

CHAPTER ONE

From high in the heavens, Lysander spotted his prey. *At last. Finally, I will end this.* His jaw clenched and his skin pulled tight. With tension. With relief. Determined, he jumped from the cloud he stood upon, falling quickly . . . wind whipping through his hair . . .

When he neared ground, he allowed his wings, long and feathered and golden, to unfold from his back and catch in the current, slowing his progress.

He was a soldier for the One, True Deity. One of the Elite Seven, created before time itself. With as many millennia as he'd lived, he'd come to learn that each of the Elite Seven had one temptation. One potential downfall. Like Eve with her apple. When they found this . . . thing, this abomination, they happily destroyed it before it could destroy them.

Lysander had finally found his.

Bianka Skyhawk.

She was the daughter of a Harpy and a phoenix shape-shifter. She was a thief, a liar and a killer who found joy in the vilest of tasks. Worse, the blood of Lucifer – his greatest enemy and the sire of most demon hordes – flowed through her veins. Which meant *Bianka* was his enemy.

He lived to destroy his enemies.

However, he could only act against them when they broke a heavenly law. For demons, that involved escaping their fiery prison to walk the earth. For Bianka, who had never been condemned to hell, that would have to involve something else. What, he didn't know. All he knew was that he'd never experienced what mortals referred to as "desire."

Until Bianka.

And he didn't like it.

He'd seen her for the first time several weeks ago, long black hair flowing down her back, amber eyes bright and lips blood-red. Watching her, unable to turn away, a single question had drifted through his mind: Was her pearl-like skin as soft as it appeared?

Forget desire. He'd never wondered such a thing about anyone before. He'd never cared. But the question was becoming an obsession, discovering the truth a need. And it had to end. Now. This day.

He landed just in front of her, but she couldn't see him. No one could. He existed on another plane, invisible to mortal and immortal alike. He could scream, and she would not hear him. He could walk through her, and she would not feel him. For that matter, she would not smell or sense him in any way.

Until it was too late.

He could have formed a fiery sword from air and cleaved her head from her body, but didn't. As he'd already realized and accepted, he could not kill her. Yet. But he could not allow her to roam unfettered, tempting him, a plague to his good sense, either. Which meant he would have to settle for imprisoning her in his home in the sky.

That didn't have to be a terrible ordeal for him, however. He could use their time together to show her the right way to live. And the right way was, of course, his way.

What's more, if she did not conform, if she *did* finally commit that unpardonable sin, he would be there, finally able to rid himself of her influence.

Do it. Take her.

He reached out. But just before he could wrap his arms around her and fly her away, he realized she was no longer alone. He scowled, his arms falling to his sides. He did not want a witness to his deeds.

"Best day ever," Bianka shouted skyward, splaying her arms and twirling. Two champagne bottles were clutched in her hands and those bottles flew from her grip, slamming into the ice-mountains of Alaska surrounding her. She stopped, swayed, laughed. "Oopsie."

His scowl deepened. A perfect opportunity lost, he realized. Clearly, she was intoxicated. She wouldn't have fought him. Would have assumed he was a hallucination or that they were playing a game. Having watched her these past few weeks, he knew how much she liked to play games.

"Waster," her sister, the intruder, grumbled. Though they were twins, Bianka and Kaia looked nothing alike. Kaia had red hair and gray eyes flecked with gold. She was shorter than Bianka, her beauty more delicate. "I had to stalk a collector for days – days! – to steal that. Seriously. You just busted Dom Perignon White Gold Jeroboam."

"I'll make it up to you." Mist wafted from her mouth. "They sell Boone Farms in town."

There was a pause, a sigh. "That's only acceptable if you also steal me some cheese tots. I used to highjack them from Sabin everyday, and now that we've left Budapest, I'm in withdrawal."

Lysander tried to pay attention to the conversation, he really did. But being this close to Bianka was, as always, ruining his concentration. Only her skin was similar to her sister's, reflecting all the colors of a newly sprung rainbow. So why didn't he wonder if *Kaia's* skin was as soft as it appeared?

