyndi a sisterly squeeze. "I doubt Seth would help Dad fix your car and then blow you off the same day."

Hope bubbled in her chest. "Really?"

"Lyndi?" Seth's deep baritone rumbled up the stairs, preempting Traci's answer. "Your door was unlocked. May I-"

"Seth! Yes, come in, come in," she called back, almost tripping over her own feet as she leapt from the couch on her rush to the stairwell.

So much for stepping back and getting a better grip on your emotions.

She rounded the corner just as Seth stepped from the stairwell, a bag from Betty's Bakery in his left arm, a bouquet of lilies in his right. The scent of sweet blueberry reached up and tickled her nose. How did he know Betty's blueberry muffins were her favorite?

Mom, duh.

"I'm late," he said. "I'm sorry. After I left your parents' this morning, time got away from me I guess."

"It's okay," she whispered. God, he looked even cuter now than last night, his brown eyes even more alluring.

He offered her the lilies and the bag of muffins. "I didn't know if I'd have to do any groveling for being late. Your dad said these were your favorites."

Her dad? Giving advice on his *Lil' Lynds'* food faves? Didn't seem possible. "Thank you."

He looked over Lyndi's shoulder. "Morning again, Traci."

"Right back at ya," Traci answered with a sly smile then made a show of looking at a nonexistent wristwatch. "Well, look at the time. I have a doctor's appointment at nine-thirty so I'd better get going."

Lyndi rolled her eyes.

When Traci walked by, she leaned close to Lyndi and whispered, "Don't forget to use condoms this time, okay?"

"I won't." Lyndi gave Trace a playful push toward the stairs, but before she took her first step down, Seth took her by the elbow.

"These stairs are pretty steep. Let me help you down."

As she watched her lover help her super-preggers sis down the stairs, Lyndi fought back a sudden rush of tears. Seth the protector. He was too-sexy-to-be-true awesome. She wanted to be much more to this man than just a vacation fuck.

As if she needed more proof she was an emotional goner.

When he returned, she stepped back and motioned him into her apartment. "Come on in. I'll put these in, uh, some water. My place isn't much, but I love it."

"I can see why. It's very open, very free."

She grabbed a vase from under the sink and tried to observe her apartment like someone seeing it for the first time.

The space was very open indeed, despite its limited size, thanks to the fact one of the "walls" was little more than a chest-high balcony overlooking her studio. A small but adequate kitchenette sat to the right. Living area with sofa, coffee table and recliner took the center of the space. Lastly, her queen-sized bed, with its pastel quilt, ornate headboard and matching nightstands, finished out the left side of the room.

"It's not much, I know," she said, setting the flowers on the counter. "It's all I really need though. I bought it mainly because of the space downstairs. My gallery and personal studio."

"I hope I'll get a personal tour." He moved to the railing and looked down at her studio. "I'm guessing you can access the downstairs from the loft? I didn't notice a second door or anything when I was on my way up."

She pointed to the double doors on the far wall, next to the fridge. "That's the freight elevator and it goes down to the studio. The doors on either side of the elevator require password access to keep out unwanted visitors. I had them installed right after I bought the place."

"Nice."

She set the vase on the counter and started arranging flowers. "Make yourself comfortable while I get these beautiful lilies into some water." She pointed to her fridge. "Would you like a drink? I make a mean mimosa."

"No thank you. I don't drink alcohol. I wouldn't mind a glass of OJ though."

"You don't—" Lyndi stopped arranging flowers mid-sentence. "What?"

Those words made no sense to her. Who didn't drink? At least a little bit every once in a while? Dad didn't drink, of course, but he was a recovering...

"Oh my God," she breathed, turning from the flowers and reaching for Seth. "You're an alcoholic, aren't you? I'm sorry I didn't—"

He shook his head, his smile amused. "I'm not an alcoholic, Lyn. I just don't drink. Never have."

"Just don't...really?" Did her eyes just bug out of her head or was that her imagination? "Never? As in *never* ever?"

"Nope." He leaned his big frame on the counter next to her, looking way sexier than any human should be allowed to look. "Never saw the benefit."

"Never saw the benefit? Never saw the..." She shook her head. Soft-spoken, tortured past he didn't want to talk about, a lover of the arts *and* he didn't drink. Had she actually found a bona fide gentleman? "You drink to loosen up, Seth. To help calm the voices in your head that keep telling you that you need to work a little longer, get a little more work done."

Dull the pain so it doesn't feel as if it's about to crush you alive.

She didn't tack on the last part. She didn't need nor want that particular reminder. Too painful.

Seth shook his head, low-rumbling laughter in his throat. "So *that's* how to get rid of the voices. Huh. If only I'd known earlier."

Lyndi couldn't stop from laughing too. When Seth smiled and joked, it was just too damn easy to forget all the problems and possible baggage he brought with him.

"Actually," he said, "I prefer meditation to help me relax."

"Meditation?" This time, she *was* sure her eyes popped from their sockets. "As in candles, sounds of the ocean...saying *ommmm*?"

"Well, I don't typically say *ommmm*, and I prefer the scent of nature over the smell of artificial aromas. The middle of the forest, a beach at sunrise, a secluded mountain

cliff, vanilla orchid fields. When trying to get in tune with nature, I find it best to *become* a part of nature." Smiling, he reached out to drag a knuckle down the side of her cheek. The heated sensation accompanying his touch set out on a leisurely journey through her body and she couldn't help herself from moving even closer.

Seth was a magnet—a hot, dreamy magnet who had opened up to her, even if it wasn't much. His past might still be a mystery but she'd take this tiny victory. Knowing he meditated and didn't drink said a lot about the man. Maybe tomorrow—please God let him be around tomorrow—she'd get him to open up more.

He slipped his arms around her, drew her tight against his mountainous body, his face turning serious. "I should have said this when I got here but... I've been thinking about you all damn morning."

"Really?" God, it was a stupid question, but she kind of felt a little stupid right now.

Stupid in love.

He didn't use words to answer, he used his lips. His kiss was little more than a quick, soft peck but it kick-started her libido. "I was really, *really* hoping to spend the rest of the day lost in your body, Lyn and forget about everything else."

That was it, the final nail in her restraint. She was done fighting, questioning. He'd probably break her heart in a few days, but she couldn't seem to stop herself from falling for this man any more than she could stop her body from requiring oxygen.

Somehow, someway, she'd make this work between them—but to do that, she needed to charm the pants off him. Literally.

She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and captured his lips with hers. His strong arms lifted her until her legs dangled. Before she could take her next breath, they were across the room and kneeling on the bed. She pushed off his jacket, peeled off his shirt, exposing the hard plane of his chest to her greedy eyes.

The thick lines of his pecs were strong and harsh. And oh-my-fucking-God, where they met the top of his chiseled abs—was it possible for such perfection to exist? Apparently. She was ogling it right now.

Slow down. The explosions of pure passion last night had been great, but today she wanted to explore every inch of the powerful man darkness had hidden from her. She wanted to indulge in each line and contour of his body, commit them all to memory.

She couldn't stop her fingertips from tracing along the contoured surface. He was like curved steel with a layer of flesh pulled taut across the surface. "I *really* need to paint you," she whispered, unable to take her eyes off a chest that could very well have been the inspiration of Michelangelo's *David*.

No, David was a couch-potato with a beer belly compared to Seth.

"You want to paint me *right now*?" He grabbed the hem of her tank and tugged, mischief lacing his voice. The trouble in his eyes sent a jolt of arousal between her legs.

She laughed, lifting her arms so he could pull the cotton free. "Well, if we wait much longer, the portrait's gonna end up being a nude," she teased.

"I'll think about it."

"You'll *think* about it?" Laughing, she popped the button of his pants, peeled down the zipper and reached inside to wrap her fingers around his stiff cock. "I can be very persuasive, ya know?"

"We'll see about that." He brushed the hair from her shoulders and pressed his lips against the sensitive dip above her collarbone.

"Mmm, I like that." Oh-so-slowly she stroked his length, reveling in the feel of him in her hands. "The way your lips and tongue work together. Of course, I liked the combo better when you applied it to more intimate parts of my body."

"Like your pussy?"

"That's one place, yes," she murmured.

He laughed, a deep-throat rumble that vibrated all the way to said body part.

Moisture leaked from her slit and dampened the lining of her panties—she really needed to lose that particular garment but not until Seth lost his. "Lay back."

"In a minute..." He licked his way over her collarbone, down the center of her chest, stopping in the valley between her breasts. The tip of his tongue traced along the underside of the mound, thoroughly working its way to her nipple.

She moaned and he sucked the peak into his mouth, savoring her like he'd never wanted another woman as much as he wanted her. It was such a mother-fucking turn-on. And she needed to put a stop to it.

"Okay, Seth, I'm serious. Lay back." She released his length, and palms to his chest, pushed him backward. When he landed, the bed squeaked, shaking under his superlarge frame. "Thank you."

Since his pants were already unfastened, one good yank sent them flying. Boxers too. And Lyndi froze.

Mary Mother of God. Seth naked on her bed, sprawled out in all his manly glory was, was, was...

"Extraordinary," she breathed.

If given more time, she might've been able to come up with a better, sexier adjective to describe him but "extraordinary" totally worked. The way the skin of his torso molded over every muscle. All those perfect lines and contours, colors and texture.

The view got better when her gaze ventured lower. He had the thighs of an athlete, powerful and solid. And his cock... She'd said it best last night. Impressive. Very, *very* impressive. "Oh, I'm definitely gonna need to paint you. Right here in my bed...naked. For posterity, of course."

"Will you be nude too when you paint me?" He stuffed a pillow behind his head, interlaced his fingers behind his neck. He was a portrait of total arrogance, posing for *her* erotic pleasure.

The muscles of his biceps bulged—big, beautiful and begging for her lips to trace each hard curve. Mmm-mmm.

"What do you say we forgo the painting altogether," Seth murmured, "and just use a video camera? It's simpler and we can relive this moment over and over and over."

She knew he was joking. Mostly. Yet as she leaned forward and pressed her lips against the inside of his right upper arm, she found herself considering his voyeuristic request. Seth would look incredible on film, no doubt about it. Her?

Not so much. Especially when her partner looked like a shoo-in for Mr. Universe and she looked like, well, Lyndi Garrison.

Still, she couldn't help but carry on the banter. "I'd rather relive fucking you by *actually*, ya know, fucking you over and over again, but for argument's sake, let's say I said yes. What would you like to do on our first recorded romp?"

"Hmm. Hard to narrow down those options."

Her tongue drew one last small circle over the flexed muscle of his biceps and then started moving again. He smelled good—like a salty, breezy ocean morning—and tasted even better. Did the rest of his hard, uh, *muscles* taste this incredible?

Her mouth practically watered to indulge in his cock, but somehow she managed to keep her exploration slow. She stopped to swirl her tongue over his flat nipple and then inside his bellybutton.

"Pretend the camera's on us *right now*," she said. "Tell me what you want me to do to you."

"Well, you could start by making good on the little promise you made me last night."

I think I'll go down on you first, ya know...even up the orgasmic count for the night. I'm dying to get my mouth on your cock.

Oh, yeah. She would *so* make good on *that* promise.

At least the going-down-on-him part. She wasn't sure she'd be able to hold off her blistering need to take his thick cock inside her and ride him until they came together. Hot and sweaty—

And if she kept thinking like that she definitely wouldn't last long.

Scooting down the bed, she forced what was left of her dwindling brainpower to think of only *Seth's* pleasure. She ran her fingers along his inner thighs and cupped his balls, careful to keep her mouth out of contact with his package.

Her body buzzed in protest of her restraint but she held firm to her decision. She *would* take her time with him, taste him, torture him. Her self-control would make the reward of his cock that much sweeter.

She opened her mouth, skimmed her lips along the warm skin of his erection, breathing in his musky, male scent and exhaling hot, moist air.

"Mmm, Lyn..."

The sound of his gravelly moan? The ultimate turn-on. Knowing she held that kind of power over him?

Priceless.

Making sure his balls didn't feel left out, she mouthed the orbs with the same contact-no-contact touch. In this position, his cock lay heavy and hard against her cheek. Temptation begged her to turn her head and swallow his dick whole. She stopped herself.

Man oh man, restraining herself was harder to do than she'd thought. Why do you have to be so fuckingly, irresistibly mouthwatering, Seth Jones?

She skimmed her lips back up his length, to his glans. His thighs tensed in expectancy, hardening against her breasts as she leaned deeper over him. The crinkly hair of his upper legs rubbed over her nipples, sending little shots of arousal right to her already screaming pussy.

She circled the outer edges of her lips along his tip, as if she were using the forming drip of salty-sweet liquid seeping from his slit as lip balm—and *boy* were her lips dry. One loop, then two. That was all she could stand before the need to taste him truly overwhelmed her.

Gripping the base of his sex with both hands, she swallowed his head and dipped her tongue into his leaking opening. His cock pulsed in her hands, in her mouth and she devoured every drop of delicious pre-cum.

