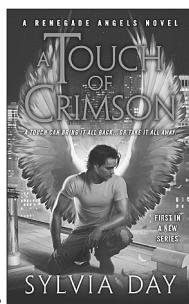


A TOUCH OF CRIMSON

A Renegade Angels Novel

by Sylvia Day



An October 2011 Signet Eclipse Mass Market Paperback

A touch can bring it all back . . . or take it all away.

Adrian Mitchell is an angel of immense power and insatiable desire. Leading an elite Special Ops unit of the Seraphim, his task is to punish the Fallen—angels who have become vampires—and command a restless pack of indentured lycans.

But Adrian has suffered his own punishment for becoming involved with mortals—losing the woman he loves again and again. Now, after nearly two hundred years, he has found her—Shadoe, her soul once more inhabiting a new body with no memory of him. This time he won't let her go.

With no memory of her past as Shadoe, Lindsay Gibson only knows she can't help being fiercely attracted to the smoldering, seductive male who crosses her path. Swept into a dangerous world of tumultuous passion and preternatural conflict, Lindsay is soon caught in the middle between her angel lover, her vampire father, and a full-blown lycan revolt. There's more

at stake than her love and her life—this time she could lose her very soul . . .

Praise for Sylvia Day writing as S.J. Day:

“Great characters and terrific storytelling in a hot-blooded adrenaline ride. A keep-you-up-all-night read.”

—#1 *New York Times* bestselling author Patricia Briggs

Praise for *A Touch of Crimson*

"*A Touch of Crimson* will rock readers with a stunning new world, a hot-blooded hero, and a strong, kick-ass heroine. This is Sylvia Day at the top of her game!"

—Larissa Ione, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Angels and demons, vampires and lycans, all set against an inventive, intriguing story world that hooked me from the first page. Balancing action and romance, humor and hot sensuality, Sylvia Day's storytelling dazzles. I can't wait to read more about this league of sexy, dangerous guardian angels and the fascinating world they inhabit. *A Touch of Crimson* is a paranormal romance lover's feast!"

—Lara Adrian, *New York Times* bestselling author

"Sylvia Day spins a gorgeous adventure in *A Touch of Crimson* that combines gritty, exciting storytelling with soaring lyricism. Adrian is my favorite kind of hero -- an alpha male angel determined to win the heart of his heroine, Lindsay, while protecting her from his lethal enemy. Lindsay is a gutsy, likable woman with paranormal abilities of her own, as well as a dedication to protecting humanity against a race of demonic monsters. This is definitely a book for your keeper shelf."

—Angela Knight, *New York Times* bestselling author

"*A Touch of Crimson* explodes with passion and heat. A hot, sexy angel to die for and a gutsy heroine make for one exciting read!"

—Cheyenne McCray, *New York Times* bestselling author

Chapter 1

“Phineas is dead.”

The pronouncement hit Adrian Mitchell like a physical blow. Gripping the handrail to counterbalance his shaken composure, he rounded a bend in the stairwell and looked at the seraph who ascended abreast of him. With the relaying of the news, Jason Taylor advanced into Phineas’s former rank as Adrian’s second-in-command. “When? How?”

Jason easily kept up with Adrian’s inhuman pace as they approached the roof. “About an hour ago. It was called in as a vamp attack.”

“No one noticed a vampire within striking distance? How the fuck is that possible?”

“That was my question. I sent Damien to investigate.”

They reached the last landing. The lycan guard in front of them pushed open the heavy metal door, and Adrian slipped sunglasses over his eyes before stepping into the Arizona sunshine. He watched the guard recoil from the ovenlike heat, then heard a complaining growl from the second lycan, who brought up the rear. As base creatures of instinct, they were susceptible to physical stimuli in ways the seraphim and vampires were not. Adrian didn’t feel the temperature at all; the loss of Phineas had chilled his blood.

A helicopter waited on the pad in front of them, its whirring blades churning the oppressively dry and gritty air. Its rounded side was emblazoned with both MITCHELL AERONAUTICS and Adrian’s winged logo.

“You have doubts.” He focused on the details because he couldn’t afford to vent his fury now. Inside, he was shattered by grief over the loss of his best friend and trusted lieutenant. But as leader of the Sentinels, he couldn’t appear diminished in any way. Phineas’s death would send ripples through the ranks of his elite unit of seraphim. The Sentinels would be looking to him for strength and guidance.

“One of his lycans survived the attack.” Despite the roar of the aircraft’s engine, Jason didn’t need to raise his voice to be heard. He also didn’t cover his seraph blue eyes, despite the pair of designer shades perched atop his golden head. “I find it a bit . . . *odd* that Phineas was investigating the size of the Navajo Lake pack; then he gets ambushed on the way home and killed. Yet one of his dogs survives to call it in as a vamp assault?”