Because she is not your temptation. You know this.

There, atop a peak of Devil's Thumb, he watched as Bianka plopped to her bottom. Frigid mist continued to waft around her, making her look as if she were part of a dream. Or an angel's nightmare.

"But you know," Kaia added, "stealing Boone Farms in town doesn't help me now. I'm only partially buzzed and was hoping to be totally and completely smashed by the time the sun set."

"You should be thanking me, then. You got smashed last night. And the night before. And the night before that."

Kaia shrugged. "So?"

"So, your life is in a rut. You steal liquor, climb a mountain while drinking and dive off when drunk."

"Well, then, yours is in a rut, too, since you've been with me each of those nights." The redhead frowned. "Still. Maybe you're right. Maybe we need change." She gazed around the majestic summit. "So what new and exciting thing do you want to do now?"

"Complain. Can you believe Gwennie is getting married?" Bianka asked. "And to Sabin, keeper of the demon of Doubt, of all people. Or demons. Whatever."

Gwennie. Gwendolyn. Their youngest sister.

“I know. It’s weird.” A still-frowning Kaia eased down beside her. “Would you rather be a bridesmaid or be hit by a bus?”

“The bus. No question. That, I’d recover from.”

“Agreed.”

She did not like weddings? Odd. Most females *craved* them. Still. *No need for the bus*, Lysander wanted to tell her. *You will not be attending your sister’s wedding.*

“So which of us will be her maid of honor, do you think?” Kaia asked.

“Not it,” Bianka said, just as Kaia opened her mouth to say the same.

“Damn it!”

Bianka laughed with genuine amusement. “Your duties shouldn’t be too bad. Gwennie’s the nicest of the Skyhawks, after all.”

“Nice when she’s not protecting Sabin, that is.” Kaia shuddered. “I swear, threaten the man with a little bodily harm, and she’s ready to claw your eyes out.”

“Think we’ll ever fall in love like that?” As curious as Bianka sounded, there was also a hint of sadness in her voice.

Why sadness? Did she want to fall in love? Or was she thinking of a particular man she yearned for? Lysander had not yet seen her interact with a male.

Kaia waved a deceptively delicate hand through the air. “We’ve been alive for centuries without falling. Clearly, it’s just not meant to be. But I, for one, am glad about that. Men become a liability when you try and make them permanent.”

“Yeah,” was the reply. “But a fun liability.”

“True. And I haven’t had fun in a long time,” Kaia said with a pout.

“Me, either. Except with myself, but I don’t suppose that counts.”

“It does the way I do it.”

They shared another laugh.

Fun. Sex, Lysander realized, now having no trouble keeping up with their conversation. They were discussing sex. Something he’d never tried. Not even with himself. He’d never wanted to try, either. Still didn’t. Not even with Bianka and her amazing (soft?) skin.

As long as he’d been alive – a span of time far greater than their centuries – he’d seen many humans caught up in the act. It looked . . . messy. As un-fun as something could be. Yet humans betrayed their friends and family to do it. They even willingly, happily gave up hard-earned money in exchange for it. When not taking part themselves, they became obsessed with it, watching others do it on a television or computer screen.

“We should have nailed one of the Lords when we were in Buda,” Kaia said thoughtfully. “Paris is hawt.”

She could only be referring to the Lords of the Underworld. Immortal warriors possessed by the demons once locked inside Pandora’s box. As Lysander had observed them throughout the centuries, ensuring they obeyed heavenly laws – since their demons had escaped hell before those laws were enacted, no one having thought escape possible, they had not been killed but first thrust into that box, and second, the Lords -- he knew that Paris was host to Promiscuity, forced to bed a new person every day or weaken and die.

“Paris is hot, yes, but I liked Amun.” Bianka stretched to her back, mist again whipping around her. “He doesn’t speak, which makes him the perfect man in my opinion.”

