



Heaven (Halo Trilogy Book 3)

By Alexandra Adornetto

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Bethany, an angel sent to Earth, and her mortal boyfriend, Xavier, have been to Hell and back. But now their love will be put to its highest test yet, as they defy Heavenly law and marry. They don't tell Beth's archangel siblings, Gabriel and Ivy, but the angels know soon enough, and punishment comes in a terrifying form: the Sevens, who are rogue angels bent on keeping Beth and Xavier apart, destroying Gabriel and Ivy, and darkening angelic power in the heavens.

The only way Bethany can elude the Sevens is to hide in the open, and blend in with other mortals their own age. Gabriel and Ivy set them up at college, where they can't reveal their relationship, and where there is still danger around each corner. Will Bethany be called back to Heaven – forever – and face leaving the love of her life?

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Editorial Review

Review

“For fans of the series.” *School Library Journal*

About the Author

ALEXANDRA ADORNETTO's first book, *Halo*, became a *New York Times* bestseller a week after it was published, and has been translated in over a dozen languages around the world. It's sequel *Hades*, published August 2011, was also a *New York Times* bestseller. Born in Australia, Ally is now attending college at the University of Mississippi in Oxford, MS.

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1

Till Death

EVERYTHING began to rattle.

I clutched the edge of the table and watched my engagement ring tumble onto the checkered floor of Sweethearts Café. The tremor lasted only a matter of seconds but the jukebox cut out and the alarmed waitresses teetered as they tried to balance their loaded trays.

Outside I saw the sky darken like bruised flesh and the treetops tremble as if shaken by an invisible hand. The blissful faraway expression on Xavier's face vanished, replaced by the hard, fighting look I'd seen far too much on him lately. I gripped his hand more tightly, closed my eyes, and waited for the blinding light that would surely come to return me to my prison in the sky.

But a moment later the earth was still again and normal activity resumed around us. Everyone had been bracing for something worse and breathed a collective sigh of relief when it didn't come. Now they were laughing, commenting on the unpredictability of Mother Nature while the waitresses hurried to clean up spilled drinks. Nobody was dwelling on what had happened—it would probably be newsworthy for a day or so and then forgotten. But Xavier and I weren't so easily fooled. Trouble was stirring in the Kingdom; we could feel it.

I considered telling Xavier that maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all, that we should return his grandmother's ring and drive back to Bryce Hamilton for the remainder of the graduation ceremony. If we hurried we'd probably arrive in time for him to deliver his valedictory speech. But the more I watched him, the more I faltered in my resolve.

My dutiful side recognized the wisdom of heeding the warning, meekly playing by the rules and not tampering with the will of Heaven. But I could feel a rebelliousness stirring inside me that told me it was too late to turn back. I let the timid girl I'd once been shrink into the shadows like a wallflower at a dance and allowed the new Beth to take over. I didn't know her too well, but somehow I felt like she'd been there all along, waiting in the wings, an understudy ready for her moment to shine.

It was this Beth who stood and snatched up her bag.

“Let's go.”

Xavier tossed some bills down on the table and followed me into the street. He turned his face upward, squinting into the sun, which had quietly reappeared, before letting out a long sigh.

“Think that was directed at us?”

"I don't know," I replied. "We might be reading too much into it."

"Maybe," Xavier said. "But nothing like that's ever happened before and I've lived here all my life."

I looked up and down Main Street. People seemed to be going about their business as usual. I noticed the sheriff was out, reassuring some nervous tourists. His level voice carried over to us.

"There's no cause for alarm, ma'am. Tremors might be rare in these parts but they're nothing to worry about."

The tourists seemed placated by his words but I knew the trembling earth couldn't be a mere coincidence. It was clearly a warning from above, not designed to do any real damage, just get our attention. And it had succeeded.

"Beth?" Xavier faltered. "What do we do now?"

I glanced at the Chevy parked across the street—it would only take us five minutes to get down to the water's edge where Father Mel was waiting for us in the chapel. I remembered visiting him along with Gabriel and Ivy when we first arrived in Venus Cove, and although it had never been openly discussed, he had known what we were. The look on his face had told us everything. I found myself thinking that if a man as pious as Father Mel had agreed to marry us, he must believe in our union. It was comforting to know we had at least one ally in our camp.

