

Chapter One

She was late, and it was almost time for curfew. Stifling a curse, Eva Smyth glanced at her watch for what must have been the umpteenth time since leaving the coffee house. The last thing she wanted was to be caught on the streets past the Consortium's imposed curfew. Lord only knew what would happen. She'd heard rumors, and none of them were good. Angels were not known for their compassion.

The soft light of the streetlamps cast an orange glow over the mostly deserted streets. The asphalt, still wet from the downpour that had fallen not long ago, gleamed in the dim light. Ominous thunder rolled through the sky, indicating that the respite from the rain was just a brief one. As she rushed past the main entrance to what had once been Central Park, a stray bolt of lightning flashed through the sky, illuminating the craggy top of the tower being constructed on the land.

"Angels," she murmured with a shake of her head. How much Earth had changed since the veil between the two worlds collapsed a dozen years ago, revealing the existence of the revered species. She'd been barely more than a child back then, just thirteen years old. In the years since, monuments had been erected all over the world. Humans worshipped them like gods, and in return, angels promised humankind protection and a peaceful existence.

Sometimes she wondered if it was all a load of crap. Curfews, forced careers, reliance on the Consortium, the guild of humans retained by the angels to do their

bidding. Was angelic protection really worth the price they paid for it?

Less than a block from Eva's apartment building, a figure stepped out of the shadows. She stopped short, her heart pounding as she took in his uniform. A Consortium Guard. She would forever think of them as policemen, though it was forbidden to call them that. After all, with the angels in charge and the whole world supposedly at peace, there was no longer any need for a police force.

The Guard's gaze raked over her as if judging her black-on-black uniform and light spring jacket. Eyes narrowing, his hand crept up toward his nightstick while his lips curled in menace. "It's almost curfew."

"I know, but I live right there." She pointed toward her building, doing her best to stop her hand from shaking.

The Guard shot her a withering glare. "Get inside," he snarled.

She ran the rest of the way to her apartment building. It took a few bumbling tries to get the key in the lock, but finally she opened the main door. Taking the stairs two at a time, she raced up to her third floor apartment.

"Whew, that was close," she muttered while she searched her packed key ring for the one to her apartment. If only she didn't have to carry the keys to the coffee house along with her.

Before she could open her door, she heard the familiar sound of a deadbolt unlocking. The door to the apartment across from hers opened and her nosy neighbor slash annoying ex-boyfriend Travis stepped out. As usual, his hair was mussed and his glasses sat askew on top of his small, straight nose. He crossed his scrawny arms and leaned against his doorjamb.

"You're late."

Eva stifled a groan and turned to face him. "Spying on me through the peephole again?"

His nose scrunched in offense. "I worry about you. You should be happy there's

someone around who cares."

Yet another sly dig at her lack of friends and family. One of the many reasons she'd dumped his sorry ass.

"As you can see, I'm fine," she said evenly before whirling back toward her door and unlocking it.

Of course, he didn't take the hint. He followed her inside.

"Have you found that copy of the key I gave you yet?" she grumbled.

"No," Travis replied. "It must be stuck in the couch cushions or something. I'll do a more thorough search for it this weekend."

"Yeah. Right." Even though they'd broken up over a month ago, he still hadn't brought back the spare key she'd given him while they were dating. She'd bet on her life he knew full well where it was. Despite her repeated admonitions that it was over for good, he seemed to hold out hope they'd get back together.

"You know, you need to be more careful," he said to her. "This is the second time this month you barely made it home on time."

"It's not my fault." Eva walked the few feet it took to get from the short hallway to the living room. She stepped over to the couch and slunk down on it, kicking her shoes off. "A couple of Consortium Guards closed the place out again."

It was just her luck to have been assigned a barista position at one of the coffee shops closest to the city's angel tower. Though she'd never seen an angel up close and personal – they were too rare, and those few who did reside in the city were far too uppity to associate with humans – she had plenty of Consortium employees to deal with. They straggled in for coffee at all hours of the day, and it wasn't like she could tell them she had to stop serving them because she needed to make curfew. That wouldn't go over well at all. Next to angels, the Consortium was the new elite. Fuck with them at your peril.

"Still, you need to take better care of yourself," Travis insisted. "It's not like I

could bail you out if you were detained by the Consortium. Not even my reach extends that far."

Eva held back an exasperated chuckle. Reason number two why they were no longer dating. He loved to lord his career over her. Not like there was any real reason he'd been chosen to be a lawyer while she got to be a glorified coffee maker. It was just luck of the draw, partially based on the stupid personality exam they'd all been required to take.

At least I hit the apartment lottery. Large and spacious with cream-colored walls, blonde wood flooring, and a small but efficient kitchen featuring stainless steel appliances, her two-bedroom apartment was a dream. There was no way she would've been able to afford it had she been forced to pay rent on a barista's wages. Luckily, the angels had done away with pesky little things like rent when they'd taken over rule of Earth. Of course they'd also done away with paying wages...

"You ever wonder what the world would be like right now if the veil hadn't slipped, Travis?"

He bristled at her words. "Don't even think about that. Can you imagine if an angel heard you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know," she mumbled.