Amun, the host of the demon of Secrets. So. Bianka liked him, did she? Lysander pictured the warrior. Tall, though Lysander was taller. Muscled, though Lysander was more so. Dark where Lysander was pale. He was actually relieved to know the Harpy preferred a different type of male than himself.

That wouldn't change her fate, but it did lessen Lysander's burden. He hadn't been sure what he would have done if she'd *asked* him to touch her. That she wouldn't was most definitely a relief.

"What about Aeron?" Kaia asked. "All those tattoos . . ." A moan slipped from her as she shivered. "I could trace every single one of them with my tongue."

Aeron, host of Wrath. Only one of two Lords with wings, Aeron's were black and gossamer. He had tattoos all over his body, and looked every inch the demon he was. What's more, he had recently broken a spiritual covenant. Therefore, Aeron would be dead before the upcoming nuptials.

Lysander's charge, Olivia, had been ordered to slay the warrior. So far she had resisted the decree. The girl was too soft-hearted for her own good. Eventually, though, she would do her duty. Otherwise, she would be kicked to earth, immortal no longer, and that was not a fate Lysander would allow.

Of all the angels he'd trained, she was by far his favorite. As gentle as she was, a man couldn't help but want to make her happy. She was trustworthy, loyal and all that was pure; she was the type of female who should have tempted him. A female he might have been able to accept in a romantic way. Wild Bianka . . . no. Never.

"However will I choose between my two favorite Lords, B?" Another sigh returned Lysander's focus to the Harpies.

Bianka rolled her eyes. "Just sample them both. Not like you haven't enjoyed a twofer before."

Kaia laughed, though the amusement didn't quite reach her voice. Like Bianka, there was a twinge of sadness to the sound. "True."

Lysander's mouth curled in mild distaste. Two different partners in one day. Or at the same time. Had Bianka done that, too? Probably.

"What about you?" Kaia asked. "You gonna hook up with Amun at the wedding?"

There was a long, heavy pause. Then Bianka shrugged. "Maybe. Probably."

He should leave and return when she was alone. The more he learned about her, the more he disliked her. Soon he would simply snatch her up, no matter who watched, revealing his presence, his intentions, just to save this world from her dark influence.

He flapped his wings once, twice, lifting into the air.

"You know what I want more than anything else in the world?" she asked, rolling to her side and facing her sister. Facing Lysander directly, as well. Her eyes were wide, amber irises luminous. Beams of sunlight seemed to soak into that glorious skin, and he found himself pausing.

Kaia stretched out beside her. "To co-host *Good Morning America*?"

"Well, yeah, but that's not what I meant."

"Then I'm stumped."

"Well . . ." Bianka nibbled on her bottom lip. Opened her mouth. Closed her mouth. Scowled. "I'll tell you, but you can't tell anyone."

The redhead pretended to twist a lock over her lips.

“I’m serious, K. Tell anyone, and I’ll deny it then hunt you down and chop off your head.”

Would she truly? Lysander wondered. Again, probably. He could not imagine hurting his Olivia, whom he loved like a sister. Maybe because she was not one of the Elite Seven, but was a joy-bringer, the weakest of the angels.

There were three angelic factions. The Elite Seven, the warriors and the joy-bringers. In addition to having different duties, their status was reflected in their wings. Each of the Seven possessed golden wings, like his own. Warriors possessed white wings merely threaded with gold, and joy-bringers possessed white wings with no gold at all.

Olivia had been a joy-bringer all the centuries of her existence. Something she was quite happy with. That was why everyone, including Olivia, had experienced such shock when golden down had begun to grow in her feathers.

Not Lysander, however. He’d petitioned the Angelic Council, and they’d agreed. It had needed to be done. She was too fascinated by the demon-possessed warrior named Aeron. Too . . . infatuated. Ridding her of such an attraction was imperative. As he well knew.

His hand clenched into a fist. He blamed himself for Olivia’s circumstances. He had sent her to watch the Lords. To study them. He should have come himself, but he’d hoped to avoid Bianka.

