

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

SHERRILL
QUINN

FALLEN
Angel



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Fallen Angel

ISBN 9781419919664

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Fallen Angel Copyright © 2009 Sherrill Quinn

Edited by Briana St. James

Cover art by Philip Fuller.

Electronic book Publication January 2009

The terms Romantica® and Quickies® are registered trademarks of Ellora's Cave Publishing.

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

FALLEN ANGEL

Sherrill Quinn

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

CSI: CBS Broadcasting, Inc.

Chapter One

Talon of the Falcon Aerie stood at attention in front of his commanding officer and stared straight ahead. He kept his expression placid though he itched to tell Gabriel to get on with it. This wasn't the first time Talon had been summoned to the boss's office, although it was usually so he could be issued a reprimand for breaking one of the many rules that governed employees' conduct with humans.

This time, however, he wasn't in trouble. He was being given a new assignment. It made for a nice change.

Arms folded and one finger tapping against his chin, Gabriel wore his usual work clothes—leather pants, frilly white shirt with billowy long sleeves and a wide red sash around his waist. Personally Talon thought the outfit was a bit over-the-top and made the other angel seem more like a misplaced pirate—they didn't usually end up on the northern side of eternity. But Gabriel seemed to like it and Talon wasn't about to upset his boss over something as trivial as his choice of wardrobe. Not at this juncture—he wanted this assignment and wasn't going to jeopardize his chances by being a smartass.

He'd finally gained some respect from the others in his division. Being given *this* assignment would put the final seal of approval on his abilities.

"I'm just not sure you're the right angel for the job." Gabriel paced back to the window of his office and gazed out over the expanse of the throne room. His snowy wings, shot through with strands of gold, proclaimed his status. Archangel.

Talon's wings, on the other hand, were deep crimson, a color belonging to those in the Retribution department. Talon decided that was fine by him. He'd rather have red wings than white ones any day.

He looked over the archangel's shoulder into the other room. Though the room was empty but for the staff of cleaners who buffed the golden fixtures and throne until the

shine was blinding, Talon felt humbled. He had been in Yahweh's presence only a handful of times and that had been enough. Enveloped by the awesome sight and sound of the Almighty, he'd found it hard to breathe. He was completely content to let Gabriel be the Angel Division's liaison to the Chairman of the Board of Sassy Devils, LLC.

He knew Gabriel didn't ever wear his pirate get-up when he had a meeting with the Great King. He wore traditional white robes, which he hated. Talon wondered what response the Chairman would have were the CEO of the Angel Division to show up with his leather pants and frou-frou white shirt.

Almost as if he knew the irreverent direction Talon's thoughts had taken, Gabriel turned, staring at him with glittering lavender eyes. The archangel was ancient and a very good judge of character—and apparently he didn't like what he saw in his subordinate right at this moment.

Talon clenched his jaw and forced himself to stay still. It didn't matter that he was coming up on his two thousandth year of existence. Somehow Gabriel still managed to make him feel like a fledgling.

"You seem to have an issue with rules." Censure wove through Gabriel's tones like reinforced steel. More like a disappointed father with his troublemaking son than a commanding officer with one of his soldiers.

Talon's nostrils flared and he held onto his irritation with effort. Gabriel didn't get it. Sometimes what looked good in an employee handbook just didn't work in the field. It had been too long since his boss had been out there in the trenches—a millennia. At times you had to think on your feet and make a decision based on your gut, not what some cockamamie policy said. No matter what Gabriel thought about always playing by the rules, it didn't always work.

"I want this job." Talon took a step forward. "I *need* this job. Xerxes was my mentor. My friend. I want to know why he's doing this."

Gabriel drew a deep breath and held it a moment, then exhaled loudly. "I can tell you the why of it. At least what I suspect to be the reason, anyway." He shrugged, the gesture one of confusion and resignation. "He's jealous of Yahweh's love for humanity. He feels that love should be reserved for those more deserving."

"Meaning...us. Angels." Talon shook his head. "That doesn't make sense. We were created with a different purpose than humans. Besides, we all have our place in His infinite love."

"Yes, well, Xerxes thinks humans have the lion's share, as it were." Gabriel walked over to a polished steel monstrosity of a desk and sat down in his chair, folding his wings over the back. "One of Lucifer's sons, Urian, discovered that Xerxes was the leader of the Brotherhood of the Red Claw." He rolled his eyes in an unspoken opinion of their opposition's name. "The members of which have done their best to undo everything Sassy Devils' employees undertake. We have to stop him. If this continues, things will quickly disintegrate into pandemonium and humanity will be lost."

"Which would certainly make the chaos demons happy, but no one else." Talon frowned. If one of Lucifer's sons had uncovered Xerxes as the leader of the Brotherhood... "Why didn't Urian stop him, then?"

"There were complications." Gabriel's lips pulled down at the corners. "Involving a human female."

Talon lifted an eyebrow. An operative who got involved with a female while on assignment was due a ball-busting as far as Gabriel was concerned. While Talon had been handed his balls on a fairly regular basis, it had never been on account of a woman. He knew better.

Giving into any of the sins that humans seemed ill-equipped to resist meant a temporary draining of power. And a loss of power—however short-term it might be—left an angel vulnerable. That wasn't something Talon wanted. Ever.

"And our Great King decided that, since Xerxes is one of our ranks, the Angel Division should be the ones to take care of him." Gabriel locked his gaze once again on

Talon and shook his head. “Since he taught you everything you know, I suppose you’re best suited for the job. You know how he thinks.” He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Right?”

Talon gave a brief nod. He did know how Xerxes thought, knew what strategies he would use. Or, at least he used to. Now with this radical change in his friend’s behavior, he wasn’t so sure. One thing he *was* sure of—he owed it to his mentor to try.

“Plus, I know I can count on you to think with the head on your shoulders and not the one between your legs.” Gabriel reached under his desk. The door behind Talon swung open, so Talon knew his boss had pushed the door release button. He was dismissed.

As much as he wanted to give Gabriel a mock salute—the archangel really did take himself too seriously most of the time—Talon contented himself with a brief dip of his head. He turned and walked out of the office, already formulating his plan.

First thing he had to do was read Urian’s report on the Brotherhood. Then he’d try to find the location of the last portal Xerxes had opened and use that same portal as a jumping off point.

There had to be a way to talk his old friend back into the company. Because if there wasn’t... As an Angel of Retribution Talon was authorized to use deadly force. His friend would have only two options. Either he returned to Sassy Devils, LLC—and everything they believed in—or he died.

Talon moved to one of the many arched doorways that opened into the air and pushed off, using his wings to gain altitude. Taking a flight through the clouds before he went home would clear his head, bring some clarity to the situation. Because while he didn’t know what his old friend was thinking, one thing he *did* know.

Sometimes this job really sucked.

* * * * *

Detective Raegan Stark flashed her badge at the uniformed officer standing at the end of the alley. He gave a nod and lifted the yellow crime scene tape so she could duck under it. "Thanks." She flipped her jacket over her badge where it was clipped to the left side of her belt.

Any lingering fatigue from being summoned at two a.m. had dissipated. All her boss had told her on the phone was that this was her case. He refused to say more, clearly wanting her to come to her own conclusions. The fact that none of the detectives on duty had been called spoke volumes.

And she didn't like it. It meant, probably, that this victim shared something in common with another case she was already working.

She made her way down the narrow alley. Work lights had already been set up, illuminating the crime scene and the people working it. The brightness made the darkness beyond seem even blacker. Rae slowed, giving herself a few seconds to prepare. While she remained cognizant of the entirety of her surroundings, her focus coalesced on the alley. Her heart pounded with slow, heavy beats, her senses expanded. Smells of exhaust and spaghetti sauce filtered through the narrow street, a combination that made her stomach flip-flop.

At this time of night there wasn't much activity in the downtown area, though there was enough to keep the homicide and robbery divisions plenty busy. This was her third murder in as many days. If this one was like the other two, they were in trouble.

The last thing any of them wanted was a serial killer stalking the streets of Phoenix.

"What do we have?" she asked as she approached the Assistant Coroner. Thankfully, her voice wasn't as tight as her roiling stomach and came out calm and confident.

The middle-aged man glanced up. In between smacks of his chewing gum, he stated matter-of-factly, "White male, twenty to twenty-five years of age. No ID." He pulled the liver probe from the body and glanced at it. "Liver temp indicates he died

about eight, nine hours ago. COD—could be exsanguination, but I'll know better after an autopsy." He looked back down at the body.

"I love it when you give me technobabble, Griffin. It's so CSI." Giving the man a quick wink, Rae squatted beside the corpse and swallowed back the bile that rose to her throat. The posture of the body, the expression of terror on the poor guy's face... It was too similar to not be related, though she had her fingers crossed behind her back that this one would turn out to be an isolated incident. "How'd he bleed out? I don't see any obvious wounds. And where's all the blood?" *And, please God, tell me this isn't like the other two.*

"Dunno." The AC slipped his thermometer back into his case. "Could be he was dumped here." He closed the clasps on his kit and stood. "I'll know more once I open 'im up, but this looks just like the last two." He motioned to two men standing by with a gurney, who rolled forward with an eagerness Rae sure didn't feel. "Which is prob'ly why *you're* here, right?"

Shit. "Let me know what you find ASAP, will you?" She smiled to soften the abruptness of the order.

"Will do." With a snap of his gum, he turned and left the alley.

She looked around, able to see quite clearly due to the bright work lights. She rose to her feet and walked a circuit around the body, dodging the techs working the scene, and held up one hand to halt the coroner's team. They stopped, leaning their shoulders against the rough brick of the building as they waited for her go-ahead.

Narrowing her eyes, she hunkered down on the right side of the body. The young man's face was turned away from her and she caught a glimpse of something that looked like a birthmark or smudgy tattoo on the side of his neck. Reaching into her shoulder bag, she fished around until she found her penlight.