How much longer could *she* stand this?

She released him but didn't pull back far. "Calm down," she murmured to herself, turning her head to rub her cheek along his satin-coated hardness, breathing in the masculine scent of his intense arousal.

He laughed, his fingers lacing in her hair. He didn't try to direct her mouth back to his erection—just cradled her scalp. His breath was harsh as he spoke. "Remember, Lyn, turnabout—"

"Is fair play? Yeah, I'm banking on that." She peered up at him through her lashes, turned her head and traced her tongue over the thick nerve that ran the length of his shaft.

His eyes rolled back in his head, his face frozen as if he were already on the brink of orgasm.

God, she might as well be pleasuring herself.

Chapter Six

Heaven.

Being with Lyndi, at her mercy, spinning faster and faster in the funnel of her love until he was delirious with need... Yes, this was *indeed* Heaven, and as far as he was concerned, being with her like this *was* enough. More than enough.

He'd stay here for the rest of eternity if he could, but Fate was a cruel mistress who got off on the harsh curveballs she threw at the unprepared subjects who populated her kingdom—and the kingdom was indeed *hers*. No one was immune to her cruelty either. Not even him. And she'd struck him in the cruelest way possible.

Through Lyndi.

Sorrow and guilt mingled in his chest. How was he supposed to arrange the violent death of the woman he loved?

And he *did* love her. The realization had struck him like a lightning bolt to the heart when he'd picked up his assignment list and her beautiful name sat amidst the rest of the doomed.

When he'd showed up at her door, he'd planned to tell her everything, not fall straight into bed with her, but when she'd kissed him in the kitchen, his dick had taken over. Now his dick was being rewarded.

At the expense of his conscience.

He took back his earlier sentiment. This wasn't Heaven—it was Hell. Being so close to happiness but knowing the joy he saw on the horizon was a fucking mirage.

He forced the tragic thoughts from his mind. This might be the last time he ever had with her—with his Lyndi. He didn't want to ruin the experience by being way too deep in his own messed-up head.

Lyndi slid his cock deep into her hot, wet mouth, her tongue lavishing him as she bobbed up and down his shaft, sucking as she came up, releasing as she went down. His balls tightened, drew in toward his body. Fuck, he'd never experienced anything so exquisite in his several thousand millennia.

If he could trade his immortal body for this human one, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

She tended his cock with her hands too, rapid semicircular pumps to the part of him too bulky to fit into her mouth. He loved the way her lips caressed him, as if the act turned her on as much as it got him off.

Her incredible mouth worked him, hot and perfect. The moist friction she created threatened to do him in. He gripped her head with a tense hand, reminding himself to not force her deeper on his cock. Besides, what he truly wanted right now was to be buried tight and deep in her pussy.

"Lyndi, sweetheart... Come here," he groaned, tugging her up by her hair. "I want to be inside you when I come undone."

With one last lingering suck, she released his length and pushed to her hands and knees. She peered at him through dark lashes. "You were inside me," she teased, desire darkening her voice.

Sweet Heaven, I love you.

The words almost blurted from his mouth but thanks to the emotional clog in his throat, they lodged somewhere near his heart.

He swallowed hard. "You know what I meant."

Laughing, she pushed herself from the mattress and shed her jeans, her underwear. His gaze zeroed in on the lower part of her abdomen, just above her thatch of curls. A linear, crisscrossing tattoo stretched the length of taut skin above her mons. The lines of colors and shapes were very intimate, very eye-catching, like a neon sign saying look at me, touch me...

Lick me.

Too bad the last time he'd done that very thing it had been pitch black.

"Nice," he said, pointing to the tat. "I bet your parents hate it."

"This one," she teased, turning to open the drawer of her nightstand and giving him a perfect view of her wet pussy, "they don't know about."

The sight of her spread cunt lips, damp and glistening with her juices, past ready for his cock to slide in nice and deep, exploded any other questions he might have had on the subject of tattoos. Mainly, where was the other one?

Turning onto his side, he reached forward and slid his fingertips along her dripping sex, wrenching a moan from Lyndi. She pressed backward and he slipped his middle finger inside her channel.

"Mmm...that feels nice," she murmured.

He pressed another finger inside her. "Yeah?"

"Oh fuck yes."

He wiggled his fingers. "But not as nice as it'll feel when my dick's in there."

"True."

"Then why are you still over there when my cock is over here?"

Laughing, she crawled onto the bed, a foil package and some lube in her hands.

A tinge of disappointment tapped at his chest but he dismissed the unwanted emotion. Whether he could or couldn't get her pregnant was pointless unless he could figure out a way to save her life. And he *would* find a way to save her.

Lyndi fumbled the foil package. She dropped it twice before *finally* getting the thing open, but her hands were steady as she positioned the latex at his tip and smoothed the rubbery ring down his sensitive erection.

He almost came right then and there. "Hurry damn it!"

She drizzled some lube over his tip then straddled him. Her legs strained as she lowered her pussy toward his waiting erection. The tip of his cock dipped into her ripe opening.

Her inner muscles clenched, as if remembering how much they'd been stretched last night. And holy *shit*, the sensation of her tightening around his glans sent a lightning strike of pure lust rocketing straight to his balls.

He was tired of playing around.

Seth grabbed one of her hands and tugged her forward with such force her palms smacked against the mattress on either side of his head as she caught herself. He grabbed her around the waist and pushed her back as he thrust his pelvis up and slid most of his length inside her channel with one glorious thrust.

"Seth," she cried out, her voice a mix of pleasure and pain.

Focusing only on her pleasure, he slid free and then pushed back inside her warmth until he was fully sheathed in her heat. And started thrusting.

He used his hands to force her hips down so her pussy met his cock head-on with each pounding stroke. Despite the frenzy in his mind and body, he managed to ground out a two-word question.

"Hurting you?"

"Yes," she whimpered, her tits slapping against his chest as he fucked her, her breath jumping in and out of her mouth. "Feels...shit!" Her arms wobbled and she dropped to her elbows. "Feels good, Seth. Don't stop, okay? Don't—oh God!—don't stop."

Don't stop? That he could manage.

Her mouth hovered just above his. He loved the way her breath slapped him as he forced her higher. He loved the way she gave herself to him, body and soul. He loved how perfectly their bodies fit while they were fucking.

No, not fucking. Loving. Yes, loving.

Fiery pleasure burned in his balls. Shit. Lyndi was near climax too, if those sexy little sounds leaking from her mouth were any indication.

He kept slamming his cock home. Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

"Seth, I...I—oh God!" she screamed, throwing her head back like a wild animal howling at the moon.

Her inner muscles seized around him, a super-snug vise gripping his dick as he pumped his arms faster, shoving her surrendering body back to meet his cock with even more fury. Her entire body shook with the force of her orgasm, her face frozen in pleasure's relentless grip.

He wanted to keep watching her, to memorize every nuance of her beautiful face—dropped jaw, eyes squinted, pulse thundering in her beautiful neck—but his own climax raged in his balls. His pleasure grew hotter and hotter with each pounding plunge until he exploded.

Back arched, body rigid, his reality became a narrow tunnel where nothing existed but the intense pleasure he and Lyndi had created. Bright, blinding lights flashed behind his eyes. What the hell?

With a stab of fear, he realized the light wasn't coming from *behind* his eyes. *He* was glowing. Just like he'd done last night.

Shit, it was only a matter of time before Lyndi noticed—and didn't dismiss the phenomenon like she'd done last night—that he turned into a friggin' glow stick every time she made him come.

"Seth," Lyndi breathed, her breath hot against his neck as she lay on top of him, her body limp. "I swear I see stars every time we make love. Bright, bright stars. I like it though." She kissed his neck. "I like *you*. A lot. Does that scare you?"

He spoke the complete truth. "It terrifies me."

"Terrifies?" She kept her face hidden. "Is it because of what I said last night, about possibly getting pregnant because we forgot to use a condom?"

Did she start speaking a different language? "What are you talking about, Lyn?"

She pushed onto her elbows and looked at him. "I was afraid my mention of the word *pregnancy* freaked you out, that the thought of commitment—"

"No, no, no." He cradled her face in his hands. "I'm not scared of committing to you." And he wasn't. He was *pissed* he'd never be able to commit to her. Or anything else.

She didn't seem convinced. "So last night, when you bolted within thirty seconds of me mentioning the p-word, that was what? Coincidence?"

His mind drifted back to last night. Fuck him. She was right. Not four seconds after Lyndi had had her potential pregnancy scare, he'd remembered about Michaels. Seth could imagine how his sudden departure must have looked to her.

He'd probably come across as a complete asshole. Had another man broken her heart that way in response to some sort of pregnancy scare? Left her when she mentioned wanting a baby—or, Heaven forbid, when she *actually* found out she was pregnant?

He spoke quickly, hoping to reassure her. "At one point today, I found myself wondering about what it *would* be like to have a child with you. And you know what? The idea didn't really frighten me that much. How's *that* for scary?"

She didn't say anything, but the expression in her eyes told him everything. She didn't think his words were frightening at all. In fact, she might want that some time in the future.

The future...

Fucking Fate! If he didn't find a way to save her life, *she* didn't have any future to look forward to at all.

Fingertips against her jaw, he pulled her mouth down to his and kissed her slowly. Scrupulously. Their relationship might have been doomed from the beginning, but he wanted her to know, right here and now, how much he cared about her. How much he wanted her.

How much he loved her.

When she pulled back, they were both breathing hard. Shit, he wanted to make love to her again and if given the chance, he'd probably never stop.

"Speaking of babies," he said, his voice deep as he tilted his pelvis against hers, where their bodies were still joined. "I'd better get cleaned up or we're going to double our chances at the whole parenthood thing."

She laughed and, careful to grip the base of his semi-flaccid cock, moved oh-so-slowly off him and plopped onto her back. The grimace on her face as she'd moved struck him with a pang of remorse. Damn it, his aggression *had* hurt her, much more than she'd let on.

"I hurt you," he murmured, easing her knees apart and cupping his palm over her slick core, as if his touch could somehow take away the pain.

"No," she started then immediately stopped. "Okay, *fine*, the sex was a little...violent. It was also please-God-let-him-fuck-me-'til-the-end-of-time good."

She pressed one finger against his mouth and the other over his hand, where he held her intimately. "You're big and you're physical. I'm going to have to get used to your, ah, prowess if we're going to be together. My body *will* adjust to yours. Don't worry, and don't feel guilty. You *did* ask me if you were hurting me but *I* told you not to stop. If it's anyone's fault I'm sore now, it's mine but..."

That slow, sexy smile he adored curved her lips and his dick took immediate notice.

She drew the tip of her index finger over his lips. "If you, ya know, still feel guilty later and want to kiss it and make it better, I won't stop you."

A smile spreading on his own face, he leaned in and kissed her, her lips, her neck, her breasts and back up again. He didn't want to stop—especially with Lyndi moving his hand so he petted her hooded clit—but he had to. Much more of this and he'd be trying to slide deep and tight into her body again, but Lyndi needed a bit more recovery time before he invited his cock in for an erotic play date.

Maybe they could play together in some other ways.

"Don't move, Lyn." He peeled off the spent condom and tossed it into the wastebasket beside the bed then changed positions so his head rested by her lower thigh, his own legs stretched out by her head.

"Seth, what are you —"

"Giving you the TLC you wanted."

She pushed up onto her elbows and looked down at him. "I didn't meant right now."

"But I want to right now."

He draped her left leg around his waist and was rewarded with a spectacular spread-eagle view of her red, swollen pussy. And another tattoo. A lily on her inner thigh, plain but dick-hardening sexy.

He traced one of the "leaves" with his fingertips. "Do your parents know about this one?"

"Yeah. Hard to hide this one in a bikini, and seeing as how we live on the beach..."

Smiling, he tapped the leg that wasn't resting across his body. "Bend this knee. Foot flat on the mattress. More. About a ninety degree angle. Perfect. Now rest your knees as wide as you can."

"Seth-"

"Just do it, Lyn. You won't be disappointed. Trust me."

She relaxed against the mattress again, letting her legs fall wide.

Damn! He sent a silent prayer to the Heavens. *Please let her stay like this for the rest of time*.

Her cunt was practically pressing into his face. He kissed the tat on the inside of her thigh, ran his tongue along the crevice where her torso met her leg. She smelled of sex and latex.

Tempted

He couldn't stop himself from taking a taste of her passion. With barely there swipes of his tongue, he drew the muscle's tip along the outer edge of her wide-open slit, working his way to the swollen mound at the apex of her pussy.

She tensed. "Easy, Seth. Everything's still supersensitive down there."

He could imagine. "Tell me if anything I do hurts or is uncomfortable—like you just did. Don't *lie* this time."

"Will do." Laughter floated down her body. "Maybe..."

Shaking his head, he used his thumb and index finger to spread her wide. "Now lie back and relax, okay?"

"With your face all up in my pussy? Yeah, relaxing will be the *last* thing I'll be doing."

Don't count on it, sweetheart.