Adrian had been utilizing the lycans for centuries as both guards for the Sentinels and heeler dogs to herd the vampires into designated areas. But recent signs of restlessness among the lycans signaled a need for him to reevaluate. They'd been created for the express purpose of serving his unit. If necessary, Adrian would remind them of the pact made by their ancestors. They could have all been turned into soulless, bloodsucking vampires as punishment for their crimes, but he'd spared them in return for their indenture. Although some of the lycans believed their debt had been paid by their predecessors, they failed to recognize that this world was made for mortals. They could never live among and alongside humans. Their only place was the one Adrian had made for them.

One of his guards ducked low and pushed through the air turbulence created by the helicopter blades. Reaching the aircraft, the lycan held the door open.

Adrian's power buffered him from the tempest, allowing him to proceed without effort. He looked at Jason. "I'll need to question the lycan who survived the attack."

"I'll tell Damien." The wind whipped through the lieutenant's blond locks and sent his sunglasses flying.

Adrian snatched them out of the air with a lightning-quick grasp. Vaulting into the cabin, he settled into one of the two rear-facing bucket seats.

Jason occupied the other one. "But I have to ask: is a guard dog that can't guard worth anything? Maybe you should put him down to reinforce that by example."

"If he's at fault, he'll pray for death." Adrian tossed the shades at him. "But until I know otherwise, he's a victim and my only witness. I need him if I'm to catch and punish those who did this."

The two lycans dropped onto the opposite row of seats. One was stocky, a bruiser. The other was nearly equal in height to Adrian.

The taller guard secured his seat belt and said, "That 'dog's' mate died trying to protect Phineas. If he could've done something, he would have."

Jason opened his mouth.

Adrian held up a hand to keep him quiet. "You're Elijah."

The lycan nodded. He was dark haired and had the luminous green eyes of a creature tainted with the blood of demons. It was one of the points of contention between Adrian and the lycans that he'd transfused their seraph ancestors with demon blood when they'd agreed to serve the Sentinels. That touch of demon was what made them half man/half beast and it had spared the souls that should have died with the amputation of their wings. It also made them mortal, with finite life spans, and there were many who resented him for that.

"You seem to know more about what happened than Jason does," Adrian

noted, studying the lycan. Elijah had been sent to Adrian's pack for observation, because he'd displayed unacceptable Alpha traits. The lycans were trained to look to the Sentinels for leadership. If one of their own ever rose to prominence, it might lead to divided loyalties which could spark thoughts of rebellion. The best way to deal with a problem was to prevent it from occurring in the first place.

Elijah looked out the window, watching the roof recede as the helicopter lifted high into Phoenix's cloudless blue sky. His hands were fisted, betraying his breed's innate fear of flying. "We all know a mated pair can't live without each other. No lycan would ever deliberately watch their mate die. Not for any reason."

Adrian leaned back, attempting to ease the tension created by restraining wings that wanted to spread and stretch in a physical manifestation of his pained rage. What Elijah said was true, which left him facing the possibility of a vampire offensive. His head fell back against the seat. The need for vengeance burned like acid. The vampires had taken so much from him—the woman he loved, friends, and fellow Sentinels. The loss of Phineas was akin to severing his right arm. He intended to sever far more than that from the one responsible.

Knowing his sunglasses wouldn't hide the flaming irises that betrayed his roiling emotions, he shuttered his gaze . . .

. . . and almost missed the glint of sunlight on silver.

He jerked to the side by instinct, narrowly missing a dagger slash to the neck.

Comprehension flashed. *The pilot.*

Adrian caught the arm reaching around his headrest and snapped the bone. A female scream pierced the cabin. The pilot's broken limb flopped against the leather at an unnatural angle; her blade clattered to the floorboard. Adrian released his harness and spun around, baring his claws. The lycans shot forward, one on either side of him.

Without a guiding hand at the stick, the helicopter pitched and yawed. Frantic beeping sounded from the cockpit.

The pilot ignored her useless arm. Using the other, she thrust a second silver dagger through the gap between the two rear-facing seats.

Bared fangs. Foaming mouth. Bloodshot eyes.

A goddamned diseased vampire. Distracted by Phineas's death, he'd made a fucking major oversight.

The lycans partially shifted, unleashing their beasts in response to the threat. Their roars of aggression reverberated in the confined space. Elijah, hunched by the low roof, pulled back his fist and swung. The impact knocked the pilot into

the cyclic stick, shoving it forward. The nose of the helicopter dove, hurtling them toward the ground.