Rae flicked on the light and directed the beam onto the deceased's neck. She stared at what looked to be the shape of a hand, the edges blurred. It was about a third the size of a normal human hand. Damn. The other two bodies had had the same mark, though

in different locations. She made a mental note of this one and glanced over the rest of the body. The AC had already been through the victim's pockets, so there was nothing further she could determine from the victim. She stood and motioned to the waiting men, moving out of their way while they loaded the body onto the gurney.

She drew in a breath and let it out with a puff. As with the other crime scenes, there was nothing here that shouldn't be. Not even things that *should* be like bits of trash and dirt. It was if the area had been spit shined by a platoon of Marines.

She shined her small flashlight around. She was just about to turn and head over to talk to the first uniform on scene when she realized she'd seen something in the shadows. Pointing the beam back that way, she walked over to a small stoop by a darkened doorway. There on the ground, tucked in the corner of the building and the stoop, was an oddly shaped stone. Rae grabbed a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and pulled them on, then picked up the stone and placed it on her palm. Shining the light on it so she could study it closer, she tilted it one way and then another.

The thing looked like a claw. She'd never seen a stone shaped quite like this. And while it was probably nothing, she wasn't taking any chances with this one. She carefully peeled off her glove, keeping the stone wrapped up inside it. She took off the other glove and stuffed them both into the front pocket of her jeans.

She aimed the flashlight around the alley one more time. The barest of movement caught her eye and she directed the beam at another doorway further down the alley. Her breath caught.

A tall, muscular man stood in the darkened doorway. No, not in, but in front of. She realized it was because he wouldn't fit in the doorway.

Not because he was too big—although he was well over six feet tall—but rather because of his wings.

Wings! She rolled her eyes. Like her night wasn't going to be hard enough, now she had to deal with a nut job hanging around the scene. Unless he had something to do with this...

Rae glanced over her shoulder. The uniforms who were still on scene were keeping the sparse group of onlookers and reporters from getting into the alley. She was alone at the moment. She looked back at the man with wings. As she stood there, blinking with disbelief, he seemed to realize she was staring at him. A scowl crossed his face and he muttered something too indistinct for her to make out.

When he started toward her, she drew her weapon. "Stop right there," she ordered. She thumbed off the safety. "Who are you?" Now that he was closer, now that he had stepped into the glare of the work lights, she could see his wings more clearly. Glossy crimson tipped with a soft gray. *Just like the tattoo on her shoulder.* And they weren't hooked on by straps, as far as she could tell. Her gaze on his wings, she breathed, "*What are you?*"

"You can see them?" His voice was deep and melodious. Filled with incredulity but still sexy enough to make everything within her that was feminine sit up and take notice.

The closer he came, the better look she got at him. He was gorgeous. Thick black hair streamed over his big, brawny and quite naked shoulders. Wide, muscled chest with a smattering of dark hair trailing over his ridged abdomen gave him the look of someone who worked out several hours a day, though she doubted that was how he stayed so fit. Her gaze flitted down that trail to where it disappeared into the waistband of his dark trousers. Slim hips led to muscled thighs that cradled an impressive bulge.

She jerked her gaze back to his face. Dark eyes and chiseled features gave him a face that was good enough to...kiss all over.

Rae gave herself a mental kick. *No time for lusting, girl.* He could be—probably was—the killer. Certainly anyone who walked around wearing wings was a bean or two short of a full bushel.

Why was it that all the good looking ones were taken, batting for the other team, or homicidal maniacs? At least in her experience those were the choices.

"I said stop!" She widened her stance. "Or I *will* shoot."

“Go ahead.” He kept coming.

That’s when she saw the scabbard attached to his lean waist. Great. A nut job with a sword. Although the coroner had said it was a sharp blade that had killed the first two victims, he’d indicated it had been something smaller, like a dagger. Of course, that didn’t mean the suspect hadn’t escalated to something bigger. By the looks of that scabbard, something much, much bigger.

Her eyes wide, Rae gave him one more warning and, when he was only a few feet away, fired her weapon. In the span of only a couple of seconds, his hand snatched the bullet from the air. Two more steps brought him to her. With fluid movements, he dropped the bullet and twisted the gun out of her hand. He tucked the weapon into his waistband then clamped his hand across her mouth. His arm went around her waist and he bent his knees. With a hard swoop of his wings, he took them into the sky.

Holy crap.

Shouts came from the street and officers ran into the alley, looking everywhere except up. The winged man’s flight was soundless. Rae tried to shout but, with the big man’s hand over her mouth, she wasn’t loud enough.

Was she to be the next victim?

Chapter Two

Talon held onto the struggling woman, cursing under his breath when she landed a hard kick against his shin. He touched down on the roof of the four-story building just above the crime scene. For a human she was strong, bucking against his hold and making enraged noises deep in her throat. Needing to find out what she knew—and how it was she was able to see his wings despite his use of glamour—he adjusted his hold, trapping her between his body and a large air conditioning unit.

He kept his hand over her mouth, even though she kept trying to bite him. “Settle down.” He kept his voice low and soothing. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

She grunted and tried to kick him again.

With another muttered oath, he wrapped one leg around hers and pulled her closer, holding her as immobile as possible. He tightened his hand, bearing down on the strong bones of her jaw, not hard enough to bruise but with enough force to get her attention. “Settle down, I said.”

She winced and gamely continued to struggle. He admired her tenacity even as irritation flared. It was at times like these he understood Xerxes’ confusion over the Great King’s unflinching love for these frail creatures. Sometimes their innate stubbornness overrode all common sense.

Why did she continue to fight against him when his greater size and strength all but ensured her defeat?

Not that she seemed to realize that and, as a particularly violent motion sent her undulating against him like a frenzied belly dancer, Talon became much more aware of her as something wholly feminine. She felt amazing—all soft, heaving curves and aggressive attitude. The exertion had increased her heart rate, dampened her skin, made her breathing ragged.

He couldn't help but think this was what she'd be like beneath him, naked and wanting...

Damn it. What was wrong with him? He never got involved with humans. Never.

And to have such lustful thoughts was to invite trouble. It was one thing for these fragile humans to commit one of the deadly sins—lust, slothfulness, envy and the others—but for him to do so would mean weakness. Literally. If he followed through on his unexplained desire for this woman, he'd be vulnerable to attack from the scrawniest of his foes.

As she bucked against him again, her hip smashing into his very interested groin, he thought perhaps it might be worth the sacrifice. "Would you be still?" he gritted in her ear, not sure how much more of this he could take. His cock had begun to harden and mentally reciting the pantheon of angelic hosts wasn't helping.

Another bump against him had him closing his eyes briefly. His cock grew and throbbed, protesting its imprisonment behind the stiff placard of his trousers. Her rounded hip thrust into the V of his thighs, making his eyes fly open. He tightened his grip on her, trying not to hurt her but desperate now to hold her still.

After several minutes, she subsided with a soft grunt, eyes the color of storm clouds glaring at him with a mixture of fear and rage. He eased up on the pressure of his hand over her mouth, though he didn't remove it.

"That's better." Talon tried to ignore his erection and focused his glamour, projecting what he wanted her to see—a normal human male clothed in jeans and t-shirt *sans* wings. Perhaps that would make it easier for her to deal with him.

A brief look of confusion crossed her lovely face and she blinked, then narrowed her eyes and returned to glaring at him.

So, it still didn't work. It usually did—whenever he had to have contact with human beings, they saw what he wanted them to, which most certainly was *not* a six-foot-five-inch angel with red wings. Yet she seemed immune to the glamour, which was extraordinary. He'd only come across a handful of other humans with the same ability.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He put as much conciliation in his tone as possible, hoping it didn't make him sound too much like a forest pixie. "I'll take my hand away if you promise not to scream." He waited for her nod.

She gave one with marked reluctance. Talon slowly drew his hand away. When she made no move to draw breath to scream, he let his hand drop to his side. "I'll move back if you also promise not to kick me again."

Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded.

He took a step back, far enough so that he wasn't pressed against her anymore, but close enough to be in what humans called "personal space." He needed to be able to grab her if she decided to bolt.

Seeing the fear in her eyes, he pulled her gun from his waistband and held out his hand. The gun rested on his palm. She looked from her weapon to his face. "Go ahead," he prompted. "Take it."

A frown flitted over her features as she slowly reached out and took her gun from him. Her fingers brushed his palm, sending sparking trails of heat up his arm that he tried to ignore.

She holstered her weapon with a muttered, "Not like this did any good anyway." Her gaze went back to his face. He could see the indecision there—the feeling that she should shout for assistance and the equal fear that she'd put her fellow officers in jeopardy. Finally she let out a soft sigh. "Just what the hell are you?"

Talon saw no other option than to tell her. While angels didn't ordinarily have the ability to erase the memories of humans, he could always prevail upon Gabriel to call in the Cleaners—Sassy Devils employees who had been given special dispensation to cloud humans' perceptions of events. "You have the wrong location, I'm afraid."

She stared at him blankly.

He sighed. "I'm an Angel of Retribution. From heaven," he stressed.

She blinked. "A what?"

“Angel of Retribution.” He sighed. “I track down those who have been pronounced guilty and render judgment upon them.”

“Pronounced guilty by who?”

He glanced up toward the sky. When he looked back down at her, her eyes had rounded and her lips formed a startled O.

He drew in a sharp breath and clamped his jaw tight. Her mouth was in just the right position to circle his cock. That carnal picture danced in his head until he was almost dizzy with it. With a soft grunt he shoved it to the back of his mind and concentrated on his breathing. He had to get his unruly cock under control before he scared her even more.

She swallowed and shook her head. “You know, under other circumstances I’d just think you were some kind of fruitcake who was running around wearing wings. But you *flew* us up here. As in flap your wings like a bird.” She drew in a deep breath. “Did...did you do that?” she asked, pointing toward the alley. Her voice held a slight quaver, but in her he sensed a strength of will that rivaled his own.