"Just breathe deeply, Lyn." He pressed a gentle kiss to her core. "And tell me what you normally do to relax."

"Not this."

"Lyn..."

"Okay. Okay." She took a deep breath. Let it out. "To relax, I like to take a canvas to the deck at my parents' house or to the landing near the Redemption Bay Lighthouse and paint representations of anything I see along the water. Anything that catches my attention."

"Good." He kissed her left labia, her right. "Tell me more about this process."

"You're kidding right?"

"Nope." His tongue snaked between her lips, circling her clit.

Her thighs tightened, back arched and she cursed under her breath. But she managed to find the will to continue.

"Well, I never, uh, paint anything the same way twice. Too many v-variables affecting me. Sometimes, the sun's rising. Sometimes, it's s-setting. Sometimes, there's a

storm brewing on the horizon. And sometimes, it's just the, the angle from which I'm viewing the subject. It's all so...freeing. I don't concentrate on making it pretty. Every once and a while, I simply close my eyes and paint whatever I see in my head."

By the time her words fell away, her breath had turned even, her words catching less often. Definitely relaxing—just not enough. "Close your eyes now, sweetheart and paint me a verbal picture of what you're seeing right now."

Her laugh echoed with increasing arousal. His cock filled with need again too. From her words or her smell? Probably both.

"The picture's mostly images and colors," she said, "nothing concrete. Kind of like the lovechild of a Monet and a Picasso. Blurry brushstrokes of abstract images, dissected and reassembled. There are lots and lots of lights too, bright, vivid colors that keep getting brighter and brighter as I get more and more aroused."

Bright lights and sex? Hmm...

Had she always related brightness with sex? Or were these images a recent occurrence because he kept glowing every time he had a damn orgasm?

Her lazy hand found his cock and wrapped around his semi-erection, pumping him in time with the languid laps of his tongue on her intimate flesh. He should tell her to stop, that this little exercise was for her alone.

He didn't.

Her breathing turned ragged again. Her hips moved in rhythm to his mouth. "The light's getting bright now, Seth. Very...very...bright."

Tell me about it.

She stroked him faster, bringing him to the verge of climax too. *Keep your eyes closed,* he willed her, afraid she'd finally see him in full-on lightning-bug mode.

He licked her clit then sucked the bud into his mouth. Her entire body tightened when her orgasm broke.

He exploded too, cum spurting from his cock as she massaged him, the hot seed turning into much-needed lubricant. And all the while, he kept suckling her, slurping at her liquid pleasure until they both crumpled onto the mattress. Laughing and spent.

* * * * *

"Damn, these are good."

Soul-shattering sex with Lyndi followed by decadent blueberry muffins—muffins they ate in bed, both still naked—Seth could get used to this.

"Told ya," Lyndi said, leaning over and shoving the last bite of her muffin into his mouth. "Betty's Bakery makes *the* best blueberry muffins. Their banana nut is good too. Maybe we could pick up some of those for breakfast tomorrow. Or cinnamon buns. Very good *and* very messy. I promise I'll help lick you clean."

His chest hitched and he leaned in and kissed her—it was either that or start crying. She spoke of a future they couldn't have—unless he called Kaia, made whatever deal she wanted.

Just a little quid pro quo.

He didn't know what kind of offer Kaia would make, but it didn't matter. He'd broken Code in a gallant, yet unnecessary, effort to save Lyndi when she was little more than a pretty face.

Now that he loved her, what lengths wouldn't he go to to save her?

Please, Lord. Take me instead.

A sharp twinge seized the muscles between his shoulder blades, as hot and excruciating as Hell's fire.

"Fuck!" He jumped back from Lyndi's arms, flinging his legs over the side of the bed. It felt as if an animal's claws had sunk into his flesh. From the inside.

"Seth?" Lyndi's panicked voice cut into the haze of pain, her palms on his back.
"What happened, sweetheart?"

"My back," he answered through clenched teeth, the throb sending rivulets of pain down his arms. "Cramp between my shoulder blades."

Her hands were on the tender spot in an instant, working the muscles and kneading the knots. He'd known pleasure in this body was intense. Apparently pain was too.

What had caused it?

"Better?" she asked, her voice still concerned.

"Yeah. Thanks." He rolled his shoulders. The pain had gone as quickly as it had come. Weird.

"No problem." She scooted closer, her naked breasts flattening against his back, and wrapped her arms around him. "Does this happen often?"

"No," he answered. "First time."

"Maybe I've been working you too hard. No more sex standing up in sheds for, oh, the next day or so. Got it?"

"Got it." Leave it to Lyndi to turn everything back to sex somehow, and speaking of sex in a shed. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure." She nuzzled the side of his neck, not a single ounce of hesitation in her response—it was quick and fluid and filled with complete trust.

Guilt and awe weighed down his chest. He *would* find a way to save her. He would...

"Last night," he said, "when you thought I'd ran because commitment freaked me out—"

"Yes," she said, responding to his question before he'd asked it. "That's happened to me before."

"Will you tell me about it?"

"It was a dark time in my life, Seth. A really dark time. Even now, it's hard to think about it without feeling the bleak despair that had me in its web."

Seth turned his head and pressed his cheek against hers. "If you don't want to talk about it—"

"It's not that I don't *want* to tell you. It's...just hard for me to even think about that time. Even now."

Seth stayed quiet, giving her the time she needed, whether to find the words she needed to go on or to regain her composure and choose a new subject. The last thing he wanted was to push her to open a door to something so obviously painful, especially considering all the secrets he had from her.

"Several years ago," she whispered, "I was dating this guy named Daryl. He was a fellow artist. We met at one of the art fairs downtown. Ours wasn't love at first sight or anything, but we did have a lot in common. At least where art was concerned." She sighed, as if remembering the good times. "We'd been together for almost two years when I found out I was pregnant.

"I was kind of excited, ya know? I thought he and I were in *that place*, that we were ready to take the next step forward in our relationship. He didn't agree." She laughed to mask her pain, but the hurt and betrayal drenching the sound betrayed her.

Seth's breath caught around his heart. He wanted to turn to her, hold her in his arms, but she held him with such fierce resolve, as if she didn't want a visual audience for her pain. He settled for lacing their fingers together, letting her know he was here for her.

"He didn't want the baby?" Seth asked. How could any man not want a family with Lyndi?

"Worse," she said. "He wanted me to get an abortion, to which I vehemently said there was no way in hell I would hurt my baby. Then he followed up my angry statement with one of his own—it was him or the...the *fetus*. And I chose my baby. I chose Eva." She pressed closer, as if drawing strength from him. "Her name was Eva Nicole. She was born a little over two years ago, on April twenty-second. She was such a beautiful baby."

A tear—maybe two—fell hot on his shoulder and he brought their joined hands to his mouth and kissed the backs of her hand. "What happened to Eva?" he forced himself to ask, already dreading the answer.

"She had a heart defect. The chambers of her heart didn't form correctly during gestation. My doctor spotted the problem doing a routine ultrasound and told me to prepare for the worst. Still, I'd hoped, wished she'd be okay somehow." Her voice hitched "But she died. Two weeks after she was born."

"God, Lyn. I don't...I..."

What the fuck could he say?

"I was diagnosed with a severe case of postpartum depression, and...shit, Seth, I didn't think I was strong enough to make it through the turmoil. For a while, I didn't even want to."

She broke, no longer able to keep her anguish at bay.

Hot tear after hot tear fell on his shoulder. "Come here," he whispered, turning and opening his arms to pull her against his chest.

For a long time, he held her and let her cry. Sweet, beautiful Lyndi, who'd already lost a child, and now, she'd been fated to die—a death *he* was supposed to arrange.

A death that was his fault.

Hasn't she already been through enough? he asked The Divine, The Angels of Death or whomever might be listening in.

His own tears burned hot behind his eyes. No way could he sit back and let the tragic events unfold, not when they were happening to the woman he loved. Especially not when the tragic events had somehow been arranged by demonic forces.

"I'm sorry," Lyndi said, pushing back and brushing tears from her face. "I didn't mean to lay all that on you like that. You must think I'm—"

"One of the strongest women I've ever met." He kissed her nose, meaning every word. "You survived and rebuilt your life after a tragedy. That takes strength, and

Tempted

when I look at you, my love, that's all I see. Strength and bravery. Well that and a kickin' body."

She laughed, and the sight of those beautiful eyes filling with life again behind her tears—he knew he'd said the right thing.

"Oh, Seth, I almost forgot. I made something for you last night. Come here."

She stood from the bed in all her naked beauty and tugged him with her and he followed willingly. They stopped in front of what he guessed was a covered easel.

"I made this last night after I got home," she said. "My nerves wouldn't let me sleep so I started drawing, and this came out."

She pulled away the covering.

Seth almost stopped breathing.

The picture portrayed a creature of darkness skulking in the shadows near a beautiful woman as an angelic being, bright and glowing, hovered above. No, not an angelic being...

Him.

With wings.

He touched the image. A representation for her. For him, this was the reality he'd been seeking for so long. A reality that would never come to fruition if he didn't fulfill his obligations to the Angels of Death.

If he didn't let Lyndi die.

Chapter Seven

"I call it The Guardian."

Lyndi examined man versus drawing. She'd definitely nailed his likeness. The square jaw, the broad shoulders, the lines of that magnificent chest. It was stupid, but Seth looked right with wings. They suited him.

Physically, he made the perfect angel—at least the way *she* pictured angels. None of those chubby-cheeked little cherubs for her. No, sir. Solid men with miles and miles of rippling muscles—and in Seth's case, an impressive package to complement that physique—now *that* was what she thought of when she pictured angels.

"I'm going to put it to canvas as soon as I'm sure the image is what I truly want it to be, and if it's ready in time, I plan to make it a last-minute addition to my *Light and Dark* showing. It'll be pushing it, but I think I can do it. For you." She linked their arms. "This is how I think of you when I look back on how we met. About how you seemed to come out of nowhere, like you'd been there the whole time, watching me to make sure I stayed safe."

"I wasn't there for you," he whispered, his voice so soft she wondered if she'd interpreted the sounds correctly.

"I know you weren't." She kissed his arm. Did he really think she thought he'd been there, invisible to the world, watching and waiting? Surely not. "You were walking, I know that. I didn't mean—"

"That's not what I was talking about." He turned away from her and, with groundeating strides, stalked to the opposite side of the room. Not before she noticed some very dark emotions hardening his features. Pain? Guilt? Sorrow?

Something even darker?

Tempted

"Seth?" She wanted to go to him—she also wanted to give him some space, like he'd given her when she'd told him about Daryl. "What happened? What did I do?"

"You didn't do anything, Lyn. Didn't do anything but fall for a fucking bastard like me."

A bastard like him?

That didn't jive with the Seth Jones she'd made love to. On the contrary, Seth was the furthest person from "bastard" status she knew.

She took two steps closer. Was he referring to some criminal act he'd committed in his guarded past, something that made him think of himself as a bastard? He'd said he was here on vacation but he kept mentioning work he had to do for his boss.

"Talk to me," she implored. "Tell me what's got you so upset. If it's not me then what? *Whatever* you've done, I'll understand. I—"

"You don't want to know, trust me." Eyes clenched shut, back against the wall, he slid to the floor. He looked defeated.

She knelt beside him. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know."

The expression on his face was one of pure conflict.

"Seth, please..." Her heart hammering out a wild rhythm, Lyndi cupped her hands around Seth's cheeks. "Talk. To. Me."

His hands balled into fists. His knuckles turned white. And when he opened his eyes, she almost quit breathing.

Pure self-loathing painted his eyes the most awful shade of brown. "You won't believe me even if I told you."

"Try me."

He shook his head, unshed tears sparkling in his eyes.

"Try me, Seth," she implored. "Talk to me. Please."

"I...I-"

With no warning, he hooked a big palm around the back of her neck and crushed her into a kiss that almost sucked the life out of her. His mouth moved hard against hers. It was as if he were funneling every ounce of passion he possessed into the act, and she held on for all she was worth. She didn't know what secrets fueled his actions and she didn't care. She wanted him to trust her enough, to *love* her enough.

Seth pulled back, tears glistening on the side of his handsome face, voice gravelly when he spoke. "I *swear* to you I'm gonna make this right. I won't let you die, Lyn. I *can't*. I won't."

Die?

Before the shock of his words had time to set in, he continued. "*Promise* me you'll stay in your apartment where it's safe."

"Seth, what—"

"Promise you won't leave and that you especially won't go near a lighthouse."

"What?"

"Promise me! No matter what. Don't. Leave. Your. Studio." His voice was firm, his face hard.

She nodded. She didn't know what else to do. She knew when to stop arguing and this was it.

"Thank you." He kissed her once more then leapt to his feet.

He was halfway to the stairs before she'd so much as moved. "Seth!" she shouted after him, pushing herself onto shaking legs. She needed to stop him and *make* him explain.

I won't let you die, Lyn...