The wailing alarms were deafening.

Adrian lunged, tackling the vampress with a midsection hit and smashing her through the cockpit window. Free-falling, they grappled.

“One taste, Sentinel,” she sing-songed through froth, her eyes wild as she struggled to bite him with needle-sharp canines.

He punched into her rib cage, rending flesh and splintering bone. Fisting her pounding heart, he bared his teeth in a smile.

His wings snapped open in a burst of iridescent white tipped in crimson. Like a parachute deploying, the thirty-foot expanse halted his descent with teeth-rattling abruptness, ripping the beating organ free of the writhing vampire. She plummeted to the earth, trailing acrid smoke and ash as she disintegrated. In his hand, the heart still pumped, spurting viscous blood before losing life and bursting into flame. He crushed the fleshy organ into a pulpy mass, then tossed it aside. It fell in burning embers, billowing away in a glittering cloud.

The helicopter whined as it spiraled toward the desert floor.

Tucking his wings in close, Adrian dove toward the aircraft. One lycan peered out the windowless cockpit, his face blanched and eyes glowing green.

Jason shot out of the damaged helicopter like a bullet. He circled back, his dark gray and burgundy wings a racing shadow across the sky. “What are you doing, Captain?”

“Saving the lycans.”

“Why?”

The ferocity of Adrian’s glare was the only answer he deigned to give. Wisely, Jason banked and came around.

Knowing the beasts would need to be spurred through their innate terror of heights, Adrian compelled the one standing in the cockpit. “*Jump.*”

The angelic resonance to his voice rumbled across the desert like thunder, demanding undeniable obedience. Mindlessly, the lycan tumbled into the open sky. Arrowing directly toward him, Jason snatched the guard out of harm’s way.

Elijah needed no compulsion. Exhibiting remarkable courage, the guard launched himself from the doomed aircraft in an elegant dive.

Adrian swooped under him, grunting as the muscle-heavy lycan slammed onto his back. They were mere feet away from the ground, close enough that the beating of his massive wings sent sand twisting upward in spiraling gusts.

The helicopter hit the desert floor a heartbeat later, exploding into a roiling tower of flames that could be seen for miles.

Chapter 2

There was a walking wet dream in Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport.

Lindsay Gibson spotted him at her boarding gate during a cursory surveillance of her immediate perimeter. Arrested by his raw sensuality, she slowed to a halt in the middle of the concourse. A low whistle of appreciation escaped her. Perhaps her luck was finally turning around. She would certainly welcome a silver lining after the day she'd been having so far. Her takeoff from Raleigh had been delayed almost an hour and she'd missed her original connection. From the looks of it, she had barely made her rebooked flight, if the number of passengers standing by the gate was any indication.

Finishing her assessment of the crowd around her, Lindsay returned her attention to the most decadent-looking man she'd ever seen.

He paced sinuously along the edge of the waiting area, his long jeans-clad legs maintaining a precisely controlled stride. His thick black hair was slightly overlong, framing a savagely masculine face. A cream-colored V-neck T-shirt stretched over powerfully ripped shoulders, hinting at a body worthy of completing the package.

Lindsay pushed a lock of rain-damp hair back from her forehead and cataloged every detail. Unadulterated sex appeal—this guy had it. The kind you couldn't fake or buy; the kind that made handsomeness a bonus.

He moved without looking, yet unerringly avoided a man who cut through his path. His attention was occupied by a BlackBerry, his thumb rhythmically stroking over the trackpad in a way that caused places low in Lindsay's belly to clench.

A drop of rainwater slid down her neck. The cool, slow trickle heightened her physical awareness of the guy she was devouring with her gaze. Behind him, the view of the tarmac revealed a gloomy gray late-afternoon sky. Sheets of rain pelted the windows framing the terminal. The inclement weather was unexpected, and not just because there'd been no rain in the forecast. She always anticipated weather conditions with uncanny accuracy, but she hadn't felt this storm coming. It had simply been sunny when she landed, then began pouring buckets shortly after.

Usually, she loved rain and wouldn't have minded having to step outside to catch the interterminal bus from one Sky Harbor terminal to another. Today,

however, there was a morose quality to the weather. A weight of melancholy, or mourning. And she was empathetic.

As long as she could remember, the wind had spoken to her. Whether it shouted through a storm or whispered through stillness, it always conveyed its message. Not in words, but in feelings. Her dad called it her sixth sense and he went out of his way to act as if it was a cool quirk to have instead of something freakish.