“No.” He heard the banked anger in his voice and clenched his fists, reigning in his frustration. He’d been tracking Xerxes for two weeks now, always falling one portal short of acquiring his target. Now Xerxes—or one of his minions—had killed that young man—and he hadn’t been the first victim. “But I’m tracking the one who did.”

“Who?”

He shook his head. “Can’t say.” He stared down into her eyes. “Just trust me when I tell you this is not something you want to be involved with.”

“But I am involved. It’s my job.” She studied him in silence. On her face he saw confusion, fear, even frustration. But her eyes were soft, inviting, making him want to immerse himself in her warmth.

His cock perked back to life, reminding him there was somewhere else he’d like to be immersed, somewhere slick and hot and tight.

Talon scowled and took another step back. Perhaps more space between them would be the better idea. Then maybe her sweetly spicy scent wouldn't be burrowing its way into his lungs.

"Look, you have to tell me *something*. This trying to intimidate me first and stonewalling me second routine ain't gonna work." She crossed her arms and frowned at him. "Why should I believe you didn't have anything to do with that?" She pointed again toward the alley side of the building. "You told me you 'render judgment'. Just what does that mean?"

He bit back a sigh. He was losing time, having to give explanations to this woman. But he couldn't leave her yet, not until he impressed upon her how much danger she was in if she tried to catch this particular killer. All angels – well, those who still worked for Sassy Devils – had an innate desire to protect humankind, because these frail beings were so loved by the Great King. So he really had no option. To keep her safe, he had to give her enough information so she'd know she could not pursue this. "It means He's the judge and jury, and I'm the executioner."

"What!" Her eyes rounded. "But..." Her gaze darted to the side, toward the roof edge closest to the alley, then she looked back at him. Shock stole some of the color from her face. Fine lines appeared between her brows. "He just has you going around killing people?"

"No." He rotated his shoulders. When her gaze settled on his wings and she seemed to pale further, he stilled. The last thing he needed was for her to faint on him. He didn't want to have to deal with an unconscious woman, no matter how appealing she might be. He needed to pick up whatever clues he could and be on his way. Even now Xerxes might be killing another human. The entire Otherworld was in danger of being exposed.

"I'm responsible for non-humans. All Angels of Retribution are. Only the Angel of Death visits humans. And never like that." Talon pointed toward the alley.

Her hard swallow was audible. “Oh.” She swallowed again. “Then...if you didn’t do this, why are you here?”

“I told you. I’m tracking the one who *did* do this.” He walked forward and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Believe me when I tell you that you do *not* want to pursue this.”

“It’s my job.” The words were bitten off, telling him a lot about her. Dedicated. Tough. Not easily dissuaded.

Stubborn enough to get under his skin.

She pushed away from the metal air conditioning unit and he backed up to give her a little more room. Otherwise, he was in danger of yanking her into his arms and consequences be damned.

Rae stared up at the man—*angel!*—standing before her. He stood at nearly a foot taller than her own five-eight and his wings swept another two feet above his head. Unbidden, her hand crept to her right shoulder, fingers curling over to rest against her angel tattoo hidden beneath her shirt. When she’d gotten the tattoo ten years ago, her friends had asked why her angel had red wings. She’d shrugged and laughed but evaded the question. Because the only answer she’d ever had was *It felt right*.

Now, looking at the living version of her tattoo in front of her, she wondered about it all over again. And noticed dark brown eyes under heavy black brows staring down at her with irritation clear in their depths, and something else. Something...hotter.

Everything feminine inside her responded, sending slick arousal to slip along her labia. Not that she hadn’t noticed before—and appreciated—the hard muscles of his arms and chest as she’d struggled against him. She had. Boy-howdy, she had. But fear had forced any potential drooling over his very fine physique to the back of her mind.

Now, though, she didn’t feel quite as scared. Oh there was still some apprehension there, sure enough, but he hadn’t hurt her yet and she didn’t think he was going to. He

could have snapped her neck with one big hand at any point. Instead he'd given her back her gun and answered her questions, though he was clearly frustrated to do so.

And there was something about him, something that on some deep, primitive level she recognized. Before she could pursue that certainty, he spoke.

"What do you know about the victim?" His deep voice rasped along her eardrums like rough silk.

Rae fought back a shiver. Now was *not* the time to get distracted from her work. There was a maniac on the loose who was killing people—and she was stymied. The victims seemingly had nothing in common, nothing to indicate they were being targeted for any reason. It was almost as if they had been selected at random.

Could it be as simple as being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

He shifted, a not-so-subtle indication of his growing impatience.

She shook her head. "He had no ID on him, so I won't really know anything until we get his prints and run them. And if he's not in the system, that won't tell us anything." She rubbed her palms against her jeans. "He's so young. It's just not right."

"He's not the first victim. What do you know about the others?"

"How do you know there are others?" Suspicion raced through her, tightening her gut. She sidled to her right, not wanting to be trapped against that damn air conditioning unit again.

"I told you. I'm tracking the one who did this." He sidled sideways, matching her step for step and blocking any avenue for escape. "Any information you give me about the victims might help me determine where he'll strike next."

"Who? Where who'll strike next?" When he shook his head, she scowled. "Don't give me that. I have a right to know what I'm up against."

"And if I were to tell you it's another Angel of Retribution?" He took a step forward and gripped her shoulders. "What then? You'll go to your superiors and tell them...what?"

He had a point. *Dammit*. “So what am I supposed to do then? I can’t ignore these deaths.” Rae wrapped her fingers around his wrists and tried to lift them from her shoulders. He didn’t budge except to lift one eyebrow. Her lips tightened in annoyance. “I’m the lead detective on this – if I don’t come up with something I could be demoted. The mayor’s already on my chief’s ass about it.”

Broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Go through the motions and tell them the trail’s gone cold. I guarantee that you won’t find any forensic evidence. We don’t leave bits of ourselves behind like humans do.”

Rae thought of the odd stone she’d stuffed into her pocket. He might just be wrong in this case.

He shifted his hands, sliding them from the outer edge of her shoulders closer to her neck. The tendons of his wrists flexed under her fingers.

So much strength. It stole her breath. What would that strength be like during intimacy – gentle or roughly erotic?

His face hardened. Lust flared in his gaze. Rae swayed forward, her body gravitating toward what it wanted. But she couldn’t. She shouldn’t.

With a soft grunt, she shrugged out from under his hands, knowing full well she was only able to do so because he let her. She propped her fists on her hips and scowled at him. It was one thing to have to take orders from her captain, and quite another to have it shoveled from this guy.

If she could just keep her libido under control long enough to remember she had a job to do...

Her cell phone rang and she snatched it from the holder on her belt. As he reached out as if to take the phone from her, she flipped it open and put it to her ear with an abrupt, “Stark.”

“Where the hell are you?” Her brother’s deep voice came over the phone and echoed eerily up from the street.

With a scowl at—good grief. She didn't even know the angel's name. Rae shook her head and walked over to the edge of the roof and peered over, keeping a cautious eye on the winged man who hadn't budged from his spot by the air conditioning unit. "I'm up here," she said. "On the roof." When her brother looked up, she waved at him.

"What the fuck are you doing up there?" From this distance she couldn't really make out his expression, but from his tone she could tell Captain Huntington Stark was irritated. He had on his dress uniform, which meant he'd probably just come from a meeting with the brass. That would explain why he was so cranky. And if the meeting had been about her lack of progress on the other two related cases...

Well, what else was new? Hunt seemed to take her wins and losses as a barometer of his own success. While she didn't report to him, he was high up enough on the food chain in the department that he could stop by one of her crime scenes without making waves. Or at least not very big ones. Even while she sometimes resented his overprotective attitude, she was grateful for his insight. He'd been at this a few years longer than she had.

"I thought I'd check to see if I could see anything from up here," she improvised. She could hardly tell him a six and a half foot tall angel flew her up here. "Because I couldn't see anything out of the ordinary down there."

Just then she felt warmth at her back. She gasped and turned, lost her balance and started to topple backward over the edge. Her yell and Hunt's bellow of fear from the street level echoed in the quiet night.

The angel grabbed her and hauled her into his arms, muttering curses under his breath and sounding anything but angelic. He dipped his head, his breath wafting over her face, smelling faintly of honey and cinnamon. "Are you all right?"

She was surrounded by heat—his big body in front of her, his arms wrapped around her. She gave a nod, answering him without words, and realized she'd snaked both arms around his neck, the cell phone still in one hand. Dimly she heard her

brother's voice shouting at her, coming across in stereo through the phone and from the ground below.

Chapter Three

The angel's head dipped toward hers.

"Don't," Rae whispered, while inside a voice shouted *Kiss me now, you fool!* It didn't matter that he wasn't human, didn't matter that she had a job to do. For this moment in time she had a handsome man, sort of, holding her in his arms and she meant to take advantage of that little fact.

He smiled, a slow movement of his lips that was much more wicked than an angel's had any right to be. Then his mouth was on hers and just that quickly he was the only thing anchoring her in a universe spinning out of control.

That was how it felt, anyway. He licked across her lower lip and she opened to him on a moan. His tongue slipped between her lips. Instinctively she met him, tasting honey and hot, hot male.

She leaned into him, pressing against his pelvis, his cock a hard ridge against her soft belly. With a shiver she pushed closer, needing to feel as much of him as she could.

His hands came up to her face, holding her steady while he continued to kiss her with a strength that bordered on desperation. Like he was afraid she'd try to get away from him. As if right now that was an option. She'd never been kissed like this—she wasn't going anywhere.

Not yet. Just one. More. Taste.

Rae slid one hand into his hair, twining the silky strands between her fingers. Going up on tiptoe, she pressed into him, pushing against the hard ridge of flesh that prodded her belly.

