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Opening extract from **Angel Fever**

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PROLOGUE



“HOLD STILL,” SAID ALEX.

“I can’t!” Willow gasped. She was leaning over the stream, her long blonde hair a slithering mass of shampoo. She shrieked, half laughing, as Alex poured a canful of water over it. “Oh! That is so cold!”

Alex started laughing too. “You’re the one who wanted to wash it.”

“I had to; it was getting disgusting... Is all the shampoo out?”

He grinned as he scooped more chilly water from the stream. “Nope. Not even close.”

As Alex woke up, Willow's laughter faded into silence.

There was no stream, no ramshackle cabin nearby. He was lying in a sleeping bag in a tent, its nylon walls a deep blue in the predawn light. Even Willow was different. The girl asleep in his arms had short red-gold hair now; it framed her face in untidy spikes.

A dream. Alex smiled as he stretched, remembering that day up at the cabin – and then everything came slamming back and his smile vanished. Christ, no wonder he'd been dreaming about the cabin: back then their biggest problem had been hiding out from the Church of Angels. Now... Alex let out a breath and rubbed his temples with one hand.

Now things were a little different.

The uncertainty was the worst part, he thought grimly. If they just knew what the hell was going on, they could start to deal with it. But it had been three days – *three days* – and he and the rest of his team still had no clue.

They were finally almost out of the Sierra Madre; their journey north through Mexico had been spent mostly on mountain back roads so they could keep out of sight. Three days of the truck lurching over rough terrain; three days of dust and plummeting views. Three days of sending Seb, the only native Spanish speaker, ahead to high, isolated farms to purchase gas.

"They don't know yet that something has happened," Seb had reported each time he returned, lugging enough gas to keep them going – along with food pressed on him by the farmers' wives. "All they know is that the TV stations aren't working and the internet is down."

Alex had felt his team's tension increase with every rendition of this. The words didn't begin to tell them what they were all so desperate to know. Homes up here had generators; it meant nothing that the farms still had electricity. What was going on everywhere else?

Did dead TV and internet mean that more of the world than just Mexico City was gone?

With a soft rustle, Willow stirred in his arms. As her green eyes flickered open, they at first held only sleepy confusion – and then Alex saw her remember.

She swallowed and shifted so that her arms were folded across his chest. She rested her chin on them. "Morning," she whispered.

"Morning." Alex stroked her spiky hair, smoothing it from her face. "Did you sleep okay?"

"Not really." She pressed her cheek against his palm. "I – I still can't stop seeing it," she admitted in a small voice. "Every time I close my eyes."

"I know. Me too," Alex said roughly. The sight of Mexico City as it had gone down – buildings shuddering into nothing; cars and people tumbling into gaping cracks

– was one that would never leave him.

Willow's eyes were haunted. "And I just keep thinking... if Mexico City was the only place affected, then we should be seeing helicopters heading down there to help. The Red Cross or the army or..." She trailed off. She didn't need to add how silent the skies had been.

Alex gripped her hand hard. "The US could still be okay," he told her. "If only one or two cities were hit there, they'll be focusing relief efforts on those for now – not here." He'd been saying the same thing for days, trying to keep his team calm. Besides – please, God – it could actually be true.

Willow's gaze was steady. If she'd psychically sensed his jumble of hope and dread, she didn't comment. Looking down, she trailed a finger across his chest. Finally she cleared her throat.

"So...tell me something about you I don't know," she said.

Surprise touched him; it was a game they'd played back at the cabin. "You already know everything about me," he said softly. He pulled her fully on top of him and wrapped his arms around her.

Her voice was strained. "Oh, I bet there are still one or two mysteries left, if you try... Please?" she added.

Alex knew she was trying to take his mind off what had happened – and her own, for that matter. "Okay, give me a time frame," he said at last.

"Preteen," suggested Willow. "Say, between nine and twelve."

His father's training camp in the New Mexico desert: cement buildings, burning white in the sun. Alex thought, stroking Willow's spine. "Have I told you that I broke my arm when I was ten?"

She shook her head. "No, how?"

"I crashed Juan's motorcycle. He'd just taught me how to ride it, and I thought it'd be cool to go for a night drive through the desert."

Willow's body relaxed a little. "You mean you stole his bike?"

Alex nodded, remembering. "Yeah, pretty much. There was a full moon, and I was doing donuts in the sand – and then these two headlights came at me out of nowhere, and I skidded and hit my arm on a rock."

"Your dad?"

"Yeah – and, man, he was pissed. Especially since he had to take me to Alamogordo to the hospital."