That inner radar drew her to the luscious man by her gate as much as his looks did. There was a brooding air about him that reminded her of a brewing storm gathering strength. She was strongly attracted to that quality in him . . . and to the lack of a wedding band on his finger.

Pivoting, Lindsay faced him head-on and willed him to look at her.

His head lifted. His gaze met hers.

She was hit with the sensation of being buffeted by the wind, the gusts whipping through her hair. But there was none of the chill. Only heat and seductive humidity. Lindsay held his stare for an endless moment, riveted by the drawing pull of brilliant azure irises, eyes that were as tumultuous and ancient as the fury of the weather outside.

Inhaling sharply, she turned and walked to a nearby gourmet pretzel shop, giving him the opportunity to chase her obvious interest . . . or not. She knew instinctively that he was a man who pursued.

She reached the counter and glanced up at the menu. The smell of warm, yeasty bread and melted butter made her mouth water. The last thing she needed before sitting on her ass for another hour straight was a carbohydrate bomb like a giant pretzel. Then again, maybe the rush of serotonin would soothe nerves jangled by the sensory input from the large number of people around her.

She ordered. "Pretzel sticks, please. With marinara sauce and a diet soda."

The clerk relayed the total. Lindsay dug into her purse for her wallet.

"Allow me."

God . . . that voice. Tantalizingly sonorous. Lindsay knew it was *him*.

He reached around her and she breathed in his exotic scent. Not cologne. Just earthy, virile male. Crisp and pure, like air cleansed by a rainstorm.

He slid a twenty-dollar bill across the counter. She smiled and let him.

It was too bad she was wearing her oldest pair of jeans, a loose T-shirt, and army-issue jungle boots. Great for ease of movement, but she would've preferred to look hot for this guy. He really was way out of her league, from the movie-star good looks to the Vacheron Constantin watch on his wrist.

Turning to face him, she held out her hand. "Thank you, Mr. . . . ?"

"Adrian Mitchell." He accepted the handshake, with the addition of his

thumb stroking across her knuckles.

Lindsay had a visceral response to his touch. Her breath caught and the tempo of her heartbeat accelerated. Up close, he was devastating. Both fiercely masculine and terrifyingly beautiful. Flawless. “Hi, Adrian Mitchell.”

He reached down and caught her luggage tag with long, elegant fingers. “Nice to meet you, Lindsay Gibson . . . from Raleigh? Or returning there?”

“I’m heading your direction. We’re sharing a plane.”

His eyes were the most unusual shade of blue. Like the vivid cerulean at the heart of a flame. Set within olive skin and framed by thick dark lashes, they were mesmerizing.

And they were focused on her as if he couldn’t get enough of looking at her.

He raked her from head to toe with a searing glance. She felt bare and flushed, left naked by the undressing he’d done in his mind. Her body responded to the provocation. Her breasts swelled; everything else softened.

A woman would have to soften for him, because there was nothing remotely yielding about his body. From the sculpted definition of his shoulders and biceps to the chiseled features of his face, every angle was sharp and precise.

He reached around her for his change, moving with a lithe and primal grace.

I bet he fucks like an animal.

Heated by the thought, Lindsay caught the extension handle of her suitcase. “So is Orange County home? Or are you traveling for business?”

“I’m going home. To Anaheim. And you?”

She moved to the pickup counter. He followed at a more sedate pace, but there was something inherently determined about the way he came after her. His predacity sent a shiver of expectation through her. Her luck had definitely changed—her final destination was Anaheim, too.

“Orange County is going to be home. I’m relocating for a job.” She wasn’t going to get as detailed as naming a city. She knew how to protect herself if she had to, but she didn’t want to buy any more trouble than she already had.

“That’s a big move. One side of the country to the other.”

“It was time for a change.”

His mouth curved in a half smile. “Have dinner with me.”

The velvety resonance to his voice engaged her interest further. He was charismatic and magnetic, two qualities that made short-term relationships memorable.

She accepted the bag and soda the clerk passed to her. “You get right to the point. I like that.”

The calling of their flight number drew her attention back to the gate. A short delay was announced, causing the waiting passengers to shift restlessly.

Adrian never took his eyes from her.

He gestured to the row of chairs near where he'd been pacing. "We have time to get to know each other."

Lindsay walked with him over to the seating area. She canvassed the vicinity again, taking brief note of the numerous women following Adrian with their gazes. The sense of him being a leashed tempest was no longer so overwhelming, while outside the rain had abated to a heavy drizzle. The correlation was intriguing.

Her ferocious reaction to Adrian Mitchell and his unique ability to set off her inner weather radar cemented her decision to get closer to him. Anomalies in her life always bore greater investigation.