His groan rumbled up from deep in his chest. He moved his mouth to her throat, his lips like a brand against her skin. She sighed and tilted her head, her fingers tightening in his hair.

The access door to the roof slammed open. Rae and the angel both jerked away from each other, breathing heavily. Her hand went to her weapon as she whirled to face the new threat.

Her brother stood there, two uniformed officers right behind him. Hunt had his gun pointed at the man—no, *angel*—whose kiss had just made her toes curl. Then he snorted and holstered his weapon with a muttered, “Oh. It’s you.” With a nod of his head over his shoulder, he motioned the uniforms away. They holstered their weapons. Turning, they went back down the stairs they’d just run up.

“You know this guy?” Keeping a wary eye on the winged man, Rae went over to her brother. She stood beside him, feeling secure standing next to his football player bulk, and tried to ignore the embers still sparking deep inside.

Hunt grimaced. “Yeah, Talon and I have run into each other before.”

His name is Talon. Rae stared at the stranger, at the rugged handsomeness of his face, the utter power of his body, and decided the name fit. But her brother seemed to not think anything was amiss, so he must not be seeing what she was seeing—those tall, wide crimson wings. “Can you see, er...”

When she glanced his way, Talon folded his arms across that broad chest and lifted one dark eyebrow.

“What? His wings?” Hunt put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze. “Not that he’s too happy about it but, yeah, I can see ‘em.” He glanced down at her. “You seem to be dealing with it much more calmly than I did when I first met him.”

You probably weren’t lusting after his body, letting your throbbing hooaha distract you from what he is. Not to mention the fact that Hunt was here to help anchor her in reality. He was the most practical, non-flappable person she knew. Rae gave a small shrug. “He says he’s an angel.”

“Yep.” Her brother took his arm from her shoulder and shoved his hands in his pants pockets. “Not that I can prove—or disprove—it. But he’s something more than human, that’s for sure.”

“Do you trust him?” That was the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Talon was powerful and, if he really was an angel, most likely had some supernatural abilities beyond the physical strength of his beautiful body.

Hunt’s pause was long enough to make her look at him. “Hunt? Do you trust him?”

Her brother blew out a sigh. “Yeah. Yeah, I trust him.”

“Took you long enough. You sure?”

“He’s always been on the up and up with me whenever we’ve crossed paths. So, yeah. I’m sure. He’s one of the good guys.”

“He’s also standing right in front of you,” Talon muttered, sounding disgruntled and so, well, *human*, that she had to laugh.

Which made him sulk even more.

Rae pressed her lips together to fight back a grin. It seemed that, human or angel, men were men.

“Just how long have you two known each other?” She stared from one to the other, seeing more commonalities than dissimilarities. Talon looked every inch the warrior—tall, strong, proud. Hunt was no different.

Well, except for the wings.

But her ex-Army Ranger brother was as tough and honest as they came. If he trusted Talon, so would she.

She’d just have to make sure she kept her distance, or her damn hooah would be doing all her thinking.

“What is it now? Three years?” Hunt looked at Talon.

The angel gave an abrupt nod.

Rae gaped. “You’ve known angels really exist and you never told me?”

“Like you would’ve believed me.” Hunt threw her a scowl. “You’d have patted me on the head with one hand and dialed the department shrink with the other.”

She pursed her lips. He was right, of course. While she believed in a literal God and a literal devil—and all the angels and demons that went along with them—she would never have believed a human being, let alone her brother, would have had direct contact with them.

She looked at Talon. “So, you were telling me about this other...angel who killed my guy.”

He cocked his head to one side. “I was not.”

“You can’t stonewall me like this,” she insisted. “I need to know what I’m up against.”

He shook his head, remaining stubbornly silent.

“Better give it up, Rae.” Hunt gave a shrug. “I’ve seen that look before. He’s not going to give you any more information than he already has.” He nudged her with his elbow. “Come on. Let’s get back down to the alley. There’s nothing more you can do up here.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Rae held up one hand, palm facing Talon in a clear gesture for him to stop. “I don’t think so. Not with those.” She motioned toward his wings.

He shook his head. “I don’t believe anyone else will see them. Resistance to glamour is rare—the fact that you and your brother can see me as I really am is unusual.” He shrugged. “They’ll see what I want them to.”

“An ordinary guy in jeans and t-shirt, right?” When he nodded, she sighed. “I thought I was going crazy for a minute, when I saw you like that for a second or two.” She frowned. “But then the wings came back and you hauled me up here.”

A muscle flexed in his jaw. “I’m sorry about that. But I needed to talk to you.”

“Hmm.” She arched an eyebrow at him and he at least had the grace to look chagrined. Whether he felt it... Well, she doubted that. He seemed like the kind of guy who’d do what he felt needed to be done regardless of how it made him appear to others. “Look, I’ve gotta get back to work.” As she turned toward the stairwell, she told him, “It was...nice meeting you.”

Hunt started down the stairs. Rae followed him, acutely aware that Talon didn’t follow. She pushed back her disappointment. She was the one who’d told him to stay behind, after all.

Once back out in the alley, she called out for the first uniformed officer who’d arrived on scene. “Start a canvass of the surrounding buildings, Cavanaugh. There may be people who were working the night shift who might have seen or heard something.”

He nodded and walked away, beckoning to a couple of other officers.

Rae turned to Hunt. “What brought you here, anyway?”

Her brother grimaced and rubbed the back of his neck. “The mayor’s on a rampage and we all got our asses chewed tonight. For five hours. Until one o’clock this morning.” He flipped his wrist over and glanced at his watch. “Exactly two hours ago I had just pulled into my driveway when I got the call about this. And since the chief has his lips so far up the mayor’s ass that the back of his head is brown, here I am.” He propped his hands on his hips. “So. How soon you gonna solve this? It’s been three days since the first killing. You’re not usually such a slacker.”

She rubbed the bridge of her nose with her middle finger, which made him laugh.

She felt someone behind her and turned to see her angel. No, not *her* angel. Just a guy with wings who set her clit throbbing again. He’d flown down from the roof and now stood silently, watching the activity as humans scuttled around the crime scene. She wondered what they must look like to him—wondered whether he liked them or thought they were insignificant compared to beings like him.

Well, remembering that kiss, he must at least like *her*.

She flushed from her clit to her forehead. With a kiss like that, she couldn't imagine what it would be like to have sex with him.

Well, she *could* imagine, and that was the problem.

A noise from deeper in the alley drew her attention. As she stared, the air swirled and coalesced, and the wind whistled like someone blowing across the top of an unseen bottle. Then a hole opened in midair and something big and gray stepped out, followed by two more big, gray things.

Talon had also turned at the noise and now said something particularly pithy that she thought, as an angel, he wouldn't be saying. Of course, he had given her the hottest kiss she'd ever had so she wasn't sure just how angelic he really was. He cursed again.

Apparently these creatures were bad news.

As if she hadn't already figured that out.

Rae withdrew her weapon and thumbed off the safety. She aimed at the grisly newcomers. Hulking bodies with bat-like wings extending above their heads, they looked like living versions of stone gargoyles she'd seen in pictures of gothic architecture. "What the hell are those?"

"Gargoyles." Talon moved in front of her, blocking her from the creatures. "Let me deal with them."

While part of her thrilled at the idea he was trying to protect her, another part was irritated—all her life she'd been told to stand up and be strong. She *was* strong. She didn't need some sexy autocratic angel shoving her aside.

"I can take care of myself," she muttered and tried to push him out of the way.

All she got for her efforts was a mouthful of feathers and a bruised ego. It was like trying to move a mountain. It appeared she wasn't strong enough in this instance after all.

"Your bullets won't work on them—they'll just bounce off their tough hides. Unless you can hit a soft spot—in their armpits or their eyes. Otherwise, it takes someone

supernatural to combat them." He glanced at her brother. "You might want to clear the rest of your officers out. This could get messy and...difficult to explain."

Hunt gave an abrupt nod. Keeping his gaze on the gargoyles, he grabbed Rae by one arm. "Come on, Rae. Talon can handle this."

She let him drag her toward the street, though she kept looking back over her shoulder. Her breath caught as the three gargoyles leaped toward Talon.

Even though he was outnumbered, he seemed to be holding his own. Muscles bulging, he grabbed one of the gray creatures and slammed it against the wall. The gargoyle growled and scabbled at Talon, who tossed it away like so much trash. The other two creatures attacked, clawed hands raking at Talon's flesh, drawing bright red blood.

"Wait!" Rae struggled against her brother's hold.

"No." Hunt kept hauling her after him. "Talon is immortal – he can't die."

"Are you so sure?" Her voice was a rasp, forced past tight throat muscles.

Hunt looked back and stopped.

Talon had been forced down to one knee and was being inexorably pushed down to the ground by all three gargoyles. One of them looked up and fixed its scarlet gaze on Rae.

Her heart started pounding a dull beat behind her ribs.

"You're next."

The words were an icy hiss. Cold fingers curled around her soul and she shivered. Even knowing the effort was futile, she drew her weapon and pointed it at the malevolent being. "Let him go."

"Your bullets cannot harm me." The gargoyle rose to its feet and started toward her, leaving the other two to deal with Talon.

That's his first mistake. She didn't know where that thought had come from, seeing as how she didn't know Talon, not really, but somehow she knew it was an accurate

assessment. Over the gargoyle's shoulder she saw Talon hunch over, saw his muscles bunch, and knew the other two were in trouble.

She put her gaze back on the gargoyle stalking toward her, not wanting to draw its attention back to Talon.

Hunt stood next to her, his weapon drawn and aimed at the approaching creature as well. "Remember what Talon said. Aim for its eyes," he muttered. "That'll be our only chance."

Rae sighted down her arm and squeezed the trigger. The bullet struck the gargoyle on its brow, flattened against the hard shell of the creature's body and fell to the pavement.

Hunt fired and missed too. "Shit."