I wrestled internally for a moment before catching sight of an elderly couple sitting on a wooden bench in the square. The man held his wife's hand cupped in his own and smiled to himself as the breeze ruffled his white hair, while the sunshine warmed the back of his neck. I wondered how long they'd been together, how much of life's journey they'd shared. It was a glittering afternoon and the birches on the sidewalk twinkled in the sun. I watched a jogger go by, plugged into his iPod, and a little boy making faces at pedestrians through a car window. I may not have been born into this world, but I knew I had earned the right to be here. I was not about to relinquish that right so easily.

I took Xavier's face in my hands. "If I recall ... you just asked me to marry you."

He regarded me uncertainly for a moment until understanding dawned. Then his face broke into a smile. He grabbed my hand with renewed fervor and we dashed across to the waiting Chevy. In the backseat lay the academic caps and gowns we had abandoned earlier but neither of us noticed them now. We didn't speak as Xavier stepped on the gas and the car sped off toward the shoreline. Any doubts we might have had evaporated. Come what may we were sticking with our plan.

* * *

SAINT Mark's was a bluestone chapel, built by European colonists just after the Civil War. A wrought-iron fence surrounded it and a cobbled path lined with bluebells led to its arched oak doors. It was the first Catholic church in the county, and a memorial wall lined the side garden, commemorating fallen confederate soldiers. Saint Mark's meant a lot to Xavier and his family. He'd taken bible study there since he was a boy and performed in every Christmas pageant until he was old enough to be embarrassed by it. Father Mel knew each of the Woods children personally. In just a few weeks he was going to marry the eldest daughter, Claire. As her brother, Xavier would stand up as one of the groomsmen.

As soon as we stepped through the arched doorway, the bustle of the outside world was completely obliterated. Our footsteps echoed on the red-veined marble of the chapel floor, and stone pillars towered to the domed ceiling above us. A statue of a crucified Christ dominated the nave, His crowned head bent, but His eyes turned Heavenward. Mosaic portraits of martyred saints stared down at us from the ceiling. A muted gold light filled the chapel, gliding off the golden tabernacle that held the consecrated hosts. On the walls, paintings of the fourteen Stations of the Cross hung in heavy carved frames. The pews were polished redwood and the smell of incense permeated the air. The stained glass window above the altar depicted a golden-haired Gabriel, stern-faced and red-robed as he delivered his message to a bewildered kneeling Mary. It was strange seeing an artist's interpretation of my archangel brother. The real Gabriel was so beautiful and formidable that his likeness could never truly be captured. Still, the colors rippled, bringing the figures to life before our eyes.

Xavier and I stopped at the entrance to dip our fingers in the font of holy water, crossing ourselves in

tandem. A soft rustling of fabric preceded Father Mel's appearance. When he emerged, he was wearing full vestments that brushed the floor with a swishing sound when he walked down the carpeted steps to greet us. He was a balding man with twinkling eyes and didn't look surprised to see us. He embraced Xavier warmly and then folded my hand in his as if we were old acquaintances.

"I've been expecting you," he said encouragingly.

Father Mel ushered us to the front of the church where we both knelt before the altar. He searched our faces, looking for confirmation of our sincerity.

"Marriage is a serious commitment," he said. "You're both very young. Have you thought carefully about what you are about to undertake?"

"Yes, Father, we have," Xavier replied in a tone that would have convinced even the most ardent skeptic.

"Will you help us?"

"Hmmm," came the gravelly reply. "What do your families have to say about all this? Surely they'd want to be present at such a momentous occasion?" Father Mel's gaze grew stern when he met my eyes.

"This is our decision," Xavier said. "I wish they could be here ... but they just wouldn't understand." Father Mel nodded as he considered the full meaning of Xavier's words.

"This isn't some teenage crush," I cut in, worried that he might need more persuading. "You have no idea what we've been through to get here. Please, we can't go another day without belonging to each other in the eyes of the Lord."

I could see Father Mel was finding it hard to ignore our urgency, but the little voice in his head advocated caution. I needed to try harder if I was going to convince him.

"It's God's will," I said suddenly, and watched his eyes widen. "He brought us together for a reason. You of all people should know He has a plan for everyone and this is ours. It's not for us to question Him, we just want to embrace what He has created between us."

That seemed to seal the deal. He couldn't reject what seemed to be a blatant directive from above. Father Mel fluttered his hands in a gesture of consent.

"Very well then. It won't do to keep you waiting any longer." He beckoned to someone who had until now been hidden in the gloom. "I've taken the liberty of asking Mrs. Alvarez to act as witness."