He waited until she was settled into a seat, then asked, "Do you have friends picking you up? Family?"

No one was meeting her. She had a shuttle reserved to take her to the hotel where she'd be staying until she found a suitable apartment. "It's not wise to share that sort of information with a stranger."

"So let me address the risk." He shifted with sleek fluidity, reaching into his back pocket to grab his billfold. Withdrawing a business card, he held it out to her. "Call whoever is expecting you. Tell them who I am and how to reach me."

"You're determined." Also used to giving commands. She didn't mind. She had a strong personality and needed the same in return, or she took the lead. Docile men were fine in certain situations, but not in her personal life.

"I am," he agreed, unabashed.

Lindsay reached for the card. His fingers touched hers and electricity raced up her arm.

His nostrils flared. He caught her hand; his fingertips teased her palm. He could have been stroking between her legs, given how aroused she became from that simple touch. He watched her with an almost tangible sexual heat, dark and intense. As if he knew what her hot buttons were . . . or was set on figuring them out.

"I can tell you're going to be trouble," she murmured, tightening her grip to still his questing fingers.

"Dinner. Conversation. I promise to behave."

Holding him captive, she reached for his business card with her other hand. Her blood was thrumming through her veins, roused by the excitement of such an immediate, unruly attraction. "Mitchell Aeronautics," she read. "But you're flying commercial?"

"I had other plans." His tone was wry. "But my pilot dropped out unexpectedly."

His pilot. Her mouth curved. “Don’t you hate when that happens?”

“Usually . . . Then you came along.” He pulled his BlackBerry out of his pocket. “Use my phone so whoever you call will have that number, too.”

Lindsay reluctantly released him and accepted the phone, even though she had her own. Setting her soda on the worn carpet, she stood. Adrian rose with her. He was affluent, elegant, mannered, solicitous, and drop-dead gorgeous. Yet as polished as he was, there remained a dangerous edge to him that titillated a woman’s basest instincts. Maybe the crowded terminal was provoking her sharp senses. Or maybe they just had a combustible sexual compatibility. Regardless, she wasn’t complaining.

Leaving her pretzel bag on the chair, she moved a few feet away and dialed the number to her father’s auto shop. While she was occupied, Adrian walked to the gate counter.

“Linds. You’re there already?”

She was startled by the abrupt greeting. “How did you know it was me?”

“Caller ID. It shows a 714 area code.”

“I’m on my layover in Phoenix, using someone else’s cell phone.”

“What’s the matter with yours? And why are you still in Phoenix?” A single parent for twenty years, Eddie Gibson had always been overprotective, which wasn’t surprising considering the horrific manner of Regina Gibson’s death.

“My phone’s fine and I missed my connection. I’ve also met someone.” Lindsay explained the situation with Adrian and relayed the information from the business card. “I’m not worried. He just seems like the kind of guy who could use a little resistance. I don’t think he hears the word no very often.”

“Probably not. Mitchell is like Howard Hughes.”

Her brows rose. “How so? Money, movies, starlets? All of the above?”

She assessed Adrian from the back, taking advantage of the opportunity to check him out while his attention was diverted. The rear view was as impressive as the front, revealing a powerful back and a luscious ass.

“If you sat still for more than five minutes, you might know this,” her father said.

God, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d read a magazine, and she had stopped paying for cable television years ago. She rented movies and shows by the season, because even commercials were a luxury she couldn’t make room for. “I can barely keep my own life straight, Dad. Where am I supposed to find time to pay attention to someone else’s?”

“You’re always poking into mine,” he teased.

“I know you. I love you. Celebrities? Not so much.”

“He’s not a celebrity. He actually guards his privacy pretty fiercely. He lives

on some kind of compound in Orange County. I saw it on a television special once. It's some sort of architectural wonder. Mitchell is similar to Hughes in that he's a reclusive gazillionaire who likes planes. The media keeps tabs on him because the public has a fascination with aviators. They always have. And he's supposedly attractive, but I can't judge that sort of thing."

And to think she'd picked him out of a crowd. "Thanks for the heads-up. I'll call you when I get settled."

"I know you can take care of yourself, but be careful."

"Always. Don't eat fast food for dinner. Cook something healthy. Better yet, meet a hot chick and have her cook for you."

"Linds . . ." he began in a mock warning tone.

Laughing, she ended the call, then went into the phone's history and deleted the number.

Adrian approached with a ghost of a smile. He moved so fluidly, exuding power and confidence, which she found even more attractive than his looks. "Everything okay?"

"Absolutely."