Rae fired again, cursing when the bullet grazed the gargoyle's skull. She and her brother backed up a few steps, firing more rapidly now, still trying to shoot the thing in the eye. "You know," she muttered, "something that size should have bigger eyes."

Her brother gave a grunt of agreement.

She heard the pounding of footsteps and risked a quick glance over her shoulder. Half a dozen uniformed officers came to a stop behind them, weapons drawn, eyes wide with disbelief.

"What the hell..." one of them muttered, but the hand holding the gun was steady.

Rae had no explanation that wouldn't make her sound like she was a loony tune, and didn't even try to come up with one. She rotated her shoulders, took a deep breath, and slowly let it out as she aimed and squeezed the trigger. The creature turned its head. The bullet that might have struck its eye instead sliced across the tip of its ear, taking bits of stony flesh with it.

The gargoyle hissed in pain, its eyes flaring with red heat. It flapped its massive wings, lifting its body off the ground.

With a roar, Talon threw the remaining gargoyles off him. He drew his sword—its blade glowing with golden light—and with one wide sweep sliced through the necks of the creatures. The bodies dropped to the ground, the heads rolling several feet away to be stopped by the stucco wall of a nearby building.

Talon strode forward, one fist clenched around his bloodied sword. “Chuck!” His wings lifted into the air, the tips brushing against the buildings on either side of the alley. “Chukrabenoranomiseciton, you rotting piece of dung. It’s me you want. Come and get me. If you’ve stones enough.”

The gargoyle stopped its advance. Turning, it faced Talon, its tail swishing back and forth like an angry cat’s. Then it surged forward, strong wings propelling it toward Talon with a swiftness that stole Rae’s breath.

Chapter Four

Bloodied sword in his left hand, Talon prepared himself. As Chuck surged toward him, Talon pushed off on one foot, meeting the attack in the air. They both struck, dodged and feinted. All the while Talon worked his way in a partial circle until he blocked the gargoyle's path back to Rae.

In all his past dealings with humans, it had been duty that compelled him to protect. This time, this human, was different. She was straightforward yet endearing, and her stubborn determination to stand on her own would more than likely make him crazy. He had to ensure her safety.

With the gargoyle upon him, Talon thrust forward with the sword. The gargoyle dodged the blow, sending one meaty fist into Talon's side before swooping back. Talon grunted at the impact and brought the sword up, nicking Chuck just below his mouth. The gargoyle roared, rage flaring in his eyes. Blood and spittle dripped down his chin. With another howl of fury, he swept forward.

Talon blocked the attack and lifted his sword. This time he sliced into the gargoyle's brawny forearm. Chuck backed away, his wings slowly pumping, keeping him hovering like a hulking nightmarish hummingbird.

Talon did the same, every muscle tense as he prepared for another onslaught.

Chuck looked at the lifeless bodies of his comrades and then back at Talon with murder in the blood-red depths of his eyes. "Don't think this is over." The gargoyle motioned over his shoulder with the tip of his blood covered chin. "Now that I know you have these puny humans to be concerned about..." On that he opened a portal and flew through it.

Talon let him go and allowed the portal to close because he needed to be sure Rae and her brother—as well as the other humans on the scene—were safe. He sheathed his

sword and landed several feet away from the humans. His wounds were deep enough to sting but would soon heal. He glanced at the uniformed officers, all of whom kept their guns trained on him until Hunt holstered his own weapon and told them to stand down.

Reaching into the front pocket of his pants, Talon grabbed his paging device and clicked out a quick communiqué to Gabriel that Cleaners were needed. He knew that since Rae and Hunt were resistant to glamour they would also most likely be immune to the effects of the Cleaners. And, based on Chuck's last muttered words, they were still in danger. "You need to go. Now. Before he comes back with reinforcements."

"What about you?" Hunt walked forward.

Rae stuck by her brother's side as if she was a fly and he was flypaper. And she did *not* holster *her* weapon. Hunt wrapped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her. He placed a kiss against the top of her head and murmured something too low for Talon to hear. But she shook her head and raised the gun, keeping it trained on *him*.

He admired her dedication. And coveted the obvious love between the two siblings.

He clenched his jaw. Another sin, that of envy, inviting him to fall into temptation. What was wrong with him? He had the love of the Great King—he didn't need the love of a family. *Get that thought out of your head. That's what started Xerxes down the path to damnation.*

A portal opened up behind Talon and he turned to one side. Three angels stepped through, their pearly gray wings designating them as part of the maintenance and cleaning department. At Talon's instruction, they bypassed Rae and Hunt and went to work, herding the small crowd of people—police and civilians alike—into a group, and set about altering their perception of the evening's events.

"What's going on?" Rae finally slid her gun into its holster and secured it.

"I'll explain later. You two need to get out of here." So he wouldn't undo the efforts of the Cleaners, Talon used glamour to cloak his presence from the other humans in the

vicinity. He walked with Rae and her brother to a dark green four-door sedan he recognized as Hunt's.

"Where're you parked, Rae?" Hunt glanced around as he clicked his remote. The security system beeped and he opened the driver's door. He paused, waiting for her answer.

"Right there." She pointed to her red Wrangler several cars down. "But we can't just leave the scene and all these people..." Rae glanced over her shoulder and her voice trailed off.

Without looking, Talon knew what she saw. The street, the crime scene, was deserted. The Cleaners had transported everyone to their homes, planted false memories and gone back to the office. They were nothing if not efficient.

He and these two humans were the only ones left on the street.

Behind him, the wind wheezed and moaned. He glanced over his shoulder to see Chuck and at least a dozen other gargoyles readying themselves to step through another portal.

"Get going!" He shoved Hunt into his vehicle. "I'll see to your sister."

Hunt met his eyes but it was clear in his expression he understood there was no time to argue. The "you'd better keep her safe" was also clear. Talon slammed the door shut as the policeman started his car. One last look and Hunt sped away.

Talon swept Rae into his arms and leaped into the air, his powerful wings taking him higher and higher. He knew the gargoyles followed close behind. But if he could get high enough, they wouldn't be able to follow. They were too bulky and required an atmosphere rich in oxygen in order to maintain their flexibility. If they went too high where the oxygen content wasn't as great, they'd turn to stone and fall to the ground. He would only need a few minutes at that altitude—which Rae should be able to handle.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. Many of the gargoyles had already slowed, not willing to take a chance on going too high by mistake. Only Chuck and one other still followed.

“Hold on,” Talon told Rae and pushed higher, faster. By now he was roughly five thousand feet up and climbing still higher. He looked behind and saw all of the gargoyles had stopped, hovering in the air, hissing and snarling at his evasion.

Rae had a stranglehold around his neck. She looked over his shoulder, her sigh a mixture of relief and fear. “Well, they’ve stopped, which is good, but I feel like I’m on the edge of an invisible skyscraper. And it’s freezing up here.” Her gaze settled on his wings and she lost a little color from her face.

“I won’t let you fall. And I promise you, we won’t be at this altitude for long. You’ll be warm again soon enough.”

One by one the gargoyles left them. Chuck lingered, his gaze promising retribution before he turned and flew away as well.

Talon tightened his arms around her. He didn’t want to risk opening a portal of his own and thereby leaving them vulnerable to trackers. Wing-power it was. He turned and flew southeast, heading toward a section of desert that had been declared neutral territory. They could rest there and he could figure out what he was supposed to do with her now.

Rae kept her eyes closed most of the trip. It was one thing to stand on the edge of a four-story building and look down into an alley – it was something entirely, freakishly different to be in the arms of an angel a few thousand feet up in the air.

It was so surreal – angels and gargoyles, things that she’d thought weren’t real had proven to be as flesh and blood as she was. More or less. She was certain of one thing, though. If Talon hadn’t been in that alley tonight, she and Hunt and all the other cops would’ve been gargoyle bait.

She shivered and it had nothing to do with the altitude because, although the skin that was exposed to the air was chilled, the parts of her body that rested against Talon prickled with heat. And that heat traveled inside and down to her clit, which throbbed in time to her heartbeat.

She realized the air was warming and opened her eyes just as he landed beside a small adobe house nestled up against the wall of a cliff. As he set her on her feet, she reluctantly slid her arms from around his neck. "Where are we?"

"It's a...you'd call it a safe house, I suppose. It's on neutral territory. Once it's occupied, there's a security system that prevents anyone else from entering." He paused, looking around, his eyes narrowed. "Good. No one's here." Talon strode toward the front door. Upon a wave from his hand, it opened.

"But where's *here*, exactly?" she asked, trailing after him into the house.

It was decorated in typical Southwest style, with leather furniture piled with pastel pillows in a Native American pattern. Pottery lined a planter shelf. A small kitchen was on one side, the floor plan open and flowing into a dining area and living room.

"About fifty miles northeast of Tucson. Bedroom's through there." Talon closed and bolted the front door then pointed to a door off the living room. "Bathroom's beyond that." He crossed the room and looked through a window. "In case you wanted to freshen up or...something."

"No." Rae wandered over to the plump sofa and sat down, one leg bent beneath her, and pulled one of the patterned pillows over. "I'm fine." She hugged the pillow to her chest and stared at Talon. "What happens now?"

"Now we lie low. At least until I can get someone to come sit with you while I go back out after Xerxes."

Even as she recognized the validity of what he said, irritation flared. She was a homicide cop, for crying out loud. Trained to hold her own in a fight. She'd taken down suspects twice her size before and barely broke a sweat. She didn't need a babysitter.

Except... They were talking gargoyles here. Gar. Goyles. And God knew what else.

Pushing that thought aside for the moment, she asked, "Xerxes? That's the one you've been tracking?" She watched him as he paced over and opened the bedroom door.

"Yes." He turned and walked into the living room. He looked at the furniture and sighed.

"What?"

He gestured with one hand. "It's not exactly made to fit someone with wings."

"You can't, like, retract them or something?" She tilted her head and looked him over.