We turned our heads to see a woman who'd been silently praying at the end of a pew. When she stood up and approached the altar, I recognized her as the presbytery's housekeeper. Mrs. Alvarez smoothed out imaginary creases in her print blouse. She couldn't help looking excited about playing a minor role in what must have appeared to her as some wild and romantic escapade. When she spoke, she even sounded a little breathless.

"You are the son of Bernadette, yes?" she asked with a heavy Hispanic accent. Xavier nodded and dropped his gaze, anticipating a reprimand. But Mrs. Alvarez only gave his arm a complicit squeeze. "You don't worry; everyone will be happy for you soon enough."

"Shall we begin?" Father Mel asked.

"Please ... *un momento*." Mrs. Alvarez shook her head and surveyed me unhappily before excusing herself. We waited in confusion for a moment until she returned and presented me with a posy of daisies hastily picked from the chapel's garden.

"Thank you." I smiled at her gratefully. In our hurry to get there, Xavier and I hadn't given much thought to details. Both of us were still in our crisp school uniforms.

"You are very welcome." Her eyes crinkled in delight.

The sunlight pouring through the stained-glass window washed Xavier in golden tones. It wouldn't have mattered if he'd been wearing his old gym shorts. His very presence was dazzling. Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of my own tumble of chestnut hair, streaked with copper and bronze. My reflection seemed to be glowing. A small part of me wanted to see this as a sign that perhaps our union might find favor in the eyes of Heaven. After all, the earth had stopped shaking and the ceiling was showing no sign of caving in. Maybe, just maybe, ours was a love that even Heaven had to accept.

When I looked at Xavier, I realized something in me had changed. I wasn't overcome with my usual flood of

emotion—a love so intense that I sometimes felt my body couldn't contain it without exploding. Instead, I felt entirely at peace, like my universe was coming together exactly as it should. Although I knew Xavier's face like the back of my hand, every time I looked at him, it was like seeing him for the first time. There was so much depth and complexity in the graceful lines of his face: his full lips curving into a half smile, his swooping cheekbones and almond eyes that were as turquoise as the shallows of the ocean. Fingers of sunlight danced across his honey gold hair, making it glow like burnished brass. His school uniform, its dark blue blazer with the Bryce crest emblazoned on the pocket, seemed fitting for the solemnity of the occasion. Xavier reached up to give his tie a final adjustment. I couldn't tell if he was nervous or not.

"Gotta look my best today," he said, giving me a playful wink.

Father Mel spread his hands and held them ceremoniously aloft.

"You have come together in this church so that the Lord may consecrate and seal your love through holy matrimony. May you both assume the duties of marriage with mutual respect and lasting fidelity. And so, in the presence of the Church, I ask you to state your intentions. Will you love and honor each other as husband and wife for the rest of your lives?"

Xavier and I both glanced up as if suddenly aware of the sanctity of this moment. We didn't hesitate, though, and answered in unison as if our individual selves had already intertwined.

"We will."

"Join your right hands and declare your consent before God and His Church. Xavier, repeat after me."

Xavier enunciated every word carefully, as if each one carried so much weight it could not be rushed. His voice was like music. I felt so giddy I had to tighten my grip on his hands for fear of floating away. His eyes did not leave mine as he spoke.

"I, Xavier Woods, take you, Bethany Church, for my lawful wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."

Then it was my turn. I must have been nervous because I heard my voice quaver as I uttered the same vows while Father Mel looked gravely on. Mrs. Alvarez withdrew a lacy handkerchief that she kept tucked in one sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. As I spoke, even I couldn't keep the tears from falling. But I'd never understood until that moment what it meant to cry tears of happiness. I felt the pad of Xavier's thumb stroke my hand and for a second I lost myself in the depth of his eyes. Father Mel's voice brought me back to the present.

"It's time for the rings, which you give to one another as a symbol of your love and fidelity."

Xavier took my hand and slipped his grandmother's ring onto my finger. It fit snugly, as if it was attaching itself to me for good. Wishing we'd had more time to plan, I covertly slipped off my class ring and tried to slide it on Xavier's ring finger. Of course it was too small and I could only make it fit onto his pinkie. Xavier and I froze, thinking we'd ruined everything. But we both relaxed again when Mrs. Alvarez covered her mouth and started to giggle.

"May your union find favor in the eyes of the Lord," Father Mel concluded. "May it bring peace and harmony to your lives. I now pronounce you husband and wife."

And that was it. The ceremony was over and we were married.