Silence fell. With an effort, Alex kept his thoughts from what might have happened to the world. *Your turn*, he started to say, and then they heard the echo of a truck door closing.

Willow glanced up. "Someone else must be awake."

"We'd better get moving," said Alex.

Their eyes met. Once they were out of the mountains,

the plan was to return to the main highways; with luck they'd be back in the US by noon. The question was, what would they find?

Willow licked her lips. "So...how long do you think it'll take us to reach Nevada once we cross the border?"

"Normally less than a day," Alex said. "Now, though – I guess it depends."

Willow started to say something else but didn't. She nodded tensely, and sat up and reached for their tangle of clothes.

Watching her get dressed, there was suddenly so much Alex wanted to say: that no matter what had happened, their group of Angel Killers would somehow be all right. That as long as the two of them were together, they'd get through anything. The words felt hollow, even to him.

At least Raziel's gone, he reminded himself harshly. The angel's fiery death above Mexico City had been the one positive in all this.

Willow pulled on her blue hoodie; her tousled head emerged. Alex touched her face, caressing her cheekbone with one thumb. "You are so beautiful, you know that?" he said in a low voice.

Abruptly, Willow looked close to tears. She clutched his hand. "It'll be okay," she said. "Oh God, Alex, it just has to be."

He had no answer. He cradled her face and kissed her

deeply, and for a few seconds lost himself in the feel of their lips together.

He could hear the low, worried buzz of voices from outside. Seb, Liz and Sam were all up. He and Willow drew apart, and Alex let out a breath.

"We'd better go," he said.

The journey to Nevada took three more days.

On his first glimpse of the small brick building in the middle of the desert, Alex was so tired that all he could think was, *Oh, shit, we're in the wrong place*. Then his brain cleared a little, and he realized this was it after all.

"What the hell?" Sam demanded from the back. "This is just an electricity substation!" They could see pylons clustered in the building's yard, stabbing at the sky.

"That's all it's supposed to look like," Alex said sharply as he steered the 4 × 4 over the uneven dirt road.

Willow glanced at him from the front passenger seat but didn't say anything. They were all exhausted, on edge...and hardly any wiser about what had happened to the world. *Though the signs don't look great so far*, thought Alex dryly. The fact that there'd been no border control was kind of a tip-off.

As they'd neared the United States, they'd heard people shouting gleefully about the abandoned border. If true, the

ramifications were chilling, but Alex had decided to try it for the sake of speed. And when they'd reached Ciudad Juárez, it had been true all right: people swarming over the fence into El Paso, dropping into the US unchallenged; cars cruising straight through the unmanned gates, honking joyfully.

"*Dios mío* – they still think there's something better here," Seb had murmured.

No one had paid attention to their dusty 4 × 4. They'd drawn their guns anyway. Willow had been driving; she'd sped them across the border, knuckles white on the wheel – and then they were home again.

It was nothing at all like the place they'd left.

Even without the border chaos, it was obvious there'd been major earthquakes in the US too. Whole swathes of the nations' electricity grids had been knocked out – the night-time portion of the drive had been shrouded in an eerie darkness, without a single light showing. Things were even worse in daylight, with panicked looting going on everywhere they passed, until Alex had decided to stick to back roads again.

How much? he kept thinking. The question pounded at his brain. *How much of the world has been destroyed?*

They'd almost reached the brick building now. It looked as if it had crouched undisturbed in the desert for decades. *DANGER OF ELECTROCUTION. KEEP OUT!* read the weathered sign.

A CIA agent had tipped them off about this place back in Mexico City. The code that she'd given them worked; the gate gave a jerk and slid open. A garage door raised up, leading into the building itself, and inside there was a light. Of course, realized Alex, the place must really be a substation, which meant it had its own power supply. The door slid shut as they drove inside.

The small room contained only a desk with a display of video monitors. On the wall facing them were two elevators: one car-size and the other smaller.

No one spoke as they got out of the truck. Alex drew his pistol. He'd done a scan for energy and knew there wasn't anyone inside – but he still felt better armed.

They took the smaller elevator down. After nearly a minute, its doors opened onto a large garage. A dozen shiny 4 × 4s were parked, waiting. At one end stood a pair of gasoline pumps, like a miniature gas station.

They stepped out and stared. "Do you think there's actually *gas* in those?" Liz asked finally.

"Yeah, definitely." Alex gave a short, humourless laugh. "Ever wonder where your tax dollars went?"