"No." With another sigh, he went into the dining area and grabbed one of the straight-back chairs. He brought it over and placed it beside the leather armchair that matched the sofa. He straddled the wooden chair, leaning his forearms along the top edge. "My wings don't retract. Usually it's not a problem. The furniture where I come from is ergonomically designed for us."

"Oh." Yet another reminder of how very different they were. As if those scarlet wings weren't enough. Rae stared at his wings, then let her gaze trace over the bunched muscles of his shoulders and biceps. But her gaze strayed back to those feathers. She pushed the pillow off her lap and stood. She went over to him, one hand outstretched. "Can I...?"

He gave a nod.

She traced the edge of one of his wings. The feathers were silky soft, a deep red tipped in pearl gray. Taking one feather between forefinger and thumb, she lightly rubbed across it. Her fingers tingled at the contact. Rae gave her hand a slight shake and walked behind him, looking at where his wings were attached to his back, between his shoulder blades.

His head turned to the side so he could watch her, though he made no other move.

She reached out and trailed her fingers over the seam where feathers met flesh. Soft feathers gave way to hard muscles covered by smooth skin.

A shudder worked its way through him. He abruptly stood. One big hand went to his front pants pocket and pulled out what looked to be a pager. He pressed a few buttons and then put the device away.

“What was that?” Rae rubbed her fingers against her pants, trying to alleviate the prickling sensation that lingered.

“You’d call it a pager, I suppose. I’ve sent a communiqué to my boss, asking him to send someone to watch over you while I go after Xerxes.”

“You use a pager?” She frowned. “You can’t just, I dunno, communicate telepathically?”

Talon shook his head. “It’s too easy for someone else to eavesdrop—especially another angel. Having an electronic network is much more secure.” He paced to a window and gazed out, leaning one forearm along the top of the window. “As soon as my replacement arrives, I’ll leave.”

“Yeah, well, we need to talk about that.” Rae walked over to him. “You said that once this place is occupied no one else can enter. Why can’t I stay by myself? Better yet, why can’t I go home? They surely won’t still be after me.”

He glanced at her and shook his head. “I should have said, once it’s occupied by one of us. One of the Others.”

“Others?”

“Someone that is something other than human. Supernatural.” He looked back through the window. “You won’t be safe here by yourself.”

“Then take me home.” Rae took a few steps away and whirled again to face him. “I can take care of myself.”

He jerked away from the window. “Can you? Can you really?” He strode to her and clasped her shoulders, giving her a little shake. Anger sparked in his dark eyes. “If I

hadn't been there in that alley tonight, Chuck and his friends would have killed you and your brother. I didn't see you taking care of yourself then."

It wasn't so much the words that made Rae angry, it was the tone. That condescending, pat-the-little-woman-on-the-head tone that set her teeth on edge. She'd been hearing that from various males her entire adult life, especially from big macho cops who wanted to protect her instead of believing she could protect herself—the way her father had raised her.

No Stark is gonna be a sissy, he'd always said. Even our women have more balls than most men.

God, she missed him. And it was the memory of him that made her stiffen her spine. Why was it that a woman had to fight twice as hard, do twice as much work, be twice as tough as a man in the same job and for her efforts be named a bitch? Rae was tired of it and suddenly spitting mad. She jerked out of Talon's hold. "You can just go to hell."

"Actually I could, but I prefer not to. I don't much care for the heat."

That gave her pause. She propped her hands on her hips. "You know, you're not what I imagined an angel would be like." She'd never expected an angel to be so arrogant and irritating. Not to mention sexy.

"Just what did you imagine? White robes and harps? Beatific smiles?" A grin tugged at his sensual mouth and sent a zing to her pussy.

"Well...yeah." Had she mentioned sexy?

"White robes would get in the way of doing my job. Not even Guardian Angels wear them. Though Guiding Angels tend to wear them because they're more...angelic." He turned from her as if finished with the conversation.

Forget sexy. He was just plain aggravating. "So you're the big, bad kind of angel, is that it?" Rae went after him and grabbed his shoulder. She wasn't finished with him, not by a long shot. She knew she was in over her head with these gargoyles and Angels of Retribution, but she'd be damned before she just rolled over and gave up.

She just wished she didn't feel like caressing the muscled flesh beneath her fingertips. It made it hard to stay irritated with him when her damn hooaha was being all perky again. Rae let go of him and clenched her fist at her side. "Take me back. Now."

Forget that you want him, Raegan. Forget that something inside you recognizes him. You have a life and it doesn't include a sexy, aggravating angel.

He cocked one eyebrow and folded his arms across that bare, brawny, mouthwatering chest. "Make me."

Chapter Five

If Raegan Stark had had demon blood in her, Talon knew his hair would be on fire about now, lit by the anger blazing in her gaze. Her slender hands clenched in fists at her sides and he could see she was debating the odds of success were she to try to “make him.”

He hoped she’d take a chance. He wanted to feel her soft body against him again, wanted a chance to get her underneath him, even if it was only because he had to wrestle her to the floor to keep her safe.

He was good at wrestling. Very good.

Talon clamped down on the arousal that began engorging his cock. By all that was holy, what was wrong with him? He wasn’t supposed to be lusting after this woman. Upon receiving this assignment, after all, he was the one who’d been proud to have never jeopardized a mission on account of a female.

Now look at him. Ready to slide this woman beneath him—needing to be part of her in the only way possible—without truly thinking out the consequences. He scowled. *Start thinking with the head above your shoulders, not the one below your waist.*

He saw in her eyes the second she made her decision. She shook her head and turned away from him, shrugging out of her jacket and tossing it onto a chair by the door. As he dealt with the acute feeling of regret that she’d given up so easily—it didn’t seem like her—he turned his head to gaze out of the window.

He saw her coming from the corner of his eye but wasn’t quick enough to evade her. She launched herself into the air, both legs straight, the soles of her shoes slamming into his ribs. As he staggered, she fell to the floor. By the time he’d righted himself, she’d picked herself up and was coming at him again.

The little tease. She'd deliberately masked her decision to attack and tricked him into letting down his guard. Of a certainty, his own belief that it would be an uneven match and ineffectual in its results had contributed to his distraction, but still, on craftiness alone she was a worthy opponent.

He blocked another kick with his forearm, eyes widening as he realized it was a full-force blow. She wasn't holding back at all. If anything, her anger fueled the attack, giving her additional strength that she didn't seem at all hesitant to use.

Except for an occasional grunt, she fought in grim silence. Another block, then another. As he backed away from her ferocious attack, shoving first one chair and then another out of his way, Talon decided he needed to go on the offensive because he didn't want to let her keep coming at him, peppering him with bruises in the process. But more importantly, the fight aroused him. He wanted to get her contained so he could get away from her before he did something stupid.

Like fuck her until neither one of them could move. Especially him, since giving into his lust would drain him of his power. Gabriel would laugh his ass off, once he got over his initial anger.

With an economy of moves, Talon maneuvered Rae toward the bedroom. He'd lock her in and call for someone to come babysit her while he went off after Chuck. He would *not* think about her lying naked on that wide bed, legs splayed in welcome, pussy hot and slick.

When Rae jumped onto him, wrapping her legs around his waist, and tried to head butt him, he jerked back just in time. Whirling, he tossed her onto the bed and came down on top of her. Her hands came toward his face, fingers curled and heading straight for his eyes. He grabbed her wrists and held them beside her head, then pressed the weight of his body onto hers to keep her still.

To *try* to keep her still.

She went wild, her body bowing as she tried to buck him off. He situated himself so she couldn't hit any vital areas with her knees and hunkered down to ride her out. She

fought as valiantly as she had with him at the crime scene when he'd grabbed her and flown up to the roof of the building.

Finally she slumped beneath him, though her eyes held fire in their depths. "Get off me."

"I don't think so." Talon shook his head, not trusting her to not erupt into battle again the minute she was free. He settled more comfortably onto her, making sure to keep his weight off her chest so she could breathe. God Almighty, she felt good beneath him. She felt *right*. Ignoring his cock, which insisted on prodding at her, he said, "You're not prepared for what's out there."

"It's my job. Of course I'm prepared. Cretin," she muttered. "You can't just keep me here. Get off me, you big oaf." She bucked her hips against him. As the action drove her softness further into the hardness of his lower body, she stilled. Her lips parted. "Stop that."

He stared into her eyes. Seeing her sensual response to his physical reaction to her, he stayed put and gave a shrug. "It's a natural response to a beautiful woman."

"You're an angel. You're not supposed to...you know." She glowered at him, though desire turned her gaze dark and sultry.

He brought his face slowly down to hers. When he touched the corner of her mouth with his lips, she turned her face just enough to press her cheek against his. He lifted his head and saw the growing passion in her gaze.

"I'm not supposed to what? Become aroused?" Talon shifted against her, settling deeper against the cleft of her body. Heaven help him, but he couldn't resist her allure. "Doesn't seem very angel-like, now does it?" He pumped his hips slowly against her. "But then, Angels of Retribution aren't exactly bred to be angelic. We are made up of the warrior clans of the heavens, after all." He stared down at her, willing her to accept his next words. "You need to stay here, where it's safe. I'd appreciate a little cooperation on your part."

The desire became tempered by irritation. She twisted her wrists in his grasp. Threading through the passion was that obstinate streak. "And I'd appreciate you being a little less high-handed about what I can and can't handle. Let. Me. Go."

He sighed. She was a stubborn woman. But he was a determined being with God on his side. "You're staying here. Get used to it."

Her eyes widened and then narrowed to slits. If she'd had fur, it'd be puffed out and she'd be hissing in fury. "You arrogant jerk. You can't just kidnap me and keep me here against my will."

"Can't I?" A slow grin tilted his lips. Maybe not the most diplomatic thing to do, but she delighted him with her feistiness. She was so cute when she was mad. He couldn't seem to stop poking at her.