None of this made sense. Was he some kind of dirty cop who'd gotten mixed up with the mob or something? That hardly seemed likely. He was a cop, yes—or had that been a lie?

Or maybe he was deep undercover and his involvement with her had somehow put her in danger? Both of them in danger? He said he hadn't been in the park for *her* and their first night he'd said something about needing to finish some work, even though he was supposedly on vacation.

Had he been at that park to investigate *the creep*, like a stakeout or something? To watch him and hope he led Seth to the "bigger fish". Then she'd showed up and Seth had been forced to reveal himself, putting his life in danger.

Oh, God, what had she done?

"Seth, wait!" Since his clothes still lay scattered on the floor, she grabbed them and the robe she always kept on a hook by the stairwell and sprinted after him.

His voice echoed from the bottom of the stairwell. "I love you, Lyndi."

The door slammed shut.

"I love you too!" She ran faster, fumbling with the tie of her robe as her feet pounded each step in quick succession. Shit, shit, these damn stairs had never seemed so long.

I love you, Lyndi.

When she reached the exit, she ripped the door open and –

"Daryl?"

What the fuck?

Before she let her mind unravel the sudden appearance of her shit-for-brains ex, she bulldozed her way past Daryl and into the tiny parking area behind the building. Seth was nowhere to be seen. Only her little car and what had to be Daryl's phallic-attemptat-male-compensation red convertible sat in the parking lot.

Maybe Seth had walked here? The man did like to walk. In the buff? No way. Still... She had to check.

She ran to the corner of the building. Nothing. As she was running back to the other side, Daryl stepped in front of her. Blond hair, blue eyes and a dick just not big enough

to justify his ego, Daryl Williams was the *last* person she wanted to see right now. Or ever.

"Hey, babe," he drawled. "Don't I at least get a friendly hello?"

Her heart pounded like a crazed gorilla's, but she didn't know if her need to find Seth or her desire to castrate Daryl was the true culprit. "The man that just ran out the door," she began, maybe Daryl could be of use after all, "which way did he go?"

"It's nice to see you too, Lynds."

"The man, Daryl! Which way did he go!" She wished she could strangle the bastard right here. Trying to converse with Daryl was like talking to a brick wall—only the brick wall was smarter and less annoying.

If she killed him, she'd go to prison and then she'd never be able to find Seth.

What if she just maimed him?

"There was no man," Daryl said.

"What? He must have come outside at the same time you walked to the door. I opened the damn thing before you even knocked!"

"I didn't see a man. There was a door and then there was you coming through it. Nothing more. Nothing less. Now, what do you say we try this again?" He held his arms out toward her. "Hello, Lyndi. It's nice to see you again."

She closed her eyes. He wouldn't help her. How stupid of her to even consider the notion.

She slapped away his outstretched arms. "Did you get a fucking brainectomy since I saw you last? What on *Earth* would ever make you think I'd ever fucking touch you again? You're a piece of dog shit that, despite evolutionary hurdles, somehow managed to learn to walk and talk!"

"So a hello kiss is out of the question too, huh?"

Red flashed behind her eyes. *Murder equals life in prison*, she repeated over and over in her head.

She squeezed her fingers tightly around the clothes she still held and pretended the cloth was Daryl's fucking neck. How dare he show up after all this time and act like he hadn't done far worse than break her heart? And today of all days!

"Kiss?" She let her anger turn her words into verbal bullets. "You want a *kiss*? Okay. How about you kiss my mother-fucking ass!"

Daryl laughed. "My, my. I hope you don't kiss our baby with that mouth."

She sucked in a ragged breath. He didn't just fucking go there without even knowing...

"Fuck you, Daryl! Just fuck. You."

"If that was an invitation, I accept." He looked her up and down, lust in his eyes.

She suddenly felt underdressed with only a thin layer of satin between them. She clutched Seth's clothes over her chest.

Maybe if she asked the asshole flat-out what he wanted, he'd fucking leave her alone. And never come the fuck back.

She took a deep breath to steady her voice. "What do you want, Daryl?"

"I missed you, baby. Is that wrong?"

Lyndi resisted the temptation to punch him. "You didn't answer my question. What. Do. You. Want? And don't call me baby again unless you want your testicles ripped out through your nose."

He laughed. "Okay. What I want is you. I thought I'd made that obvious when I said I missed you."

"Unbelievable! You lost the right to *want me* when you walked out on me and our baby. And now, I'm with someone else. So go jump off a lighthouse or something. There's a nice one in Redemption Harbor Bay. Really tall. Your brains would make a lovely contrast against the sea-washed rocks below."

He smiled at her, cocked his head to the side, looking totally unfazed. "Okay, so I can see we have a little ways to go before we're jumping into the sack again. Can I at least see our baby? I don't even know if it's a he or a she."

Pain chiseled at the wall she'd constructed to hold all the misery and blackness that had invaded her after Eva's death. Reliving the memories had been hard enough when Seth's protective arms were wrapped around her. She sure as hell didn't want to go through that anguish again, not with Daryl for comfort. Daryl who thought "comfort" came in the form of a blowjob or a good shagging.

He had a right to know, though, even if he'd walked out.

She stood straight, shoulders back. "Our daughter died," she said with as little emotion as possible. "Two weeks after she was born. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to—"

"Died. Really? Shit."

Breathe, Lynds. Don't let him see you cry.

"Yes, Daryl. She had a heart defect."

He nodded. "Guess you didn't want the kid as much as you claimed. What did you do, Lynds? Will the child to death with your anger for me? Or maybe you considered aborting it after I left. The kid *knew* how much its own mother didn't want it and it broke its heart so it never formed right. Ya know, that's pretty cold."

"How *dare* you! I *wanted* Eva more than you'd ever know. I was devastated when I lost her. I *loved* her. Don't you *dare* imply I didn't."

Her fierce outburst didn't stop his hurtful vomit. "Or maybe you went on a fuck-athon to ease your loneliness. Too many dicks for your womb to handle...baby?"

"You bastard."

Remorse and self-accusation closed in on her heart like the approaching night, steady and unstoppable, pulling her back toward the bottomless void she'd fallen into after Eva died.

A darkness that had nearly claimed her life once.

* * * * *

Fists pumping, Seth weaved through the tombstones at one of Redemption Harbor's many cemeteries, waiting for Kaia. Waiting didn't usually bother Seth, but when Lyndi's life hung in the balance, all bets were off.

Kaia – more likely her boss – wanted something only Seth could deliver and they'd used Lyndi to make sure he complied. More like *bent* him to their will. No fucking way it was coincidence that the day after he'd had his first and only intimate relationship with a human, the same human had appeared on *his* death list.

But why? And to what end? What did the demonic faction want that *only* Seth could provide?

With a poof of cool air, Kaia materialized in front of him. Behind her, the wings of a sculpted angel headstone stretched out as if they extended from Kaia herself—ironic considering Kaia was anything but angelic these days.

Seth tried to picture his former lover as the young angel he'd fallen in love with all those millennia ago. A sweet Virtue with the stars in her eyes.

But he couldn't. He'd seen her as nothing more than an evil, callous bitch for far too long.

"I knew you'd call." Kaia fisted her hands on her man-eater hips, acting like the innocent woman she *wasn't*. "I keep hoping you'll call for something that's not work related, but no matter the reason for the visit, it is nice to see you again, lover."

Seth's jaw clenched. He took a deep breath. "Stop it, Kaia. We both know why I called you here."

"Yes, yes. To save your human."

His human?

Seth got right up in Kaia's face. "Her name is Lyndi Garrison, and she's a person. Not a damn possession."

Kaia laughed. "Wow. You're more gone than I thought. When did you start seeing these pathetic mortals as anything more than a means to an end?"

"A better question," Seth countered, "when did you *start* seeing them as only a means to an end? You used to be a Virtue. You *inspired* people. Now you prey on them."

She placed her hand on her heart. "Ouch. You wound me, Seth."

Yeah, right. Besides "wound" was such a watered-down version of any of the multitude of things he wanted to do to her. "Come on, Kaia, let's drop all the bullshit and get down to business. What does your boss want from me?"

"Get down to business?" She squeezed her breasts through her skintight corset. "I thought you'd never ask."

He let her innuendo pass. The sooner he found out what Kaia wanted, the sooner he could do whatever dark deed that would save Lyndi's life.

Kaia laughed, looking at him the same way a human might look at a piece of rotting meat.

"You're thinking of her right now, aren't you?" Kaia asked.

Of course, I am bitch. I love her.

"We both know your side somehow managed to get Lyndi's name on my death list," Seth said. "I'm not sure how you did it, but I will find out. And—"

"And by the time you figure everything out, our plan will be finished." She sauntered closer. "Look, Seth, babe. The way I see it, you have one opportunity to save your human. Work with us."

The idea of helping Kaia—for *any* reason—left a bad taste in his soul. But if Lyndi died for no other reason than she'd had the misfortune of getting too close to him? His soul would never recover.

"Or maybe," he said, "I could get really industrious today and slaughter every demon on your side before—"

Tempted

"My side?" She pointed a manicured finger in his direction. "It's your side too, and you'd be better off if you remembered that every once in a while and start doing what you fucking fell to do. Live your life by your own rules."

He spoke right over her. "I didn't fall so I could live by my own rules. I fell because I was trying to protect—"

He cut his words off at the neck and changed the subject back to saving Lyndi.

"What do you want from me, Kaia? What is it you need done that your boss's army of minions can't do?"

"It's simple. We need someone to stop breathing."

"As in dead?"

"Very dead, yes." She conjured a piece of paper then handed it to him. No, not paper. A photo of a man, mid-forties, glasses, balding, white lab coat.

"If you want someone dead," Seth said, staring at the picture, "take it up with one of the Angels of Death. I only arrange deaths on their orders."

"Even when that life is your human's?"

Not a chance in hell. "Only if it's required of me," he lied, praying he'd managed to keep his voice steady and believable. As the situation stood, he feared he might wipe out the entire northeastern seaboard if the act would keep Lyndi alive and in his arms another day.

"And if I propose a plan that might spare her?" Kaia asked.

"Might?"

"Would," she amended. "Would spare her."

Hope pounded in his chest, but not hard enough to drive out all the apprehension and fear. Making a deal with the devil's messenger was the same as making a deal with the devil himself. Seth had to play this carefully.

"I'm listening," he said.

"Well, as you know, we demons can't kill, an unfortunate byproduct of our banishment. We are sowers of discord, strife, evil. You know the deal. We don't possess the kind of power required to challenge The Divine outright, and trust me, He'd consider *this* a challenge worthy of retribution."

The "little *quid pro quo*" she'd mentioned earlier sounded worse and worse with every word she spoke.

"Again I ask. Why me? Can't you just, ya know, demonic-mind-game him to death?"

"Normally, yes. Our standard approach. But in this case..." She pointed at the photo. "We're running out of time. Not to mention, his damned Guardians have thwarted all our attempts."

Guardians. Plural.

A red flag went up in the back of his mind. Only the most valuable individuals received even one personal Guardian. He'd know, he used to be a Guardian.

To have more than one, he must be very special indeed. Only something on the scale of a major revelation for all mankind would constitute *that* kind of protection.

How was Seth supposed to kill someone who might usher in the next phase of mankind's existence?

Was his happiness – Lyndi's life – worth that kind of sacrifice?

Shit.

Shit!

"You," Kaia continued, "since you work for the Angels of Death, have the blessed ability to actually *take* lives, and—wait for it—your boss's visions trump a Guardian's ability to protect. You know that. The little do-gooders won't even see you coming."

This deal wasn't looking good in the keep-Lyndi-alive arena. "Who exactly is this guy? And why is he on your boss's hit list?"

"His name is John Campbell. And why? Because we want him dead. Simple as that."

Simple? There was that fucking word again!

Seth swallowed the bile building in the back of his throat. "I'm going to need to know more if I'm going to—"

"What you *need* to know," Kaia interrupted, "is that your worthless human trash will die by midnight if you refuse to accept our offer. But if you accept, we will help right the accidental inclusion of her name to your list."

"And why should I trust you'll follow through with your side of the bargain? You are, after all, a demon."

Her smile was pure evil—just like her. "Because it's me, baby."

Not very reassuring. "And what happens to me?"

She shrugged.

Yep. Figured. Once he did this, his chances of ever returning home were nil—if *that* good. If he didn't, Lyndi died. And what was infinity in paradise if he couldn't spend every moment with the woman he loved?

"I'll have to think about it," he said.

Kaia shook her head. "The clock is already ticking, Seth."

"I know." He thrust his fingers through his hair. "I have until midnight to—"

"Oh, no. Midnight is cutting it way to close for us. You have until Lyndi gives in to all the glorious anguish she's feeling. Tick-tock..."

If possible, her smiled dropped a hundred feet below the "simply evil" threshold. Oh, no...

In an instant, fear took over.

Gives in to all the glorious anguish.