Their footsteps echoed down gleaming corridors as they explored the bunker. The details they'd been given had done nothing to prepare Alex for actually being here. The vast underground base could support a thousand people for up to two years. It just went on and on: a fully

stocked armoury, an industrial-size kitchen, closets piled high with sheets and pillowcases. The silence got to you after a while; Alex kept bracing himself with every door he opened, not knowing what he was about to see.

But there was no sign that anyone had been here recently. And no sign of their missing teammates, Kara and Brendan – last seen in Mexico City.

Willow stood peering into a closet full of cleaning supplies. She gave Alex a worried glance as the others went on ahead.

“Kara definitely knows where this place is, right?” she asked in an undertone.

Alex nodded, not surprised that she’d picked up on his thoughts. Kara had seen the specs on the base. If she and Brendan had made it out, this was where they’d have come.

Willow touched his arm. “Alex, they could still show up.”

She didn’t add that the odds of them having made it through the lurching Mexico City streets in Juan’s old van were infinitesimal...if they’d managed to escape the Church of Angels mob at all. Alex saw again the hundreds of bloodthirsty people, all intent on killing the AKs, and his jaw tightened.

“Yeah, they could still show up.” He heard his voice shut a door on the conversation. How many people he cared about had he now lost to the fight with the angels?

Silently, Willow stepped close and slipped her arms around him. Alex let out a breath and held her, dropping his head down to her shoulder.

“Hey, we’ve found something,” said Sam, coming back to them.

Alex glanced up. “What?”

“Shortwave radio.” The big, muscular Texan still wore the same rumpled clothes he’d had on when they escaped Mexico City. “And it works,” he added.

Alex’s pulse leaped. Shortwave radios could broadcast worldwide – they were the one way the planet could still communicate even if other systems were gone. They followed Sam quickly to what was clearly a communications room, where a curved metal desk held a gleaming radio.

Seb stood with his hands propped on the desk; Liz sat frowning as she twiddled the dial. A few times she paused, fine-tuning. Each time there was only static.

She shook her head. “I don’t think anyone’s—”

And then the speakers burst into life.

“...this terrible catastrophe. But do not despair, because I am stepping forward to offer my leadership...”

Alex froze at the male voice with its English lilt. Oh *Christ*, no – it couldn’t be.

“What the hell?” Sam yelped. “But Raziel’s dead! We saw him die!”

“Quiet,” Alex said tersely.

Willow's face had drained at the sound of her father's voice; she clutched the desk. Alex turned up the volume; without looking up, he gripped her hand.

"...those who do not know what has happened, I am deeply sorrowed to announce that the Seraphic Council has been assassinated in Mexico City. This vile deed was carried out by Willow Fields and her gang of Angel Killers, knowing full well that the Council had put down roots of energy in your world. She *knew* their assassination would cause the very earth to grow unstable."

Oh, the bastard. And people will believe it too, Alex thought. The world already believed that Willow was a terrorist – and of course Raziel left out the fact that *he* was the one who'd wanted the Council dead and had manipulated the unknowing AKs into doing it for him.

Raziel sounded aggrieved, sincere: "She is a deranged individual who hates the angels. *She* is the reason for the earthquakes that have devastated so much of your world."

So much of the world? Alex swallowed and glanced at Willow. Her eyes had grown too big for her face. The others stood stricken and waiting.

A faint rustle of paper. "In the US, the following cities have been destroyed: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, New Orleans, Dallas..."

Alex's mind reeled as the list went on and on, over a dozen, each city name a death knell. How could New York

City be *gone*? And Chicago. It was his hometown. He had a fuzzy memory of walking along the lakeside with his mother – of her laughing and calling ahead to his brother Jake to slow down.

Liz was crying. "Is he...is he lying, maybe?"

"No," Seb said faintly, staring at the radio. "I think he is telling the truth."

Sam's broad face was slack. "Dallas..." he murmured, pushing a helpless hand through his hair.

Willow had gone deathly pale. Alex's hand tightened on hers. "Okay, we already knew it was bad," he said from between gritted teeth. He glared at the others. "This is not going to break us. Do you hear me? This is *not* going to break us."

"...worldwide, the news is also dire. We have confirmed accounts of the destruction of London, Paris, Tokyo, Madrid..."

Finally the terrible litany came to an end.

"There are no words for what has happened," said Raziel. "Cities have been levelled. Millions have died. And Willow Fields is at fault. *She* has done this to your world."

With a small whimper, Willow pressed a hand to her mouth; her shoulders crumpled as if she'd been punched.

"No!" Alex straightened quickly and pulled her away from the others. "You do not believe this," he said fiercely.