In more ways than one.

Her face flared with color that matched his wings. She bucked against him, twisting her body back and forth like a ship on a storm-tossed sea. Each brush of her belly against him heightened his arousal and, if the look in her eyes was anything to go by, hers as well. When she finally settled down, defeated for the moment, strands of hair sticking to her sweat-dampened neck, he did what he'd wanted to do from the moment she'd walked into that alley.

He crashed his mouth down on hers, taking from her and giving of himself as male and female had done from the beginning of creation.

What had begun as determination to show him she could manage her own life—that she didn't need to be "handled"—had escalated out of control. And Rae didn't care. He'd blocked her every move with a gentleness that had been exquisite, as if he took great care not to hurt her while allowing her to pummel him with fists and feet. Even in her fury she'd registered that.

She'd also realized that it wasn't as much him that she was angry with, though she was irritated at the arrogant way he'd commandeered her life. Rather she was

frustrated by her inability to combat this new enemy—a creature of myth and legend, something that was supposed to squat above human-built buildings and be nothing more than a piece of the architecture.

And Talon was a nice, big target to take her frustration out on.

Now, though, with his body draped over hers, it was like being covered by a living blanket. And his mouth! His tongue swept between her lips like a conqueror, confident and commanding. He was hot and exacted an equally heated response from her.

Rae moaned and sucked on his tongue. His taste went to her head like a shot of tequila, giving her that same swirly headed feel without any of the acridness. He was smooth and rich like the finest chocolate that she didn't have to worry about going straight to her ass.

As his mouth moved on hers, hard with demand yet soft to the touch, she kind of hoped he *would* go in that direction.

Her breasts were flattened by Talon's weight, molded to his hard chest. She twisted beneath him, restless now, wanting to feel him closer. Even the clothing between them was too much—she needed to have skin on skin. On a certain level the intensity of her desire surprised her. Yet...not. She'd been attracted to him on a purely physical level from the second she'd clapped eyes on him. Now, to feel his heavy bulk on top of her, to feel the evidence of his own desire pressing insistently against the V of her thighs ramped her passion even higher.

His mouth left hers to travel across her jaw and down her throat, lips and tongue tasting her skin. He nibbled a lazy trail between the opening of her blouse, mouth resting for a moment against the swell of her breasts where her bra plumped them together. She shivered as his warm breath wafted over her skin.

Rae quaked beneath him. As she gripped his shoulders she realized no longer held her wrists. She thought briefly of pushing him away—really, was this appropriate behavior with one of God's messengers? But when he unfastened her blouse and slipped one big hand under her bra to thumb her tight nipple, she gave up.

Since she'd gain something from retreating, she'd concede this particular battle.

She brought her legs up, knees cradling his hips, and the heat of his erection pressed snug against her center. He groaned and surged against her, muttering something in a language she'd never heard before.

He stared down at her, passion and something else in his gaze—something fierce and protective, full of need but ripe with promise at the same time. And beneath all of that emotion swirling there, something else. A question. *Do we stop now, or follow this path to its natural conclusion?*

Her breath hitched and her heart banged a staccato rhythm against her ribs. Could she do this?

How could she not?

Talon's hands shifted to the mattress as he started to lever himself off her. No way in heaven—or hell for that matter—was she going to let that happen. Rae grabbed his shoulders and held on, fingers digging into his flesh, and at the same time wrapped her legs around his lean hips, locking her ankles beneath his buttocks and rocking her hips with clear intent against his.

He froze. His gaze searched hers then seemingly satisfied with what he saw in the depths of her eyes, a slow smile stretched his mouth.

It was the triumphant smile of a male who saw his goal within his grasp.

"Be very sure, little one." His voice was a low, hungry rumble. "I'm breaking all sorts of rules here and aim to make it worthwhile."

"What kinds of rules?" Her voice was breathless, with none of the usual assertive quality to her tone.

"If an angel gives in to any of what you call the Seven Deadly Sins, we pay for it by losing our power for a short time."

"How short a time?"

“Long enough to make me vulnerable if I weren’t in this safe house.” He pressed his mouth to hers, a hard kiss of possession.

When he lifted his mouth, she said, “But—”

“Just... Don’t leave the house. Afterward. Promise me.”

She chewed on her lower lip. If he were incapacitated it would be the perfect opportunity for her to get out of here and head home. Of course, not knowing exactly where *here* was could be a problem. Plus she couldn’t do that to him, sneak out on him when he was down for the count. “I promise. But we still need to talk about me going home.”

“Later.” As if her strength was nothing, he reared up, though she tried to hold him near. As he went to unbutton the rest of her blouse, her hands fell from his shoulders to rest on the mattress at her sides. He brushed her blouse aside, his gaze narrowing on the front closure of her bra. “Perfect,” he muttered. His face sobered and he looked more intently at her than any man had ever before.

Well, than any *male* had before.

With one finger and thumb, Talon flipped open the tab of her bra and peeled away the cups to reveal her breasts. He leaned down and licked across one tip, then the other. Both immediately hardened, pouting for more.

Rae gripped the bedspread. “Talon...”

With a low groan, he closed his lips over her nipple and suckled her. Hard. The tugging of his mouth went zinging directly to her clit. Sensation washed over her, dragging her under in a stormy eddy. She succumbed, barely aware of his hands on the waistband of her jeans. But when his knuckles rubbed across her belly as he unfastened the copper button, awareness flared with prickling heat.

Reaching up, he settled his mouth once again on hers. If possible, this time he was hungrier, even more demanding. He pulled her jeans down and off her legs, followed by her panties. He moved one hand over the soft mound of her belly and down through the neat curls at the apex of her thighs. His fingers parted her folds, slid lower to find

the slick heat of her arousal. Then one finger dipped inside, stroking into her pussy with devastating slowness.

Rae cried out and arched into his touch. Her head fell back, her eyes closed. She felt him shift on the bed, his weight rocking her slightly as the mattress was jostled. His lips touched her throat, lingered at the hollow between her collarbones, his breath hot and moist. His tongue swirled a circle against her skin just as he withdrew and then pushed that long finger inside her again.

She clamped around him, every muscle tensing at the intrusion. She gasped and lifted her hips, trying to take him deeper.

“Easy,” he murmured. He kissed his way over to one nipple. “You feel so tight. So hot.”

What she felt was empty, and he could take care of that problem. “Talon, please.”

His finger stroked deep inside her. He added another, widening her, tempting her. “I will please you, sweetheart.” His voice was husky. “Tell me what you want.”

She wanted more. She wanted *him*. Opening her eyes, she met his gaze and gave a slow, sultry smile. “I want you. Inside me. Now.”

Chapter Six

If lust was the reason angels fell from heaven, then Talon willingly took the leap. Rae was like heated honey on his fingers, her pussy rippling around him as her arousal built.

He'd been with females before, but never with a human woman. He'd always believed them to be too soft, too weak to withstand a union with him. With anyone like him. But he saw now he'd been wrong.

Rae's gaze was hard with challenge, but her mouth... Those courtesan lips were soft with invitation.

He trailed his lips over the silky skin of her breast until he reached one taut peak.

Here she was soft and hard all at the same time. It was a contrast he had to explore. With a low groan, he took her nipple between his lips. She was like satin against his tongue. He suckled her slowly, in time with the fingers he thrust steadily in and out of her sweet pussy.

Her fingers stroked over his erection through his leather pants, then cupped him. His cock surged, fighting to get past the enclosure. He wanted...no, *needed* to feel skin on skin. He rolled off the bed long enough to take off his trousers. Climbing back onto the mattress, he stopped at the slender hand that wrapped around his straining shaft.

"You might be an angel, but you're all man here." Her voice was low, wondering. She slipped her hand down his cock to his balls, fingers dusting over them, making him gasp and tighten. She brought her head closer to his erection. As she bent, he saw the tattoo on the back of her right shoulder.

It was an angel with crimson wings.

It was *him*.

Then her tongue flicked out, licking up the drop of pre-cum that clung to the tip of his cock, and his brain shut down. She closed her mouth over him. Her lips sliding down his shaft was the most carnal sensation Talon had ever felt. In reflex, he brought his hands to her head, holding her as he watched as more and more of his thick flesh disappeared between her lips. Her mouth was hot and wet and oh, so soft—she would drive him insane.

And he would gladly succumb.

As her lips drew on him, her tongue laved his cock head. Her mouth slid back and forth and it felt so incredible he made a helpless, shallow thrust.

She moaned, the sound traveling the length of his shaft to his balls. Her gaze remained locked with his. Her eyes sparkled with a sensuality that left him breathless.

She was the true angel here.

Talon rocked his hips, thrusting his cock in and out of her mouth. He groaned, a rumble that came from deep in his gut.

Rae's slender hand wrapped around the base of his shaft as she licked the sensitive head. Her tongue flicked into the slitted tip and he arched into her touch.

She made her way down the underside of his cock, gently licking and nibbling. When she reached his scrotum, her tongue came out to gently lap at his tightly drawn skin. Her hand stroked his cock, milking him through the ring of her fingers.

He grunted and thrust into her hand. "Take my balls in your mouth, sweetheart. Suck them."

With a soft moan that was full of need, she opened her mouth and tenderly sucked one testicle between her lips. Talon groaned and lifted his hips, fingers clenching in her hair as the pressure of his orgasm built.

She switched to the other testicle and gave it the same loving treatment, her tongue laving him, gently suckling him. By the time she released him and moved back to his cock, his hips were surging against her in an instinctive motion he couldn't control.

One slender hand stroked across his balls as the other one swept up his shaft to meet her descending mouth. With another soft moan, she set a steady rhythm, sucking strongly and swirling her tongue over the head with each pass. Talon gave a hoarse shout and his hips pumped steadily, driving more and more of his cock into her mouth.