Travis crossed over to the couch and took a seat next to her. "I still don't understand why you broke up with me, Eva. We could have a good life together."

She groaned. "Come on, Travis. I don't want to get into this with you again. It's over between us."

He took her hand, peering intently into her eyes. With his thin features, large, wire-rimmed glasses, and the wide-eyed look on his face, he rather resembled an owl. "If we had children, you wouldn't have to work again until they went to school. Wouldn't it be nice to take a break from the coffee shop for a few years?"

Yeah, it would be nice. But if the price she had to pay was putting up with him, it wouldn't be worth it. Besides, she wanted more from life. What more, she didn't know.

But she'd always felt like she didn't quite belong.

Something was waiting for her out there. Something besides coffee and curfews and Travis' offspring. And when it came, she'd be ready for it.

"I'm sorry, Travis, but it would never work between us."

He somehow managed to look dejected and exasperated at the same time. "I'd think about it if I were you. I don't think you'll ever do better than me, Eva. I mean, how many baristas get to marry lawyers?"

Gritting her teeth, she tugged her hand out of his. "I'm tired. I think it's time for you to go home."

An hour later, after escorting Travis out and taking a long, steaming bath, she hopped into bed still fuming. "Can't do better than you. I'll show you better."

Travis' ignorant words had gotten to her. Mostly because she feared he might be right. What sort of future faced a twenty-five year old coffee-maker with no family to speak of?

"Something, Eva," she mumbled. "There's something out there for you."

With a loud yawn, she shut her eyes and surrendered to her exhaustion.

The loud clap of thunder woke her out of a deep sleep. A bolt of lightning illuminated the room, casting soft shadows along the walls. Rain pelted her bedroom window in hard, rhythmic slaps. It sounded like a monsoon was going on outside.

Just then, a whisper of sound from the living room drifted over to her through the open door of her bedroom. She froze, heart hammering inside her chest.

There it was again. Almost like the rustle of paper.

Wait a second...hadn't she opened the window before taking a bath to let some of the cool spring air in? Now that she thought about it, she couldn't remember closing the window before going to bed.

She relaxed, letting out a silent laugh. Lord, she'd almost given herself a heart

attack. More than likely the wind was blowing in through the window, flapping back the pages of the magazines she'd stacked on her coffee table.

Along with a good dose of rain.

Shit.

Throwing her fluffy, white down comforter back, she hopped out of bed and started toward the door. The shadow of something across the room caught her eye. Heart in her throat, she whirled toward it.

Another bolt of lightning illuminated glossy black, shoulder length curls and a light blue, button-down sleep shirt. Goodness! It was just her reflection in the mirror. This weather was seriously freaking her out.

"Chill out," she murmured, forcing herself to relax. She padded out the door and down the short hallway, rounding the corner into the living room. At that very moment another dart of lightning lit up the space. It was just enough to highlight the figure of the man who stood facing the window not more than twenty feet in front of her. He wore black slacks and nothing else. The corded muscles of his bare back flexed with his slightest movement.

Oh my God!

Eva's mouth opened on an involuntary scream, but before she could utter a peep the man turned to face her.

"Be calm," he said, lifting one hand up, palm facing her. Just like that her vocal chords tightened. She couldn't scream. Couldn't move. Could only utter soft, strangled grunts that would be of absolutely no help at all.

She fought back her panic as he swiveled to face her full-on. His face was in shadow, but the light of the moon and the streetlights filtering in through the window showcased his sculpted pectorals and taut abs.

A man wearing no shirt who had the ability to contain her muscles and vocal chords. It seemed pretty clear what he was.

An angel. A freaking *angel* had flown in through her open window. *What the hell?*

The angel grinned as if he'd guessed her train of thought. He nodded toward the window. "You never know what you'll attract."

Holy crap! It was a good thing she was rooted in place, because she didn't know if her legs would support her right now. What was going on here? Why would an angel pick her apartment, of all places, to fly in to?

"If I release your vocal chords, do you promise not to scream?"

Scream? Right now she thought she might faint. She made a strangled sound that came out as a cross between a croak and a squeak.

"I'll take that a yes," he said in a dry voice. One flick of his hand and her vocal chords loosened.

Eva took a deep breath, keeping her gaze focused on the angel. A million questions crossed her mind. What was he doing here? Why had he chosen her apartment to invade? How did he manage to hide his wings so completely that it would be impossible to tell he was an angel just by looking at him? What came out of her mouth instead was, "Where's your shirt?"

The angel laughed, a low, rolling sound that practically electrified her nerve endings. "Tends to get in the way of the wings. Besides, I don't feel the cold the same way that you do." He stepped forward so his face was out of the shadows.

Eva involuntarily sucked in her breath. With dark hair and perfectly arched brows, a long, straight nose framed by an inhumanly symmetrical face, and bright topaz eyes that seemed to blaze right through her, he was easily the most perfect being she'd ever laid eyes on. Suddenly, she could begin to understand why humans worshipped angels as gods. Why so many of them would give anything just for a glimpse of one.

What could he possibly want with her?

She gave a nervous lick of her lips. "Wha-what are you doing here?"

He laughed again, the sound of it huskier this time. "I'm here, beloved, because you called to me."