What had Kaia done to Lyndi—was doing to her? Demons might not be able to kill outright, but they could convince a petty thug to ransack Lyn's studio because she "had a stash of speed" somewhere. They could incite a lust so great in a man he'd rape Lyndi without a second thought. Put ideas in her head or disguise themselves as people she knew in order to prey on her vulnerabilities, push her until she took her own life.

One of their previous conversations came rushing back. She'd been suicidal after she'd lost her baby. She hadn't told him that in so many words, but he'd read between the lines.

I didn't think I was strong enough to make it through the turmoil. For a while, I didn't even want to...

A demon could grab onto any lingering traces of the hopelessness, magnify them until the pain was even more raw and devastating than it had been before.

Seth rushed Kaia and clamped his hands around her throat. "What did you do to Lyndi?"

"I haven't laid a finger on her," she assured, "but I can't speak for any of my coworkers. Demons will be demons."

"You bitch!" He shook her, his rage spiking. "You black-hearted, soulless bitch! I swear to The Divine if you hurt her I'll—"

"Shit, I really like it when you're angry." She flashed him that wicked, flirtatious smile he hated. "Your anger makes you powerful. Strong. Mmm, fuck, it's such a turnon." She grabbed his cock through his pants. "Forget about your human whore and let me remind you what true pleasure feels like. Together, we could be an unstoppable force for our people."

He ignored her words and her unwanted touch. "I should kill you now."

"I'd prefer you fuck me instead. Just like old times. In *these* bodies. Feel the lure of human flesh."

"Not a chance in Hell."

Tempted

Her appearance shimmered and shifted and Seth found himself looking into a face almost identical to Lyndi's. Almost. Except for Kaia's evil eyes.

"Is this better?" she asked. Even her voice sounded like Lyndi's. "Is this what a demon has to do to get a little fuck time with you?"

Chapter Eight

Lyndi stumbled into her studio, Daryl's words echoing in her mind.

What did you do, Lynds? Will the child to death with your anger for me?

She pressed the heels of her hands against her temples. While she *had* thought those terrible things while lost in the black void of Eva's death, Eva's death wasn't her fault. The defect had been a fluke, and nothing she did or didn't do had caused it. She understood that now, no matter what Daryl implied. She'd loved her daughter and she'd almost died inside when she'd lost her.

How many days and nights had she spent lost in her black misery? So lost, she'd feared she only had one way out.

"No," she whispered, refusing to think about what she'd almost done to escape her grief.

You should have killed yourself for what you did to Eva. It's your fault she's dead.

The voice sounded in her head, loud and solid, her thoughts but...somehow not.

Eva's death is your fault. Haven't you figured that out yet?

Lyndi shook her head. She needed to paint. Now. To bleed these emotions onto canvas before—

You're a virus to everyone you love. Why do you think they leave you? Daryl. Eva. And now Seth.

She put her hands over her ears. But how did she stop the taunting when the voice she wanted to silence was her own?

Shit. Shit. Shit! She was losing her mind.

The main space of her studio had already been set up for her art show, so she headed straight to her "storage room". In the corner of the dimly lit room, an always-

ready-and-waiting canvas called to her —set up in case of emergency inspiration or, in this case, emergency emotion sloughing.

She grabbed her palette, several jars of dark paint—*dark* fit her mood at the moment—and started painting. No object in mind.

Only release.

Creation consumed her mind, her body and everything disappeared. She imagined her paintbrush was a conduit for her emotions. Her world became a bubble—nothing could touch her in the bubble's protection. Not her pain over Eva's death. Not her uncertainty over Seth. Not even the taunting voices.

As long as she stayed here, she was safe.

Lyndi didn't know how long she'd been working when the incessant ringing of a phone in the distance threatened her sanctuary. She tried to ignore the interruption—the studio was closed until Monday. Whoever was calling could phone back then.

The ringing continued and continued and continued...

Lyndi slammed her brush and palette on the squat paint table. Why the *fuck* wasn't the voicemail taking the call?

Fuck!

She'd go unplug the phone and come back to her bubble.

What if it's Seth calling? The soft voice compelled her to answer.

Yes, what if Seth was calling to tell her where he was, that he loved her? Yes, she had to answer.

She plucked the cordless receiver from its base. "Garrison Art Studio."

"Lyn, babe, I'm glad I caught you," the high-pitched male voice said as an introduction.

Garrett Wilson? Weren't he and his partner supposed to be in Miami until tomorrow night? Why would her publicist be calling her on his vacation?

"I've got some upsetting news about your show next week, hon. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but..."

Oh, no. Please don't say it.

"I just talked to Mr. McMillan. And he's pulling his funding."

"What!"

Lance McMillan was the owner of McMillan Fine Arts and Imports. More importantly, he was providing the funding for her show. At least he had been.

Lyndi had met his wife late last year and they'd struck up an immediate friendship. One thing had led to another, and *voila*! Lance McMillan was offering to back her first art show.

The protective shield around her failed, and with the rushing current of a devastating vortex, pulling everything toward it, the voices were back.

McMillan finally realized you're lame...just like your so-called art. You call yourself an artist. Ha! Your work is feeble, at best.

No, she was a good artist. Her artistry had provided her with a good living. Not grandiose, but good. She lived doing what she loved. She had a good life.

"He can't back out now, Garrett. I've already booked the caterers, ordered the food and drinks, hired the event staff—"

"I know, Lyn, and I'm sorry." He didn't sound fucking sorry. "You'll have to bring that up with McMillan."

With that, he was gone. And so were her dreams of ever making it big in the art world.

Like this is the reason you won't make it big. Are you forgetting the tiny detail that you have no talent?

"Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!" Lyndi flung the cordless phone across the room, setting it on a collision course with the leg of the tripod nearest her. The one that held her favorite painting.

Tempted

The Angels of Death.

The work portrayed a gray, circular room where beings of light and dark came together in a neutral arena. The "light" creatures stood on the right side, with their "dark" counterparts on the opposite, and three beings stood in the center—the morally neutral Angels of Death.

The image had come to her in a dream after Eva's death, when Lyndi had been thinking about joining her daughter in death.

You should have killed yourself then and saved those you loved from having to be disappointed by just how pitiful you are.

"No!" she screamed, moving toward the painting, but it was too late.

As if the scene were unfolding in slow motion, Lyndi watched helplessly as the frame struck the painted concrete floor with a deafening snap. And cracked.

The destruction didn't stop there. Like one domino tile knocking into a line of other waiting pieces, the falling tripod stand knocked into the stand next to it, which knocked into the next stand.

Within a span of ten seconds, four pieces were ruined.

Ruined.

The voices laughed at her. You killed them. Just like you killed Eva.

"No."

 $\gamma_{es...}$

Lyndi dropped to her knees, tears scalding her cheeks. Four precious pieces of art demolished. Because of her. In a moment of sheer anger, she'd killed them. Oh, God. She *was* a destructive force. She didn't deserve to draw breath—

She shook her head. She wouldn't go down that path again. She wouldn't.

Damn the voices!

Damn everything!

She screamed into the empty room.

She plucked the wounded phone from the floor where it had come to rest, praying it still worked. The back was gone, the battery hung free, but—thank you, thank you, Jesus!—it still had a dial tone.

With shaking fingers, she punched in seven familiar numbers and her big sis answered after the second ring.

"Mari. Oh, Mari! Thank God."

"Lynds? What's wrong? Did something happen with Seth? I know how upset you were last night."

The voices cut in and Lyndi couldn't hear the rest of Mari's words. *She only pretends* to care because she's jealous and she wants to sabotage your chance at happiness. That way, you'll stay miserable like her.

"You're wrong," Lyndi countered. "She wouldn't do that to me."

"Lynds." Concern drenched Mari's voice. "What are you talking about? Is there someone else there with you? Seth?"

"No, I'm alone," Lyndi said, cutting off the voices in her head.

God, what was happening to her?

"Mari, could you come over for a little bit? I..." How did she phrase this question without sounding like a lunatic? "I'm not feeling well. I'm afraid—fuck, Mari, I think I'm losing my goddamned mind! Daryl just showed up and started asking to see Eva because, fuck...he didn't even know, Mari! Then Garrett called to tell me McMillan pulled his funding. I've destroyed half my gallery and I can't stop thinking about Eva. I'm afraid I might try something again—"

"I'm on my way, sweetie," Mari interrupted. "I'll be there as quick as I can. Do you...?"

Mari paused, but Lyndi knew what her sister was afraid to ask.

"Yes, I still have the pills," Lyndi murmured. "I'd forgotten about them until—" *Take them.* The voice was back. *End. Your. Pain.*

Tempted

"I won't take them." Lyndi shook her head, telling the voices, telling her sister.

Yes...you will. You're pathetic. You won't be able to keep from taking your life this -

"Flush them now," Mari interrupted. "Okay? While you're still on the phone with me."

Take them now.

Fuck, it was too much!

Lyndi dropped the phone and ran.

She didn't run toward the bathroom upstairs, where the pills sat on a shelf in the back of her medicine cabinet. She ran for her car. She needed to get out of here now. She couldn't wait for Mari.

She needed to go to the harbor.

* * * * *

This wasn't what Seth had expected.

The clattering clack of keyboard keys and the low *hum* of working machines tickled his ears. Dozens of people in white lab coats moved about the room and millions of dollars worth of high-tech machines—automated analyzers, spinning centrifuges—hummed as they worked.

His new target worked in a research lab?

The knowledge begged one really big question. What was the man researching?

Seth couldn't carry out this personal mission until he'd figured out how this scientist's particular puzzle piece fit into the greater picture of mankind's existence. Okay, technically he didn't need to know the answer in order to arrange the man's death—lab accident, tumble down the stairs—but the Guardian in him *did*. Especially given the fact the target had not one but *two* Guardians bracketing him.

The two angels, one male and one female, couldn't sense Seth while he was cloaked in Angel of Death's camouflage—one point in his favor, minus one for his target. They

stood with their backs to Seth, giving him a spectacular view of their massive white wings, shimmering with the light of the angelic. The soft radiance that burned inside all angels, the outer reflection of their inward love and devotion to The Divine and to those they protected, lit their spirits.

All the fallen had lost their radiance when they'd been banished—Seth was no exception. After his banishment, he'd been broken, conflicted, angry. At The Divine, at Kaia, at the Dark One for starting the damn war in the first place, but mostly, at himself. That sour darkness in his soul had overpowered the light.

Something Lyndi had said to him the night they met came roaring back to him.

We all have to fight everyday to keep the lightness in our souls greater than the darkness, lest the darkness overtake us.

She hadn't known how true that statement was.

That old familiar pang of sadness thudded to life in his chest. A few days ago he would have done anything to get his wings back. Now? That dream was nothing compared to his burning desire to make sure Lyndi stayed safe and breathing.

His target studied a computer screen. Seth couldn't make out what occupied the monitor, so he moved closer. Graphs and charts about neutralizing antibodies' responses, detailed B cell—

Fuck.

AIDS vaccine research? Was it possible that sometime during this man's lifetime—this gangly, bottle-eyed-glasses scientist—he'd make a major breakthrough in the quest for an HIV/AIDS vaccine?

Everything made sense now. Why Campbell had two Guardians—and great, Seth was back to referring to Campbell by his name—and why the demons wanted him dead.

Worldwide, about five-thousand people died daily from the virus. If Campbell was on the verge of stomping out—or stumbling onto one of the key components that would help someone else stomp out—one of the biggest natural killers on the planet, that

would explain why he was heavily guarded and why the demonic forces wanted him taken out.

Seth's heart broke. Campbell was too important to humanity to kill.

Acknowledging the man's importance got in the way of what Seth needed to do for Lyndi, for them, for their future. But how was he supposed to go through with the murder, knowing how many people would be doomed because of his selfish act?

On the flip side, how was Seth supposed to live with himself knowing the breakthrough of the century cost Lyndi her life?

He closed his eyes. He didn't want to let Lyndi die, but he wouldn't doom the world either. There *had* to be another way.

The damn demons had him by the balls. The bastards and their well-thought-out plans. They could have attempted to torture Lyndi to death without her name ever getting put on the Death List. Oh, it'd wind up there, when they pushed her hard enough. By making sure she was put there *now*, it forced Seth to act with haste. Make him act before his heart caught up with his conscience.

If he could figure out how Kaia's boss had managed to fool an Angel of Death, then surely Lyndi's name would be deleted from the Death List. Surely! But he'd have to act fast. Every minute Lyndi was alone with Kaia or one of her coworkers put her one step nearer Redemption Harbor Bay and the lighthouse where she would commit suicide.

As much as it pained him, he couldn't stop to protect her from the demonic mind games now. His biggest priority had to be removing Lyndi's name from the list. If not, she'd be assigned to someone else's list and Seth would be stripped of his Angel of Death powers, which meant he'd lose the ability to help her altogether.

That, he couldn't let happen.

He'd have to push and prod and most likely break every law in the Death Code to get to the truth. If his quest cost him his chance to return to Heaven? So be it.

Seth pressed his hand to his heart. He'd finally found something greater than his pursuit for heaven. The pursuit to save the woman he loved.

The pursuit for love itself.