He held out a boarding pass. Lindsay saw her name and frowned.

"I took the liberty," he explained, "of arranging adjacent seats."

She took the ticket. First class. Seat number two, which was more than twenty rows closer to the front of the plane than she'd had originally. "I can't pay for this."

"I wouldn't expect you to foot the bill for a change you didn't ask for."

"You need photo ID to mess with someone's ticket."

"Yes, but I pulled a few strings." He retrieved the phone she handed to him. "Are you okay with that?"

She nodded, but her inner warning light lit up. With TSA security being what it was, it should've taken an act of God to change her ticket without her permission. Perhaps the gate attendant had simply succumbed to Adrian's allure or maybe he'd seriously greased her palm, but Lindsay never ignored alarm bells. She was going to have to dig deeper where he was concerned, and she would really have to think twice about what she'd hoped would be a short and sweet, hot and raunchy, no strings attached affair.

Frankly, there was no need for a guy like Adrian to go to any trouble to get into her pants. Every woman in the terminal was eyeing him, some with the sort of searching glance that said, *Give me the slightest encouragement and I'm yours*. Shit, even some of the men were looking at him like that. And he handled the prurient interest so deftly that Lindsay knew it was par for the course for him. He kept his gaze moving, never lingering, while wearing an air of indifference

that acted like a shield. She'd arrowed right through it with her direct come-and-get-it eye contact, but it truly made no sense that he'd taken her bait. She was rain damp and scruffily dressed. Yes, self-assurance was a lure for powerful men, and she had it, but that didn't explain why she felt as if she was the one who'd been snared.

"Just so we're clear," she began, "I was raised to expect men to open doors, pull out chairs, and pick up the tab. In return, I dress nice and try to be charming. That's as far as it goes. You can't buy sex from me. Work for you?"

His mouth curved in that now familiar almost-smile. "Perfectly. We'll have an hour to talk on the plane. If you aren't completely comfortable with me by the time we land, I'll settle for an exchange of phone numbers. Otherwise, I have a car picking me up and we can leave the airport together."

"Deal."

His gaze held a hint of self-satisfaction. Lindsay kept her similar response in check. Whatever else he may be and whatever his motives were, Adrian Mitchell was a challenge she relished.

Chapter 3

I have her. Adrian savored a ferocious surge of triumph.

If Lindsay Gibson knew how predatory and rapaciously sexual his sense of conquest was, she might have thought twice about having dinner with him. His first urge upon seeing her had been to press her against the most convenient flat surface and take her swift and hard. To her, they were meeting for the first time. In truth, they were reuniting after two hundred years apart. Two hellish centuries of waiting and craving.

Today, of all days. Life had a way of grabbing him by the balls at the most in-fucking-convenient times. But he couldn't bitch about this—would never bitch about it.

Shadoe, my love.

They had never been apart this length of time before. Their reunions were always random and unpredictable, yet inexorable. Their souls were drawn to each other despite the disparate roads their lives were traveling.

The endless cycle of her deaths and her inability to remember what they meant to each other was his punishment for having broken the law he'd been created to enforce. It was an excruciatingly effective reprisal. He was dying in slow degrees; his soul—the core of his angelic existence—was ravaged by grief, rage, and a thirst for vengeance. Each time he lost Shadoe, and every day he was forced to live without her, further compromised his ability to carry out his mission. Her absence impaired the commitment to duty that was the cornerstone of who he was—a soldier, a leader, and the gaoler of beings as powerful as he was.

Two hundred damned years. She'd been gone long enough to make him dangerous. A seraph whose heart was encased in ice was a hazard to everyone and everything around him. He was a danger to *her*, because his hunger for her was so voracious he questioned his ability to restrain it. When she was gone, the world was dead to him. The silence within was deafening. Then she returned, and the rush of sensation exploded around him—the pounding of his heart, the heat of her touch, the force of his need. *Life*. Which was lost to him when she was.

As they returned to their seats, Lindsay said, “My dad says you're the Howard Hughes of my generation.”

Impatience clawed at him. Discussing his necessary but meaningless facade after the events of the day was both perverse and anguishing. He was beyond

agitated, his blood flowing thick and hot with fury and driving hunger.

“I’d like to think I’m less eccentric,” he replied in a voice that betrayed none of his volatility. Every cell in his body was attuned to Lindsay Gibson—the vessel carrying the soul he loved. The illicit physical needs of his human shell had roused with vicious alacrity, reminding him how long it had been since she’d last been in his arms. He could never forget how good it was between them. A single scorching glance could set off an incendiary hunger that took hours to burn out.

He craved those intimate hours with her. Craved *her*.