“Well, don’t just lie there. Tell me what you want to do more than anything else in the world,” Kaia exclaimed, once again drawing his attention.

Bianka uttered another sigh. “I want to sleep with a man.”

Kaia’s brow scrunched in confusion. “Uh, hello. Wasn’t that what we were just discussing?”

“No, dummy. I mean, I want to sleep. As in, conk out. As in, snore my ass off.”

A moment passed in silence as Kaia absorbed the announcement. “What! That’s forbidden. Stupid. Dangerous.”

Harpies lived by two rules, he knew. They could only eat what they stole or earned, and they could not sleep in the presence of another. The first was because of a curse on all Harpy-kind, and the second because Harpies were suspicious and untrusting by nature.

Lysander’s head tilted to the side as he found himself imagining holding Bianka in his arms as she drifted into slumber. That fall of dark curls would tumble over his arm and chest. Her warmth would seep into his body. Her leg would rub over his.

He could never allow it, of course, but that didn’t diminish the power of the vision. To hold her, protect her, comfort her would be . . . nice.

Would her skin be as soft as it appeared?

His teeth ground together. There was that ridiculous question again. *I do not care. It does not matter.*

“Forget I said anything,” Bianka grumbled, once more flopping to her back and staring up at the bright sky.

“I can’t. Your words are singed into my ears. Do you know what happened to our ancestors when they were stupid enough to fall asl -- ”

“Yes, okay. Yes.” She pushed to her feet. The faux fur coat she wore was blood-red, same as her lips, and a vivid contrast to the white ice around her. Her boots were

black and climbed to her knees. She wore skin-tight pants, also black. She looked wicked and beautiful.

Would her skin be as soft as it appeared?

Before he realized what he was doing, he was standing in front of her, reaching out, fingers tingling. *What are you doing? Stop!* He froze. Backed several steps away.

Sweet heaven. How close he'd come to giving into the temptation of her.

He could not wait any longer. Could not wait until she was alone. He had to act now. His reaction to her was growing stronger. Any more, and he *would* touch her. And if he liked touching her, he might want to do more. That was how temptation worked. You gave into one thing, then yearned for another. And another. Soon, you were lost.

"Enough heavy talk. Let's get back to our boring routine and jump," Bianka said, stalking to the edge of the peak. "You know the rules. Girl who breaks the least amount of bones wins. If you die, you lose. For, like, ever." She gazed down.

So did Lysander. There were crests and dips along the way, ice bounders with sharp, deadly ridges and thousands of feet of air. Such a jump would have killed a mortal, no question. The Harpy merely joked about the possibility, as if it were of no consequence. Did she think herself invulnerable?

Kaia lumbered to her feet and swayed from the liquor still pouring through her. "Fine, but don't think this is the last of our conversation about sleeping habits and stupid girls who –"

Bianka dove.

Lysander expected the action, but was still surprised by it. He followed her down. She spread her arms, closed her eyes, grinning foolishly. That grin . . . affected him. Clearly she reveled in the freedom of soaring. Something he often did, as well. But she would not have the end she desired.

Seconds before she slammed into a boulder, Lysander allowed himself to materialize in her plane. He grabbed her, arms catching under hers, wings unfolding, slowing them. Her legs slapped against him, jarring him, but he didn't release his hold.

A gasp escaped her, and her eyelids popped open. When she spotted him, amber eyes clashing with the dark of his, that gasp became a growl.

Most would have asked who he was or demanded he go away. Not Bianka.

"Big mistake, Stranger Danger," she snapped. "One you'll pay for."

As many battles as he'd fought over the years and as many opponents as he'd slain, he didn't have to see to know she had just unsheathed a blade from a hidden slit in her coat. And he didn't have to be a psychic to know she meant to stab him.

"It is you who made the mistake, Harpy. But do not worry. I have every intention of rectifying that." Before she could ensure that her weapon met its intended target, he whisked her into another plane, into his home – where she would stay. Forever.