"Please let me find a way to help her," he murmured under his breath, truly praying to The Divine for the first time in longer than he could count. "Please. I don't care what it costs me. Just don't let her die because of me. She's innocent."

The female Guardian moved, drawing Seth's gaze. She turned her face upward, her eyes closed. She was receiving instructions from above.

Maybe The Divine was onto him and the plot The Dark One had contrived with Kaia's help.

To be on the safe side, he should transport to safety. The fallen should *always* flee when He was pissed, at least if they valued their pitiful existence. But Seth was no ordinary fallen. Besides, the angel's beauty transfixed him.

Her flowing, blonde hair and glowing skin shimmered even brighter while in communication with The Divine. A look of pure peace.

She turned her angelic face on him.

Fear exploded in Seth's chest. How could the angel see him when he was cloaked?

She hovered toward him, hand extended, face neutral. "Come with me. *He* would like a word with you."

Chapter Nine

Seth stood alone in the center of the *Solium*, The Divine's Inner Sanctum. Being in the *Solium* was like being in the middle of nothing. Shimmering whiteness stretched indefinitely in all directions. No chairs, no throne. Nothing.

Seth had never been here. Even as an angel. Fuck, this couldn't be good.

To his knowledge, the last angel summoned had been Leviathan. The Divine had brought The Dark One here to pronounce judgment on him and his minion of the damned.

For the life of him, Seth couldn't figure out why *he'd* been called now. Couldn't be because of Kaia's plan—he hadn't gone through with it. The Divine would know that. Besides, if He wanted Seth dead, Seth would be dead. There'd be no reason to summon him.

Was it because of Lyndi? Seth had shown himself without Order, not to *one* human but to an entire family. The normal punishment would be banishment, but since he was already banished...

Soft, multi-harmonic tones flittered through the *Solium*. He'd never heard, never seen anything more beautiful in his life. Melodic strains that sizzled and crackled the air, creating sparks of lines and colors that echoed the rise and fall of the mysterious music. It almost looked like the electric colors flittered back and forth through the dimensions.

The tune grew louder. No, not just sound. Singing. The choir was unlike any other he'd ever heard. Like a chorus of hissing serpents—odd yet beautiful—with a roaring fire as accompaniment.

Oh fuck! The Seraphims!

Seth dropped to his knees and his face got very intimate with the floor. The Seraphims were the highest class of angels, the angels closest to The Divine. Each one had six wings and four faces. They were the caretakers of the throne room and they emitted a fiery glow so fierce no being could look upon them. They remained in eternal song to The Divine, their melody portraying their love and devotion. Most importantly, they were *always* in The Divine's presence which meant...

He was here.

Awe and fear swirled in Seth's spiritual body. For a Fallen to be in The Divine's presence... This can't have ever happened before.

Arise, my child. The Divine's voice projected into Seth's mind. The words filled him with the softest, purest tranquility he'd ever known and Seth hesitated before pushing to his feet.

The Seraphims stood around him like sentries, two of their six wings covering the intense fire of their being. But as far as Seth could tell, no one else occupied the room. There was only a dense blanket of fog that had filled the space, slinking around as if it were sentient.

Realization struck. The mist was The Divine.

"My Lord." Seth dropped to his knees again, his mind not quite wrapping around what was happening. "I am Your humble servant. All that I am is Yours."

The mist swirled around him, like the caress of an invisible lover. I have watched you over the years. You are a castdown, but you chose not to be like the rest. I am proud of you for that, my son.

Guilt stabbed him in the gut. "I'm not worthy of—"

I love all my children, regardless of their pasts. For no one is perfect, Seth. And my love for you has remained steadfast throughout the centuries. Even after you revealed yourself to Lyndi Garrison and her family, for you acted out of a desire to save her life, which proves to me the Guardian in you is still strong and thriving.

And you stayed with her because you desired companionship, something you lost because of your choice to distance yourself from the rest of the castdowns. And it was your love for this human, your desire to save her but not at the cost of humanity's future, that has called my attention to a terrible injustice that has befallen my people.

"Injustice, my Lord?"

Yes. You see, Triam has just aligned himself with Leviathan.

Holy fucking shit! His boss, a fucking Angel of Death, had aligned himself with The Dark One?

It all made sense now. The demons didn't trick an Angel of Death. They fucking *recruited* one. Son of a whore.

The Divine's laughter filled Seth's spirit. *I see Lyndi's vocabulary is rubbing off on you.*

Seth bit his bottom lip and bowed deeper. "Forgive me, my Lord."

As we speak, an army of Thrones stands in Mourez. Triam will be brought before me and stripped of his Angel of Death powers, a job I'd like to give to you. If you'd accept?

Seth looked up, his heart thundering, and pressed his hand to his chest. The Divine wanted him? A fallen angel? "You'd give me my wings back?"

I will give you the powers, yes, but my son, the only person keeping you from getting your wings back is you.

Seth shook his head, confusion gnawing on every molecule in his body. "I, uh, don't understand."

You will, my son. Soon. But now, you must go. Lyndi needs you. Kaia is not happy at how things have transpired.

* * * * *

Lyndi stared down from the tallest lighthouse in Redemption Harbor Bay. The jagged rocks jutting from the water's surface seemed as inviting as the waves slapping against the shore or the salty breeze tickling her skin and fluttering the silk material of

her robe. So inviting she considered taking the express route down and ending the madness swirling inside her head.

You're a complete failure in everything you do. Art. Family. Relationships...

She closed her eyes to block out the voices. Why wouldn't they let her be?

You're nothing. You're a pathetic screw-up.

Yes, she *was* a screw-up. She'd messed up everything with Seth—that was why he'd left her. She was such an idiot. A guy as Greek-god sexy and sensitive, nearly perfect in every way. No way he would ever settle for someone like her. Who was she fooling?

He'd taken her body when it suited him. Her heart? He didn't want that. Daryl hadn't either. Or any of the men who came before him.

Eva hadn't wanted her either.

You should do everyone a favor and end your life before you hurt someone else. Just step over the railing and end all the pain.

She shook her head. Damn those voices! Damn their mocking! She couldn't fucking think straight.

But somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew the voices were right. Everyone *would* be better off without her. Especially her family.

If she hadn't been such a pain in the ass as a child, rebellious and wild, her dad would never have started drinking in the first place, let alone develop his drinking problem.

Mari...sweet, sweet Mari. She'd still be married if Lyndi hadn't made it her mission in life to prove what a cheating bastard Paul was. Fuck, she'd probably driven Paul straight into the arms of other women with her constant nagging. She'd *made* him a cheater.

And Traci...poor Traci. Lyndi had forced Traci to marry a man who, for years, had taken her away from her family just to get away from Lyndi's destructive presence.

Tempted

Yes, that's right. Every bit of their despair was... All. Your. Fault. If anyone deserves to be lying lifeless on those rocks below, bleeding, the very life draining from their body it's you. It's time. End it now.

Lyndi closed her eyes and climbed over the railing, the metal cool against her legs. Her back to the barrier, she barely had enough room to stand. The ocean wind seemed greater now, more fierce, like one good gust would send her flying.

Do it.

Lyndi took a deep breath. But she didn't want to die.

Her thought processes blurred, went askew. She closed her eyes. How did she get here anyway? The day's events all seemed fuzzy, as if she'd indulged in lots *and lots* of booze. But slowly, flashes of clarity illuminated previous events. Images without context.

Incredible sex.

Seth's mood change.

I love you, Lyn.

Daryl's arrival.

I won't let you die.

She wished she could remember how all the damn events connected!

A blast of cool air swirled behind her, followed by a deep male voice. "Lyn, sweetheart, you don't want to do this."

Seth was here?

She blinked, started to turn toward him, but the voice in her mind shouted at her, angrier and louder than before.

You'll just hurt him! Send him away. Send him away and jump!

"I can't, Seth," she whispered, fearing the voices were right. She didn't want to cause Seth pain. "I'll just hurt you."

"You'll hurt me more if you don't turn around." His voice sounded closer, as if he stood right behind her. "I know this is going to sound strange, love, but the thoughts you're having right now are not your own."

"What?" Confusion penetrated the darkness shrouding her brain. Not her voice? "I d-don't understand."

"I'll explain everything, but first I need you to step back over the railing. Can you do that? For me. For us."

"Us?" She blinked against despair's thick fog. "You left me."

"I left your apartment, Lyn. I didn't leave *you*. I had something to take care of, remember? I always planned on coming back. I've fallen for you, Lyndi Garrison. Why would I ever leave the woman I love?"

The woman he loved?

Surely she'd misunderstood him. "You love me?"

"With all my heart."

He's lying to you, the voice said. He's lying!

Seth's fingers traced the outside of her upper arm. "You're irresistible, strong, loving. I could go on and on, Lyn, but I'd rather *show* you how I feel. All you have to do is come back to me."

Was it possible she'd misunderstood his departure? That he did, in fact love her?

She wished she could remember!

Seth's long fingers tightened around her wrist. "Come back to me, Lyn. Please..."

She nodded and started to turn toward him, but when she came face to face with her lover, she froze.

Seth was...was glowing? Softly, as if he were lit from behind by the setting sun—only the sun was setting *behind* her.

The hue was so soft, so subtle she almost dismissed it.

Almost.

Tempted

Shock forced her to take a step back.

Her foot hit open air.

Chapter Ten

Seth couldn't hold her much longer. Hunched over, arms outstretched, the metal rail of the gallery walk crushed against his underarms, but he held tight to Lyndi's wrist.

Her legs thrashed with a terror reflecting the fear squeezing the breath from his body. With each kick, his hand-to-arm contact faltered and the woman he loved came closer and closer to her own demise.

"Lyndi!" he shouted over her sounds of panic. He should have grabbed her and pulled her over when he had the chance, but he'd wanted to break the demonic hold on her slowly.

Damn Kaia and her demonic mind games. If he ever saw her again, he'd make sure she regretted fucking with Lyndi.

"Stop kicking, Lyn. I'm losing you, baby. Lyn. Lyn! Can you hear me?"

"Yes," she called back, her voice sounding weak and faraway in the wake of her terrified cries.

"Good. Now I need you to listen to me, sweetheart. I need you to give me your other hand so I can pull you up. Do you understand?" This would be much easier if he could just teleport her to the safety of the terrace. Or if he had his wings. "Lyn. *Lyn!* Look. At. Me."

She lifted her head and locked her eyes with his, and miracle of miracles, her entire body stilled. Sheer trepidation painted her blue eyes a dark, un-Lyndi-like shade.

"Are you listening, Lyn?"

She nodded.

"Say the words. Say, I'm listening."

Tempted

"Listening."

Close enough. "On the count of three, I'm going to let go of you with my left hand. At the *exact* same moment, you need to grab hold of it, okay? We're only gonna get one shot at this."

"Got it," she repeated, her voice quivering.

"Okay. On three. Ready?"

She raised her other arm high, as close to his hands as she could.

"One."

The vise grip around his chest tightened even more. He couldn't lose her. Not now. His pulse pounded fast and rampant through his ears. He said the next number louder.

"Two."

If this didn't work, he would go over with her and try his damndest to somehow get his body underneath hers, shield her from the rocks below. Maybe his immortal physiology would save him—maybe it wouldn't. But it didn't matter. He'd willingly sacrifice himself to save Lyndi.

A stabbing pain seized the muscles between his shoulder blades, much like it had earlier today, but ten times worse. He fought back the throbbing distraction and shouted.

"Three!"

He released Lyndi's wrist, opening his fingers and – praise The Divine! – grabbed hold of her free hand without fumbling.

Thank you, thank you, thank you!

"Now, when I start to pull you up," he instructed, "use your feet to climb the wall, okay?"

She nodded.

He took a deep breath. "Climb, Lyn! Climb!" He heaved her with all the upper body strength he had, which didn't feel like a whole hell of a lot considering his position. "Come on. Come on. You're almost—"

Her foot slipped.

The sudden loss of position sent her skidding back down the side of the lighthouse with so much force *his* feet lifted from the platform, and he nearly went up and over the railing. A smaller man would have.

Somehow, he managed to keep his grip on Lyndi firm. "Okay, Lyn, let's try—"

"No."

He ignored her words. "I need you to—"

"Let...me go, S-Seth." Her eyes locked onto his. "Don't want...to take...you with me."

He shook his head without hesitation. "Not a chance in Heaven or Hell of *that* happening. I love you too damn much to let you go. If you go, I'm going too."

A second surge of ripping pain erupted between his shoulders—even greater than before. Jets of fire shot down his arms, his back, his legs, as if his entire body was on fire—but on the inside and the flames were trying to find an escape route.

Love and sheer determination forced his grip to stay firm and his own cries of agony to stay lodged in his throat.

"Seth...please."

"No, damn it," he gasped, the inferno growing hotter. "Now climb!"

He didn't give her a chance to object. He pulled her with everything he had left. If she didn't help, they'd both go over and he was willing to bet his entire existence she'd fight to keep *him* from dying too.