While Shadoe’s physical form reflected the genetics of Lindsay’s family line, he felt and recognized her regardless of the body she was born into. Over the years, her appearance and ethnicity had varied widely, yet his love burned undiminished regardless. His attraction was borne of the connection he felt to her, the sense of finding the other half of himself.

Lindsay shrugged. “I don’t mind eccentric. Makes things interesting.”

Raindrops glistened in her hair. She was a blonde in this incarnation, with tousled curls that were sexy as hell. The length was short, about four inches all around. His hands clenched against the desire to fist the lush mass, to hold her motionless while his mouth slanted over hers and quenched his desperate thirst for the taste of her.

He was in love with Shadoe’s soul, but Lindsay Gibson was inciting a blistering lust. The combined response was devastating, blindsiding him when he was already on edge. His spine shifted with restless awareness, forcing him to restrain wings wanting to flex in sinuous pleasure at the sight and smell of her. Sitting beside her on the plane would be both heaven and hell.

He had the advantage of remembering every one of their past relationships, but Lindsay had only her instincts to go on, and they were clearly sending her signals she wasn’t sure how to process. Her nostrils flared gently, her pupils were dilated, and her body language confirmed her reciprocating attraction. She watched him carefully, assessing him. There was no coyness to her. She was bold and self-assured. Definitely comfortable in her own skin. He liked her immensely already, and knew that would be the case regardless of his history with Shadoe.

“Where in Orange County are you heading?” he asked. “And what was the draw worth uprooting for?”

Although Adrian knew her as deeply as any man could know his woman, in most ways he was starting from scratch every time he found her again. Lindsay’s likes and dislikes, her personality and temperament, her *memories* were unique to her. Every reunion was a rediscovery.

She peeled back the flimsy plastic top to her soda cup and took a sip. “Anaheim. I work in hospitality, so Southern California tourism is right up my alley.”

He gave the appearance of reaching into his back pocket. With his hand behind him, he summoned a straw and then presented it to her. “Restaurants or hotels?”

How did she take her coffee? Did she even enjoy coffee? Did she sleep on her back or her stomach? Where did she like to be touched? Was she a night owl or an early riser?

Lindsay stared at the straw, then arched a brow at him. She accepted it and tore into the protective paper, but was clearly wondering when he’d picked it up. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

There was so much to assimilate and an unknown amount of time in which to work. Once, she’d come back to him for twenty minutes; another time, twenty years. Her father always found her. The leader of the vampires was as drawn to her as Adrian was, and Syre was determined to finish what he’d started. He wanted to make his daughter immortal through vampirism, which would kill the soul connecting her to Adrian.

That would never fucking happen as long as Adrian was breathing.

“Hotels,” she answered, returning to his question. “I love the energy. They never sleep, never close. The endless flow of travelers ensures there’s always another challenge to tackle.”

“Which property?”

“The Belladonna. It’s a new resort near Disneyland.”

“Owned by Gadara Enterprises.” It wasn’t a question. Raguel Gadara was a real estate mogul rivaling Steve Wynn and Donald Trump. All of his new developments were heavily advertised, but even without the publicity, Adrian knew Raguel well. Not just through their secular lives, but also through their celestial ones. Raguel was one of the seven earthbound archangels, falling several rungs below Adrian’s rank of seraph in the angelic hierarchy.

Lindsay’s dark eyes brightened. “You’ve heard of it.”

“Raguel is an old acquaintance.” He began planning the steps required to research her history from birth until this moment. There were no coincidences in his world. He found Shadoc in every reincarnation not due to chance, but because they were destined to cross paths. But to move so near to his headquarters and end up in an angel’s employ . . . ? Raguel owned properties all over the world, including resorts closer to her home on the East Coast. It could not be accidental that circumstances contrived to bring her to Orange County.

Adrian needed to know the opportunities and decisions that led her so directly into his life. The discovery process was one he undertook whenever she returned. He looked for routines or patterns applicable to her former lives. He gained knowledge used to build her trust and affection. And he searched for any sign that they were being manipulated, because the time was fast approaching when he would have to pay for his hubris. He had committed the transgression he'd censured others for: he had fallen in love with Shadoe—a naphil, the child of a mortal woman and the angel her father had once been—and he'd succumbed, countless times, to the decadent sins of her flesh.

He had personally punished her father for the same offense. He'd severed the wings from the fallen angel, an act that took Syre's soul and made him the first of the vampires.

The consequences of Adrian's hypocrisy would eventually catch up with him; it was an inevitability he'd accepted long ago. If Raguel was the means the Creator intended to use to rebuke him, Adrian needed to know and be prepared. He had to ensure that Shadoe would be taken care of when his time came.