“You are *never* to believe this crap. Do you hear me? *It was not your fault.* It was him – Raziel. *He’s* the one who’s done this.”

Willow had a hand over her face, crying. “I should have known – I should have figured out sooner what he was up to. Oh God, all those people...”

Alex folded Willow into his arms as she began to sob. “How could you have known?” he demanded. “You were trying to *save* the world. Raziel knew that – he used it!” Alex drew back, stroked her hair from her face with both hands. “Willow, don’t believe him! Tell me you know it wasn’t your fault.”

“I...” Willow struggled to speak against the tears. “Maybe not completely my fault, but—”

“It wasn’t your fault *at all!*”

“Of course it was! I had a role in it, Alex. How can I get away from that – *how?*”

“You had a role like a pawn in a chess game has a role, *querida,*” Seb said vehemently from behind them. “That’s all.”

Over Willow’s shoulder, Alex could see the expression on Seb’s stubbled face, his love for Willow clear. “And you weren’t the only one who didn’t know Raziel was spying on us,” Seb added. “I checked too; I found nothing!”

“I know that!” Willow cried. “But if I’d just figured it out sooner—”

“How?” broke in Alex. “You didn’t know he was in your head in the first place!” He gripped her hands. He thought he’d do anything, pay any price, if he could take this anguish away from her. “Willow, there was no way you could have stopped it – none. This was all him, okay? Not you. Never you.”

She clung to his hands, her face tormented. Finally she gave a faint moan and leaned forward onto Alex’s chest. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her.

No one spoke. In the background Raziel’s voice was reciting the list of cities again. *On a loop*, Alex thought, his own shock and grief pulling at him.

When Willow at last raised her head, she looked as if she’d aged a decade. “Okay,” she said woodenly. “I’ll – try not to blame myself.” Her eyes were locked on his; her voice lowered to a whisper. “And... I love you, by the way.”

He kissed her, not caring about the others standing there. He knew, though, that this would haunt her for ever, and inwardly he cursed Raziel even more. The destruction of half the world was still too much to take in; his mind kept skittering away from the reality of it. But what the angel had done to his own daughter made Alex want to rip Raziel’s halo apart with his bare hands.

Liz cleared her throat, her cheeks damp. “He’s – he’s still talking.”

Willow let out a breath and nodded; they returned to the others.

Raziel's voice had become reassuring. "But you don't need to be afraid! I have a plan that will save us all."

Alex stiffened. No matter how bad things were already, he had a feeling Raziel was about to make them worse.

"As you know, you currently have no power," the angel continued. "Sadly, reinstating it everywhere is not an option – we must conserve our resources from now on. And so selected cities are going to be transformed into bountiful Edens, where life will continue as before! There you will have warmth and electricity, food and comfort."

Alex frowned. *Selected cities?* But bringing back the electricity shouldn't be that difficult, even now – just bypass the damaged stations on the grid until they were repaired. There was no reason to permanently ration power.

No, no reason...except to gain control.

"...meanwhile, emergency camps are being set up. The military is providing assistance. Make your way to one of the temporary camps, and soon there will be glorious Edens for all!"

Great. So Raziel now had control of the military too. Alex could practically see the angel's feigned sad smile as he finished: "These are dark times, but a new dawn is coming. I will take care of you. That is my promise."

After a pause the message began once more.

Seb's jaw was taut. "These Edens will be—"

"A trap," finished Alex flatly. "Yeah, I *bet* he wants to conserve his resources; he's just knocked off half the angels' food supply. So now he'll lure people to live in a few centralized places where he can control everything."

"Like fish in a fish farm," whispered Liz.

On the radio, Raziel was denouncing Willow again.

"Oh, man." Sam's voice was bleak. "How is he even still alive? *How?*"

Alex shook his head; he had no idea. Raziel had been battling other angels above the lurching streets of Mexico City – there'd been a flash of light they'd all thought had meant his death.

Yeah, right. They should have known better – beings like Raziel stuck around until the bitter end. Alex grimaced and moved to snap off the radio; Willow's hand flew out to stop him.

"No, wait," she murmured. "I can almost..." She trailed off, staring at the speakers as Raziel said again, "But you don't need to be afraid! I have a plan that..."

"Afraid," Willow echoed. Abruptly, her face cleared. "There's something we haven't thought of!" she gasped. "Alex, remember on top of the Torre Mayor, when my mind linked with Raziel's? I sensed that half the angels had died – because *he* knew it. But there was something else."