He'd bet correctly.

And Lyndi climbed.

With each baby step, she moved closer to him, farther away from the rocky death below. The chaos in his own body kept growing, as if muscles and tendons were being burned and ripped apart.

The pain was inconsequential. Lyndi was almost safe. Almost in his arms again.

Her head broke the plane of the walk and Seth jammed her hand against the railing. "Hold tight to this."

She did, wrapping her shaking fingers around the metal.

"Now hook your leg over the side of the ledge," he shouted. "Just beneath the rail and hold yourself steady while I reposition my grip."

She didn't answer in words, and when her leg wedged beneath the ledge, Seth grabbed at her. The slippery material of her robe evaded his grip.

Yes! Finally. He found a place to grab onto her! "Can you manage to stand?"

She nodded. Her arms trembled as she used her grip on the railing and pulled herself higher. When she managed to get a foot on the landing, she pushed slowly to her feet. It was as if three centuries passed in the span of about five seconds.

He banded his arms around her and dragged her over the railing. To safety.

Overwhelming elation mixed with the agonizing pain ripping his back apart as he collapsed with her on the gallery walk. Tears scalded his face and he caved to the fear, the happiness, the uncertainty, the absolute love he had for her.

"I love you," he cried, crushing her to him and capturing her mouth with his.

"I love...you too," she whispered between the hard kisses. "I love you...so fucking much. I don't know how I even got—"

"Shit!" Another series of exploding pain detonated between his shoulders, doubling him over with the intensity. He tore away from Lyndi's amazing body. What the fuck was happening to him? He hadn't experienced anything like this since his—

No.

It couldn't be.

"Seth?" Lyndi's uncertain voice cut through the pain. "Did you hurt yourself pulling me up?"

"Get back!" He jerked away from her touch. "Now!"

Pain forced him to his hands and knees. Air drudged in and out of his lungs with such force his back bowed and flattened with each ragged inhalation.

Bless The Divine!

Something ripped free from his back. And excruciating pain gave way to absolute peace.

Lyndi's voice chiseled through the happy confusion swirling in his head. "What the fuck?"

What the fuck indeed?

Using muscles he hadn't used in an eternity, Seth unfurled his wings.

He pushed his wings to their full span. The movement incredible, like stretching his legs after they'd been stuck in the same position too long.

I'm complete. Lyndi was safe, and he had his wings. Speaking of Lyndi...

His gaze found Lyndi's. Astonishment. Terror. Curiosity. Dozens of warring emotions filled her eyes—terror shone brightest.

He pushed to his feet and took a step toward her. He had to explain to her, to make her understand what he himself didn't truly understand yet. "Lyn—"

"Stay away from me." She moved closer and closer to the balcony stairs. "I mean it. Stay away."

He didn't listen. "Lyn, I know this must come as a shock to you, but I can explain."

"A shock." Her voice pitched higher. "Yeah, it's a fucking shock. To see you have... What the fuck are you anyway?"

Good question. Until about fifteen seconds ago, he'd been one of the fallen. Now he wasn't quite sure. Was he an angel again? Some weird kind of half-breed?

The Divine's words echoed in his mind.

Tempted

The only person keeping you from getting your wings back is you.

"I'm an angel, Lyn."

She snorted.

"I know it's hard to believe but I was created by The Divine when the world came into existence." He took another step toward her, his arms outstretched. "And there's more. Lots more, and I'll tell you everything. I swear. First, can we please go somewhere private to talk?"

Her head shook from side to side. "I don't know who...what you are but you're not Seth Jones." She turned and her feet beat a rapid rhythm on the landing as she ran to the stairs. Away from him.

"Lyndi! Wait!"

"Stay the fuck away from me!"

He started after her but a familiar *calling* stopped him.

Seth, brother...welcome back.

Welcome home.

The thoughts of the other angels filled his mind, like a soft melodic harmony of peace and tranquility. The sea of voices colored his being in the ultimate serenity and all the trouble and anxiety he'd carried since his banishment faded into a distant, *distant* dissonance to the peaceful accord of angelic voices.

Chapter Eleven

Regret times misery equaled sadness to the one-hundredth power.

The turnout for Lyndi's first show had exceeded all her expectations—seemed her funding had never actually been cut and her publicist denied ever calling her. She should be ecstatic, but how could she be happy when the man she loved wasn't at her side?

Man? Probably not the best word to describe Seth. He wasn't even human. He was an —

She cut the thought off at its neck. It didn't matter what she thought he was. What she remembered and grieved for was the man she'd *thought* Seth was when she'd taken him into her bed. Into her body. The sweet man who seemed shy when they first met. The man who couldn't put together a ten-word sentence. The man who'd spent the evening with her family, laughing and enjoying himself. The man who'd taken her to heights she'd never known ecstasy could reach.

Truth was, she wanted Seth Jones back—in any form. He may not be human, but in all the ways that mattered, he'd been real to her. And she'd pushed him away in a moment of surging adrenaline and shock. Because when he'd sprouted wings, her entire world had tilted on its axis.

What she wouldn't give to be able to send herself back in time and stop her runaway mouth from spewing all the hateful things she'd said.

I don't know who...what you are but you're not Seth Jones.

Stay the fuck away from me.

It was almost ironic now. Staying away from Seth was the last thing she wanted. She'd trade her phenomenal gallery opening if she could have Seth back. Even if for a day.

She'd "prayed" to him—not that anyone could actually pray to an angel but it had been worth a shot—and begged him to come back to her.

He hadn't answered.

She knew he was near though. He'd repaired her studio and the paintings she'd destroyed. At least that was how she liked to think all those repairs had been made, that Seth was watching after her, even though he wouldn't show himself to her.

Seth...

Forever her protector. Just like in his painting.

She'd finished *The Guardian* the day after her hurtful words, when her adrenaline spike and shock had worn off and she'd been able to think about things. So many events from *that* day remained a mystery. Like how she'd gotten on the landing in the first place. How Seth had found her, which probably had something to do with his — *you can say the words*, *Lyn*—angelic abilities. And, of course, his sprouting wings. Two big, beautiful white wings, like the ones she'd painted for him.

She *hated* irony but her situation was certainly ironic.

Seth had seemed heroic the night they'd met. Even then, she must have, at least on some level, known what he was. He'd come out of nowhere when he thought she'd needed help. And on the lighthouse the following day, he'd saved her life, despite her plea for him to let her fall.

Seth *had* been her Guardian Angel, even before he'd grown wings. How would she get over someone like him?

Traci and Mari came alongside her, one sister on either arm. "You have to stop thinking about him," Mari murmured. "It's not healthy."

Lyndi shook her head. "I wasn't—"

"Liar." Traci draped an arm over Lyndi's shoulder and squeezed. "You're *always* thinking about him. Al—ways. Besides, you're looking at his painting again."

Lyndi's head dropped forward in shame. Although she hadn't told her sisters the full story about what all happened with Seth—hello, *she* hardly believed what she'd experienced—they knew enough.

"Why don't we stay with you tonight?" Traci offered. "We can have a sister-bonding night and wallow in our men-less misery."

Lyndi forced a laugh. "Minor kink in your plan there, Trace. You're not man-less. Your wonderful husband is just out of the country at the moment, but he'll be back."

"God, I hope so." Traci looked heavenward, as if willing God to keep her husband safe. If prayers worked that way, Seth would be here.

"Anyway," Mari picked up where Traci left off, "are you up for company, sis? The kids are with Paul tonight, so I'm kid and man-free for the evening."

Lyndi should say yes, but the thing was, she'd been so *un*-alone as the madness of the show had swept her up. Tonight, she wanted some alone time to take off her mask of composure and let her misery breathe. For a while anyway.

"Not tonight." Lyndi offered her sisters a weak smile. "Maybe tomorrow?"

"All right. Tomorrow then?"

Lyndi nodded.

"Good." Traci gave Lyndi a peck on the cheek.

Mari copied the move. "Want us to lock up for you?"

"If you wouldn't mind," Lyndi answered. "I want to look around a little longer before going upstairs. Most of these portraits are going to new homes tomorrow."

"Sure thing." Traci gave Lyndi one last hug then waddled away, Mari right behind her, leaving Lyndi alone to mingle with her art.

Only one painting, however, would have her undivided attention tonight.

The Guardian.

Voices mingled and echoed across the room, followed by the thud of the door being pulled shut. Mari and Traci were gone, which meant Lyndi could officially break down.

And her tears didn't disappoint.

Trembling fingertips traced the contours of Seth's painted wings. Would she ever see him again? Probably not. He was in heaven, or wherever angels went, which begged an important question, one she'd been wondering for days.

What had he been doing on Earth in the first place?

Although she assumed his interest was feigned, he'd been intrigued about her ponderings of angels and demons. How they each had both good and evil, how the fallen had given in to the bad.

Was Seth one of these fallen? The notion seemed impossible.

Maybe another glass of coconut rum would help her come up with some answers. At the very least, help her forget the question.

Sighing, she picked up the painting and headed to her loft. The ride up the rickety old freight elevator seemed to take forever. Maybe, with the money she made from sales during her show, she could have a better elevator put in.

With a *lurch* and a *hiss* the elevator stopped and the doors squeezed open. Well most of the way open anyway. "Great."

Sucking in to make herself as small as possible, she pushed her way through the doors. When she was almost through, her ridiculous gown—with its thigh-high slit and crisscrossing back—snagged on the door. And ripped.

"Well that's just great."

"I think it did its job," a familiar voice said. "You look beyond beautiful, Lyn. As always."

Her heart stopped. Seth, all six-foot-nine of him, stood across the room. No wings.

He wore a loose shirt and cotton pants, his shoulder-length hair pulled back from his face. In the few days she'd known him, his hair had always been down, hiding parts of him from the rest of the world. Now, he just looked...vulnerable.

No way this -he — was real. Her mind had to be playing tricks on her again.

Brandi Evans

She closed her eyes. Seth was gone *and* he had wings now. Yet the small part of her heart—the part where hope lived despite the choking weeds of denial—had her asking the one question pinballing in her head.

"If I open my eyes will you still be there?"

"Yes."

Yes. Yes!

Sadness and uncertainty cloaked his voice as he added, "Unless you'd rather I not be here when you open your eyes."

"No," she whispered. "Please stay."

She opened her eyes and — thank you, God — he was still there. He looked as nervous as she felt. She wanted to run to him, to throw her arms around him and kiss him for a month straight. She settled for placing the painting on the breakfast table and taking a few weary steps toward him.

Reconciliation probably wasn't the motivation for this visit. Most likely, he'd come to tell her, officially, things were over between them, that he'd spend the rest of time in heaven. That she needed to get on with her life.

"Misplaced your wings already?" she asked, figuring he'd camouflaged them somehow to keep her from feeling scared.

She'd tried to make a joke out of her words, a feeble attempt to keep from sounding as vulnerable as he looked. No need to make him feel worse for leaving her behind. She loved him too much for that.

He shook his head.

She pursed her lips. She'd been going for light humor, but his expression only grew darker. Putting her bad sense of humor aside, she decided to go for the big question right off the bat. "Why are you here, Seth?"

"I was hoping we could talk."

"Talk?" Forcing her hands not to shake, she motioned him toward the sofa. "About what?"

His feet remained rooted to the spot.

What can I do to make this easier for you, Seth?

She knew he couldn't hear her unspoken words—or could he? It just made her feel better to think them.

"I'm sorry," he began, his eyes lowering and locking on some undetermined point on the floor. "I let things get out of hand between us. I know that. It's just..." He scrubbed his hands over his face. "Shit, Lyn, I don't even know where to fucking start."

She tried again to lighten the mood. "I didn't think angels were allowed to curse."

That did the trick. His smile might be subtle but the left side of his mouth *did* tip up for a fraction of a second. "Been hanging around with you too long," he said.

"Yeah, I do tend to have that kind of effect on people." She sat on the sofa and patted the seat next to her. "Have a seat and let's talk."

He sat beside her but wouldn't make eye contact, which was probably a good thing. The intensity of those brown eyes would probably do her in. She'd break down and beg him to stay with her, tell him she didn't care if he were the Devil himself, she loved him. Not how she wanted him to remember her for the rest of eternity.

"You know about the War in Heaven right?" he finally asked.

She nodded. *Keep it light. Keep it light. Don't let him see how painful this is for you.* "In theory, but I'm sure nothing happened the way we mortals have heard it."

"Probably." He took a deep breath. "Eons ago, a group of angels grew disillusioned with the way of The Divine. They thought humanity, who had become wicked and selfish, should be wiped out, leaving the angels free to just...be. The Divine, however, made it very clear humanity was under His protection and that anyone who challenged Him, challenged His rule or harmed any human would forever be damned and cast down, forced to coexist with the peoples they despised.

"At first, it seemed as if The Divine's edict had been successful, but that was only on the surface. Followers of The Divine's most vocal opponent, Leviathan, continued meeting in secret and his numbers grew. And when their numbers grew large enough, they struck, causing a great flood to swallow the Earth."