His gaze met those of his lycan guards, who were sitting a few rows away on either side. They were observant, curious. They couldn't help but see that he was reacting differently to Lindsay than he did to other women. The last time Shadoe's soul had been with him, neither of the two lycans had been born yet, but they knew his personal life. They knew how little attention he paid to the opposite sex.

He would need more than two guards now that he could resume his hunt for Syre, and Lindsay would need her own dedicated protection. Adrian knew he'd have to manipulate that carefully. She was young—twenty-five at most—and starting out on her own in a new place. Now was the time for her to broaden her horizons, not find out that her new lover was micromanaging her life.

Lindsay rolled her straw between her fingers, her soft pink lips hovering over the tip before parting for a sip.

A wash of heat swept over him. Even the knowledge that he would lose her again, that he was forsaking his duty once again, couldn't dampen the rush of desire quickening his blood. He wanted those lips on his skin, needed to feel them sliding across his flesh, whispering both raw and tender words as they teased him mercilessly. Although the Sentinels had been forbidden to love and mate with mortals, nothing could convince Adrian that Shadoe hadn't been born to belong to him.

She'd talked to her dad on the phone . . .

He grew very still.

Adrian kept his face impassive, but he was intensely alert. Shadoe's various

incarnations had always been raised by a single-parent mother, never by a father. It was as if Syre had marked her soul when he'd begun the Change that would have transformed her into a vampire, ensuring that no other man would ever take his paternal role in her life. "Are your parents in Raleigh?"

A shadow passed over her features. "My dad is. My mother died when I was five."

His fingers flexed restlessly. The order of her parents' deaths had never been mutable.

His long-stable world had canted that morning, and Lindsay Gibson continued to challenge his balance, causing the objects around him to begin a slow slide away from their predetermined place. The lycans had been growing more agitated by the day, the vampires had crossed a precipitous line with the death of Phineas and the attack in the helicopter, and now Shadoe had returned after an interminable absence yet with the most basic pattern of her reincarnations altered.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he murmured, adopting the customary remark offered to grieving mortals who so often viewed death as a sorrowful ending.

"Thank you. How about your family? Big or small?"

"Big. Lots of siblings."

"I envy you. I don't have any brothers or sisters. My dad didn't remarry. He never got over my mom."

Adrian had become adept at winning over her mothers. Men, however, tended to give him a wide berth regardless of any efforts he made to put them at ease. They instinctively sensed the power in him; there could be only one Alpha in a designated space, and he was it. Gaining acceptance from her father might take some work, but it would be worth the time and investment. Familial support was just one of the many avenues he utilized to gain her complete and total surrender, which was the only way he could bear to have her. No holds barred.

He touched the back of her hand where it rested lightly on the armrest, relishing the charge he got from the simple contact. He heard the elevated beat of her heart as if his ear was pressed to her chest. Over the paging of flight information, boarding calls, and gate changes, the strong and steady rhythm of her heartbeat was crystal clear and deeply beloved. "Some women are unforgettable."

"You sound like a romantic."

"Does that surprise you?"

Her lips curved gently. "Nothing surprises me."

His heart ached at that smile. He'd gone too long without her, and his wait was hardly over. While she couldn't fail to feel the pull between them, she didn't

love him. He'd have only her body for a time, which would soothe the sharpest edge of his need but still leave him wanting.

His attention diverted to Elijah, who'd pushed to his feet and moved off the carpeted waiting area to the main concourse. The lycans were uncomfortable in enclosed, crowded spaces. Adrian could have chartered a flight or waited for one of his own planes—either action would have spared his guards their discomfort—but he'd needed to send a message to any vampire stupid enough to think he might have been weakened by the aerial ambush or the loss of his second: *Come and try me again.*

“You love surprises,” she guessed.

Adrian looked at her. “Hate them. Except when they're you.”

Lindsay laughed softly. A forgotten warmth stirred in his chest.

A young woman pushing a stroller and carrying a fussy infant headed toward the gate counter via the carpeted pathway directly in front of them. As she argued with a toddler dragging a small carry-on, Adrian's phone rang. He excused himself from Lindsay and stepped a short distance away.

The caller ID on his phone showed a number, but no name. “Mitchell,” he answered.

“Adrian.” The icy voice was instantly recognizable.

Primal aggression spurred Adrian's pulse. Lightning split the sky in tandem, followed by the roar of thunder. “Syre.”

“You have something that belongs to me.”

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A RENEGADE ANGELS NOVEL**

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Sylvia Day

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