Alex saw again their altercation atop the highest building in Mexico – Raziel running after them with a howling Church of Angels mob just behind. “Go on,” he said.

Willow took a breath. “He was scared. He still is; I can hear it in his voice. Because with so many angels dead, the survivors are vulnerable too now.”

Harsh excitement swept over Alex. *Of course*. The angels were creatures of energy, all linked. If you killed one, they each felt it.

And if enough died, the rest would follow.

He gripped Willow’s hand urgently. “How many more have to die?”

“Not many.” Willow’s expression went distant again; Alex could practically feel her studying the brief encounter with her father. “The number was almost right there in his head... I think we’re talking hundreds, not thousands. More like *one* hundred, even.”

A hundred angels. Alex didn’t move as electricity sizzled through him.

Liz looked dazed. “But...that means we’ve almost defeated them.”

Her words seemed to rouse Sam. “A *hundred*?” he yelped. “Hell, we could do that in a week!” He slapped the desk. “Okay, who’s with me? I say we leave here right now and go kill us some angels!”

“No,” Alex said sharply. “We’ve got to plan this carefully – *really* carefully.”

“You want a plan?” retorted Sam. “Okay, here’s one: we go out there, start shootin’, and don’t get caught! Now, come on!”

Alex’s voice rose. “There are only five of us! The second we kill one, they’ll all feel it; they’ll know we’re still around! If they wipe us out before we finish them off, then that is *it*, for ever.” He rapped a fist against his palm, his mind ticking as he considered options, then discarded them.

“We need a bigger team,” he muttered. “A lot bigger. We’ve got to lay low for a while – months, a year even – let Raziel think we died in Mexico City. And then when there are enough angels gathered in one place, we’ll *strike* – get rid of them all at once.”

“But what about the Edens?” protested Liz. “If we wait too long, he’ll fill the whole world with those places!”

“Let him; it doesn’t matter,” said Alex curtly. “The angels would still be feeding from humans anyway. The important thing is to get rid of them. No mistakes, no screw-ups – just get *rid*, for good.”

The others exchanged glances... and Alex knew he’d convinced them. Even Sam. Willow’s eyes were steady on his; he could feel her love for him – her support. He let out a breath, daring to imagine a world without the angels.

“Oh Christ, babe,” he murmured. “I can’t tell you how much I hope you’re right about this.”

“She’s right.” Seb was sitting on the desk, fiddling with a paper clip. He looked up, his gaze on Willow. “I can sense what she’s getting very easily.”

The tips of Willow’s ears reddened, and Alex knew that Seb meant the psychic link he and Willow shared: the only two half-angels in the world.

Willow had told Alex everything that had happened between her and Seb – the way they’d kissed that night in Mexico City. Though Alex hadn’t enjoyed hearing it, he’d known it was his own stupid fault. He and Willow had fought over her friendship with Seb, and he’d been too stubborn to make up with her before the terrorist attack that had separated Willow and Seb from the others. The weird thing was that he couldn’t bring himself to dislike Seb any more. The half-angel was a good guy – his only crime was being in love with Willow.

Liz cleared her throat. “Listen, I think we should...not *celebrate*, but... Well, I mean, we’re all still alive, and it looks like we might really have a chance again, and...” She tried to smile, her eyes still red. “Besides, I found what has to be the biggest pantry in the universe. The food’s mostly military issue, but there’s a whole mountain of it.”

Alex touched her shoulder. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

* * *

They sat up planning for hours in the base’s rec room: a too-large space that felt almost cosy with the mood that had gripped them all. Their new knowledge made the air crackle with hope – gave them something to think about instead of all the destruction.

Eventually, though, the long, fraught journey caught up with them. One by one, they dropped off where they sat, until only Alex and Willow were still awake, lying curled up on one of the sofas, holding each other.

“Are you okay?” he asked in an undertone, stroking his thumb across her cheekbone.

She let out a breath. “Kind of numb. But, yeah... You?”

Alex nodded. “Now I am.”

He had no intention – none – of making his strike against the angels until they were ready. Because if he did this right, his plan would work. Then not only would what was left of the world be saved, but he and Willow could have the long life together that they both wanted.

The crystal pendant he’d given her glinted around her neck. He touched it gently, feeling its warmth from her skin. Willow swallowed and reached out to trace his eyebrow with her finger. The motion was full of wonder, as if she were discovering him for the first time.

Nothing will stop us this time, Alex vowed to himself,

and to her. *We're going to defeat them.*

As he kissed her, he felt something close to joy, despite the shattered world that lay above.