"Demons caused the great flood?" She shook her head, thinking back to all those Sunday school lessons she'd had to endure as a child. Somewhere along the way, "they'd" really gotten that little detail wrong. "I thought the flood was God's way of cleaning the world of evil and starting over."

Seth shook his head. "The Divine, in His infinite wisdom, had foreseen the flood and had taken precautions to ensure humanity would survive."

"Noah's ark?" she asked. Surely not...

"The flood served as the official beginning to the War in Heaven. A vicious battle ensued but The Divine's power is absolute and the resurrection was quickly put down. Even with their numbers, the rebel angels never stood a chance and because of their insolence, they were cast down."

Lyndi caught on to one important word. *They.* "You *weren't* on the side of those who tried to slaughter humanity?"

"Yes and no." He closed his eyes against the shame that seized his face. "I ended up on the wrong side of that fight, yes. And I don't say 'wrong side' because they were defeated. I say 'wrong side' because I didn't even believe in what they were fighting for. I only cared about keeping her safe."

"Her?" The one-word question lodged in her throat. What *her*? Another angel. How was she supposed to compete with an angel?

"Her name is Kaia, and I was crazy about her. I mean stupid crazy, hence my banishment."

Was. Past tense. He was no longer crazy about her.

Something Seth had said on the night they met came back in a rush.

I lost everything because of her.

This Kaia must be the *her* he spoke of then. Poor Seth. Lyndi's chest ached for him, for the pain weighing him down. He looked wounded, mentally exhausted. She couldn't stop herself from gripping the hand nearest hers. She knew she'd done the right thing when his fingers tightened around hers.

"I swear, Lyn, I wasn't fighting *against* The Divine. I was fighting to keep her safe, and all that mistake cost me was my home and, as fate would soon reveal, her too."

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, meaning it from the bottom of her heart.

"The other fallen turned selfish, greedy, everything completely opposite of what I'd always lived for and believed in. They interfered in the lives of humans, caused discord and strife. The pain and grief you were feeling the day you ended up on the lighthouse? It was caused by demonic mind games designed to blackmail me into doing something reprehensible. And I almost did, Lyn. I almost murdered an innocent man to keep you from dying."

I can't let you die, Lyn...

That was what he'd been talking about. Keeping the demons from killing her? But why would demons want to kill her? What was she? Before she had a chance to ask, Seth continued.

"I walked away from it all. From them—from Kaia. I spent the next...shit, I don't even know how long alone. Utterly alone. I couldn't go home and I wouldn't become evil. Eventually, I went to work for the Angels of Death, hoping to redeem myself somehow."

She listened in wonder as he told her how and why he'd gone to work for the Angels of Death. Just as she'd always imagined, the beings were morally neutral.

"You can't imagine how alone I've been, Lyn. Nothing except regret and shame for company. And then I met you and for the first time in longer than I could remember, I wasn't alone." He paused for a moment, as if he were fighting tears. "When I made the

decision to break Code and show myself to help you, I could never have imagined how drastically that one decision would change me."

Her lips scrunched together as she fought tears of her own. She couldn't break down in front of him. She had to let him say his peace and then after he left, she could cry for what never could be.

Before she took on the role of sacrificial party, she whispered, "It changed me too, Seth."

"You're the reason I got my wings back, you know?"

She didn't understand. "Me?"

"The unconditional love you awakened inside me transformed me, united me—mind, body, and soul. I became *more* than one of the fallen, more than someone seeking redemption. My love for you transformed me and allowed me to ascend to the one place I'd been trying to get back to for millennia. Imagine their surprise when I asked to leave."

She stopped breathing. Surely he wasn't saying what she *thought* he was saying. "Asked to leave?"

Seth moved closer, his brown eyes locked on her. She didn't—couldn't—move away. "I asked The Divine to make me human." His big hands captured her face in the most careful, tender touch she'd ever experienced. "Heaven wasn't Heaven without you by my side."

"Human?"

"Yes." He brushed his lips against hers. "If mortality is the price I have to pay for loving you, it's a debt I'll take on tenfold."

The tears she'd been fighting scorched down her cheeks and she kissed him.

From the absolute bottom of her soul.

Chapter Twelve

Nothing in the universe compared to Lyndi's kisses. The way her arms clung to him with desperate need. The way her kisses tasted of the salty tears she kept shedding. The way her body pressed against him as she pushed her way onto his lap.

Now, this was Heaven.

His cock—his *human* cock—filled with the need to claim Lyndi as his own. Once and for all.

He devoured her kisses, the heat of their frantic mouths evaporating the lingering remorse in his chest. Guilt for everything he'd done to hurt her. Guilt for the things he *hadn't* told her.

He didn't want to lie to her, but knowing how close she'd come to dying because she'd been targeted by an Angel of Death who'd teamed up with Seth's demonic exlover in an attempt to blackmail him into committing murder...

Yeah, that was knowledge he wanted to spare her from.

Lyndi pulled away, breathing hard past the passion that had exploded between them and whispered, "I can't believe you gave up Heaven, immortality. *Everything* you've been working toward. For me."

"I did it for *us*, Lyn." He wiped away the tears streaking her face. "For our future. If...you still want a future with me? I know you probably don't trust me right now and I understand that. But I promise I'll do whatever it takes to make this up to you."

She laughed through her tears. "Do you think I'd fucking kiss you like that if I didn't want you? Did that angel-ectomy you had scramble your brain? God, Seth, I've been sitting here wishing *you'd* take *me* back."

She still wanted him. The realization humbled him but he wasn't about to let up, not until he'd said everything he needed to say.

"I want you completely, Lyn. To build a home, a family with you. To have you at my side for the rest of our lives."

"I want that too," she admitted, tears streaming one after the other down her face.
"I want that too."

Joy filled his chest. Part of him had feared, even after he'd given up everything for her, she still wouldn't take him back. Or at the very least, he'd have to earn the privilege of calling her his. That she'd forgive him and without regret or hesitation...

There were no words.

"I want you in every way a woman can have a man," she whispered, eager hands inching down his torso to grip his rigid length through his pants. "Every way."

When he'd been an immortal who'd taken on a human body, the absolute bliss of her touch, her kisses, her warm, wet core as he slid in deep had been beyond incredible. Experiencing her while being *fully* human?

The anticipation alone almost had him creaming his pants.

"I'm afraid I'm not going to last long," he warned, peeling her hands away from his cock. "I've never had sex completely mortal before. I'm not sure what to expect. Then again, before that time with you in the shed, I'd never done it in a human body either."

Her expression turned from fiery to stunned. "You were like a-a virgin before that night?"

"Not exactly," he said.

When he noted a question forming in her eyes, he distracted her with another kiss. They'd have time for explanations later. Right now, he needed to consume her.

His impatient hands found the zipper of her dress. She looked beautiful in the dark red number, with its straps and slits, but the sight would be nothing compared to what he'd find when he peeled the damn material away. "Shit, it feels like it's been years since we last fucked," she whimpered into his mouth.

He laughed. Beautiful Lyndi with her angelic face and her devil's mouth. The woman he'd sacrificed everything for. "Let's not make a habit of this, okay?" he whispered.

When the last strap of her dress surrendered, Lyndi pushed to her feet. The dress slid to the ground in a sparking crimson flash. To his feral delight, she only wore a wispy pair of black panties.

She held her hands toward him. "Come on, Seth. Take me to bed."

She'd get no argument from him.

Seth put his hand in hers and followed her very, *very* eagerly to the bed, a bed they'd probably have to replace soon if their last round was any indication. Even now, he doubted he had the ability to take her gently. The bubbling, just-out-of-hibernation need in his body was almost uncontrollable. Maybe in a few years he could find the self-control to bring restraint into the equation.

Maybe.

By the time they reached the bed, they were both naked. Lyndi crawled onto the mattress and settled in the center, her legs spread in invitation. His gaze floated between the enticing sight of the moisture clinging to the wiry hairs of her pussy and the passion glimmering in her eyes. Passion for *him*, despite how he'd lied to her, hurt her, almost gotten her killed.

He closed his eyes. For a brief moment, he let the awe consume him. He didn't deserve her forgiveness, let alone her love and her luscious body, yet she offered both to him. And Heaven willing, he'd get the next seventy-five years or so to make things up to her.

"Seth?" she whispered, "are you okay?"

He smiled, his eyes finding hers again. "Actually, Lyn, I'm wonderful. Better than I've ever been. And it's all because of you."

Fuck, he sounded like a cliché, but his words must have touched her.

A single tear slid from her eyes. She didn't even bother to wipe it away. "You scared me there for a moment," she said, her voice wobbling. "I thought maybe you were having doubts about your decision."

"Never."

Seth crawled onto the bed with her and knelt between her open legs, his gaze settling on her wet sex. The sweet, musky scent of her core reached up and drew his mouth down for a quick taste.

Okay, maybe not quick.

The flavor of her honeyed juices excited his taste buds, the same yet different than the last time he'd sampled her. Being human now would give him the rare opportunity to experience her again for the first time.

He moved his attention to her ripe clit, the bud so swollen she jumped when his tongue slid over the tight knot. Her back arched, pressing her pussy against his face, widening her slit as he pressed two fingers inside her dripping center.

"Not that I'm—oh fuck!—not enjoy-enjoying this," Lyndi panted, her fingers slicing through his hair as *his* fingers found and teased the tight grouping of nerves on the front wall of her pussy. "But can we...save the...the oral for r-round two? I need you inside me. *Now*."

Seth peered up at her over her panting chest, his fingers continuing to stroke her G-spot. Her words reminded him of something she'd said to him before. "What's wrong, Lyn? Don't consider yourself *lucky* yet?"

She laughed, her beautiful breasts shaking with her merriment. She sat up and grabbed him by the dick. "Get up here and fuck me, you sweet, wonderful bastard! Or I'll take you by force."

The smile Lyndi gave him told him her *taking by force* line wasn't figurative. She wanted him fast, hard and as soon as fucking possible.

Fuck, he really loved this woman. Strong, determined and with a sex drive that just might kill him.

He moved over her, forcing her back down on the mattress. Lyndi didn't let the change in position affect her hold on his erection.

Her legs widened and she guided his cock to her entrance. She slid his head through her juicy folds. Heaven, had she always felt *this* slick, this hot?

His dick stiffened. His balls tightened. At this rate, he just might come on her hand. "Let go," he groaned when she didn't release him.

"No." She kept circling his glans around the edges of her pussy, sliding his tip around like he was her personal dildo.

Seth positioned his weight on his left elbow then reached between them with his free arm and took hold of her wrist. Still, she didn't let go.

The new position gave him control over his own cock again. He tilted his pelvis forward, sliding into her channel, stopping only when her grasping hand didn't allow any more entry. And started thrusting. Soft, shallow penetrations that had her back arching to increase the contact, her legs wrapping around his waist.

"Condom," she whispered, flapping her free hand toward the nightstand even as her legs tightened around his hips.

"No." Releasing her hand, he braced his palms against the mattress, his thrusts increasing. He wanted a future with her, a family. What better time was there to start than the present? "No more condoms. I *want* you pregnant with my child."

"Seth..." She tried to open her eyes. Judging by her out-of-control breathing she was close to losing it.

Just like him.

"Let me come inside you." The first eddies of his climax tingled his balls. "I'm so close, Lyn." His hips pumped faster, harder, driving into her pussy, crushing her hand between their joined bodies. "I need to know. Now."

"Yeeeees," she screamed, releasing his dick and wrapping her arms around his neck. She held him so close her entire body lifted off the mattress. Her inner muscles clenched around his buried length as he pounded into her.

His own climax seized him, sending jets of hot, wet cum spilling into her, lubricating their lovemaking. "Lyn..."

When the last quivers of orgasm eased, Seth collapsed on top of her, content to stay here, skin to skin, bodies locked together, for the rest of time.

Slowly, Lyn's hands started moving over his back, sketching slow circles that, despite their non-sexual movements, had his cock hardening again. "I love you," she whispered.

"Love you too." He lifted his head just high enough to see her beautiful, flushed face. His woman for the rest of his life. "I was thinking we could go to Italy for our honeymoon. There's a lot of great art there. You'll enjoy it."

"Presumptuous much?" she asked with a laugh that was meant to hide the fact she was suddenly crying. "I don't remember you proposing."

"I gave up Heaven for you, told you I wanted you pregnant with my child. I would have thought marriage and forever were a given at this point."

Tears streaming down her cheeks, she nodded. "I think Italy sounds perfect."

About the Author

Brandi Evans is a stay-at-home mom with a serious addiction...the compulsive need to tell sexy stories to whoever will listen.

She brings to life fun, flawed characters with kick-ass-and-take-no-prisoners attitudes who challenge her every step of the writing process. Whether inspiring a hot-and-heavy contemporary, a pulse-pounding suspense or a dark-and-decadent paranormal romance, her muse knows no boundaries. And she likes it that way. When veering outside the box, she never knows where her next story could take her.

Brandi welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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