All my life I'd felt like the outsider, looking in on a world I could never be part of. In the Kingdom I'd existed, but never really lived. Meeting Xavier had changed all that. He had let me in, loved me, and looked after me. He'd never cared that I was different, and he had brought my whole world to life just with his presence. I knew we still had struggles ahead of us, but my soul was now inextricably tied to his and nothing, neither Heaven nor Hell, could tear us apart.

We forgot to wait for the formal directive from Father Mel and melted instantly into a kiss. There was something completely different about the nature of the embrace we shared. This time, it felt sacred. My wings began to hum beneath my shirt and every inch of my skin began to tingle, spreading a warm glow across my body. Then, the light from my skin fused with the sunshine filtering through the stained-glass window. It exploded in a flash, locking Xavier and me inside a shimmering prism of light. Father Mel and Mrs. Alvarez gasped in surprise but a second later, the prism shattered as the sun dipped behind a cloud.

Mrs. Alvarez was so overcome with excitement that she broke into a stream of congratulations in Spanish and kissed us both as vigorously as if we were her long-lost relatives. She only stopped when Father Mel steered us discreetly away to the altar to sign the license.

I'd just laid down my pen when the chapel doors flew open with a crash so resounding it made everyone jump.

The loose-limbed figure of an adolescent boy with an effeminate face and a cowlick stood in the entrance. He wore a hooded black robe and three sets of black wings fanned out behind him. He bowed formally, never taking his eyes off Father Mel, and approached the altar with a gait so rehearsed he might have been on a catwalk. A gleaming scythe swung at his side. I knew at once what he was: a Grim Reaper, trained by the Angel of Death himself. Hysterical screams broke from Mrs. Alvarez as she scrambled for refuge behind the altar. Frantic prayers uttered in Spanish could be heard from her hiding place. Traditionally, reapers are only visible to those they seek, but in this case etiquette had been abandoned. Every movement seemed deliberate, designed to issue a clear message to us. This death was on our heads.

Instinctively, I pushed Xavier to the ground. At the same time my wings snapped open, shielding him; a reaper could never claim a soul while its guardian was watching over it. But I soon discovered it wasn't Xavier the young reaper had in his sights.

His intense gaze was fixed on Father Mel, and his slender finger was pointing straight at him. The priest blinked in confusion before cowering backward until he was pressed up against the altar, his horn-rimmed glasses askew on his face.

"I meant only to help. I meant only to help," he repeated.

"Your intention is irrelevant," replied the reaper coldly.

Father Mel paused for a moment, then righted himself. "I was called by the Lord and I answered."

"Do you know what she is?" the reaper asked. "She is not human."

Father Mel did not seem surprised. He had known all along I was different, although he had never questioned me or treated me like an outsider.

"God works in mysterious ways," he replied boldly.

The reaper inclined his head. "Indeed."

I watched transfixed as he held one hand aloft and Father Mel instantly doubled over in pain, clutching his heart. He gasped for breath as he fell to the floor.

"Leave him alone!" Xavier screamed, trying to extricate himself from my grasp. I had him pinned, using strength I didn't know I had. The reaper seemed to look at us for the first time and turned his languid sleepy eyes to Xavier. The smile on his rosebud lips was almost insolent.

"My business is not with you," he answered. Then he closed the distance between himself and the priest lying prostrate on the marble floor. Xavier struggled, but my angelic power held him fast.

"Beth, let me go," he pleaded. "Father Mel needs help!"

"We can't help him now."

"What's wrong with you?" he implored, looking at me with a strange expression, like he didn't recognize me.

"You can't fight a reaper," I whispered. "He's acting under instruction. If you get in his way, he'll take you too. Don't make me your widow within minutes of becoming your wife."

That seemed to get through to him. Xavier stopped struggling and fell silent, though his eyes were full of anguish as he stared helplessly at his childhood priest and mentor. Father Mel's body twitched briefly and then was still. The reaper glided away only to reposition himself at the head of the body. I knew what he was waiting for. A smoky shadow emerged from Father Mel's open mouth and hovered in the air—a filmy replica of the lifeless form on the floor.

"Follow me," instructed the reaper tonelessly. He sounded almost bored. Father Mel's soul looked lost for a moment, searching for direction, and then complied. Together reaper and mortal soul ascended toward the domed ceiling of the church.

"Where are you taking him?" I demanded, dreading the thought of Father Mel being cast into the pit for

trying to help us.

“His motives were pure, so his place in Heaven remains intact,” the reaper replied without looking back or pausing in his flight. “But his days on this earth are over.”

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