He stared down at her. Her breasts swayed with the movement of her head bobbing up and down. She looked up at him, her lovely eyes dark with passion, her full lips stretched taut around the hard flesh invading her mouth.

His spine tingled. Heat spread from his groin outward as his balls drew up tight and hungry against the base of his cock. He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold on to his control, but he wanted to prolong this moment, the feel of her hot, wet mouth surrounding him.

But when he came, it would be in the creamy depths of her cunt.

Rae clenched her thighs against the need pulsing between her legs. Talon's warmth filled her mouth. He was so hard she felt the throb of his heart beating against her tongue, yet he was like velvet at the same time. Slick dampness—sweet and salty—hit her tongue. She prodded at the slitted tip for more, hungry for every taste of him she could get. He gave a harsh groan, his hands fisting tightly in her hair. That slight pain ramped her own arousal. More wet heat slid from her throbbing sex.

"Take me," he murmured, his voice harsh with need. "Take all of me."

Angling her head and concentrating on breathing through her nose, Rae sucked him deeper, exulting in the way he held her as if he would never let her go. His thickness spread her jaws wide, the head hitting the back of her throat as he took over the rhythm.

Giving him what he needed—pleasuring him with lips and tongue and hands—made her so hot she was ready to come just from touching him.

She let his cock slip from her mouth and went back to his taut testicles. Keeping one hand on his cock, stroking the rigid length, she licked her way around his hard sac,

once again taking one ball into her mouth to lave him with her tongue. He tasted of salt and vinegar and she whimpered with her own need, her free hand sliding between her legs to rub her aching clit.

Suddenly, over two hundred pounds of aroused male reared over her, pressing her back against the mattress. Big hands pushed her legs wide and his dark head pressed between her thighs. Thick crimson wings swept up and over, blocking the light, the upper curve coming over her to lightly flick the tight peaks of her breasts.

His fingers spread her labia and he lightly tongued his way through her folds, circling her opening. She gasped and arched against his mouth. Talon gave a strained chuckle and moved back to her clit. Drawing it between his lips, he suckled, lightly at first, then with growing strength.

Rae moaned and reached down to clasp his head. He pressed two long, thick fingers inside her sensitive channel, testing her, stretching her. She clamped down around him.

His feathers stroked her nipples, making them almost unbearably sensitive. They were so hard they tingled at each brush of his wings. Her pussy spasmed, convulsing around his fingers. She needed a deeper connection. She needed to be filled. "Talon, I want you."

He lifted his head long enough to rasp, "As soon as I'm finished here." He went back down on her. He fucked into her pussy with his tongue while his long fingers slipped between her buttocks. He rimmed her sensitive back opening, pressing at the responsive ring of flesh as his tongue probed her sex deeper and deeper still.

"Talon!" She bucked against him, caught in the erotic caress of his mouth and hands, her body tightening with every lash of his tongue, every flutter of his fingers. She tangled her fingers in his hair, tightening her hold, trying to drag him up so he could put his cock to good use.

He resisted, swiping through her folds with the flat of his tongue. Just as his mouth latched onto her clit, his finger pressed through the puckered opening of her ass.

Her orgasm exploded. Rae arched, crying out again and again as his finger probed deeper, harder, thrusting in and out in the same sensual rhythm as the suction of his mouth on her clit.

Talon's movements slowed and he resisted her tugging at his hair. Even as the last shudder rolled through her body, he began again. Easy at first, drawing his tongue lightly through swollen, sensitive folds, dipping into her pussy to draw her slick arousal into his mouth. His finger kept pressing into her ass, thrusting steadily in and out.

He added another finger. The small, sharp pain quickly slid into extraordinary pleasure. Another climax roiled through her and she arched once again into his mouth, a long, low groan coming from her as the pleasure spiked and spiked and spiked.

As she came down from her orgasm, he rested his face against her mound. His lashes swept up, dark gaze meeting hers. He slowly withdrew his fingers from her ass.

She clenched with a renewal of arousal. Amazing.

Reaching over, he pulled a few tissues free from the box sitting on the bedside table and wiped his fingers. He dropped the tissues to the floor and leaned over her. "You are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." He dipped his head and flicked his tongue against her clit. She jumped and moaned, just that one touch ramping her passion even more.

But enough was enough. His cock was long and thick and hard, and she wanted it inside her. Rae grasped his face between her hands and, this time, he willingly moved up her body until she could kiss his lips. The tangy taste of her arousal lingered on his mouth. With one hand she reached between them and gripped his erection. "If you know what's good for you, you'll use this. Now."

Common sense—just for a moment—reared its head. She put one hand against his chest. "Um, do we need to use some sort of protection? Do you have any weird germs I could catch?"

Talon's grin was quick and infectious. Though the way he scrubbed the tip of his

cock through the swollen folds of her sex was anything but funny. "I don't have germs. Weird or otherwise. And I can't catch anything from you."

She frowned. He made it sound like she was Typhoid Mary. "I don't have germs, either, flyboy. I...haven't been with anyone in a while." She did a quick count and realized with relief that it wasn't the right time of the month, so no angelic babies to worry about, either. If angels could even have babies.

But then, she'd never thought about angels having sex, for that matter. Who knew?

Trying to hurry him along, she slid her hands around him to grab his firm buttocks. She rubbed her pussy against his shaft, exulting in his sudden inhalation. His muscles bunched beneath her hands.

Then it was her turn to gasp. With a flex of his hips, Talon began a maddeningly slow entry. He captured her mouth in a deep kiss, gripped her hips in his hands and held her still as he pushed in and in.

And in.

Rae broke away from his mouth and dragged in a deep breath. She tilted her head back, moaning when his lips trailed down her throat. His mouth covered the tip of one breast and he gently sucked her as he continued to push through the tight grasp of her pussy.

Her sex was swollen and tender from her earlier orgasms, the stretching of her muscles around his thick length bordering on painful. But this kind of pain she could handle, encourage even. Because his possession was like nothing she'd ever experienced.

Gentle. Inflexible.

Seemingly endless.

Closing her eyes, she gasped and moaned, and still he pushed in until he was fully seated inside her. He remained locked against her, not moving for long moments. She could feel the pulse of his heartbeat in the turgid flesh of his cock and a whimper

escaped from her parted lips.

Pushing his shoulders up until she could look at him, she saw his face was stark with need, his skin taut across high cheekbones, his jaw held tautly. His eyes were dark and held a slight sheen that told her without words he was as moved by this union as she was.

Shivering, Rae tried to concentrate, tried to make her mind work through the riot of her senses. Her pussy felt stretched, beyond capacity, his cock a hard wedge of invasion. Her nipples were diamond-hard points, her breasts heavy and swollen.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” Talon’s voice was harsh, guttural, the words sounding as if they had been dragged from the deepest part of him.

“I’m fine.” She curled her fingers deeper into his hard buttocks. “I’ll be even better when you start moving.”

He laughed. When she clenched her inner muscles around his thick erection, he groaned and pulled out of her. Slamming back in, then sliding out, he set a hard, driving rhythm that crashed the heavy headboard against the wall. With each thrust, the breath exploded out of her lungs on a thin, short cry. Through it all, he held her gaze, his eyes boring into hers.

There was a wonderful sensation of fullness as he pushed deep into her body, then a clawing emptiness with his withdrawal. The head of his hard cock scraped along her sensitive inner walls and she fought instinctively to keep him deep inside.

The sensual tension coiled tight in her core, each thrust pushing her closer and closer to the edge of release. She kept her gaze on his, unwilling to look away, and saw his eyes darken. His face pulled tight even as his lunges became more forceful.

The headboard pounding against the wall and the sound of flesh slapping against flesh ramped up her arousal. He gathered her body into his arms, sliding his hands around to grip her buttocks. The position forced her hips higher and she wailed as the new angle put him right at the mouth of her womb.

Talon leaned down farther, rubbing over her sensitized nipples with the dark hair

on his chest. Never taking his eyes off her face, he nipped her lower lip, then said in that dark, magical voice, "Come for me."

The spiraling tension gathering inside her reached a pinnacle and, with a keening cry, she exploded into yet another orgasm. She arched, her head went back and little stars swam in her peripheral vision. Dimly, she heard his shout and felt his fingers dig into her buttocks as he stiffened and hardened even further, then the hot spurts of his release jetted inside her. His climax triggered a fresh round of spasms so strong Rae's entire lower body clenched, hard. Blackness swam at the edge of her vision, growing steadily inward until her lids fluttered closed.

With a soft sigh, she surrendered to the darkness.

Talon withdrew from Rae and collapsed to his side. Already his eyelids drooped. He could feel extreme fatigue pulling at him. With the last of his strength, he slipped an arm beneath Rae and pulled her close to him, draping one thigh over hers. Then he closed his eyes and let the tiredness take him.

Some time later—how long he couldn't be sure—he became aware of Rae trying to wake him.

"Talon!" She shook his shoulder. "Wake up! Someone's at the door."

He opened his eyes. He blinked slowly, fighting the urge to close his eyes and let them stay that way. "Don't...open it."

"No, of course not. But they keep knocking."

When his eyes fluttered closed, she prodded his shoulder again. "What if it's your replacement?" Then, under her breath, she muttered, "Not that I'm gonna sit here with some glorified babysitter."

"You promised." He forced his eyes open again. "It would...be your...guardian...angel."

"What?" Her voice was soft with confusion.

Talon blinked and tried to concentrate. He'd no idea the drain of his power meant that he'd lapse into unconsciousness, but that certainly felt like what was about to happen again. It was so hard to keep his eyes open. Rae's face was a pale blur as his eyes refused to focus. "The replacement. Will be your guardian angel." He drew in a deep breath, hoping more oxygen in his lungs might help. It didn't. Fatigue continued to drag at him. "Blue wings."

"What?" She tipped her head to one side. "Oh you mean him. *His* wings'll be blue."

Even a nod was an effort, though he thought he was able to tilt his chin down at least once to acknowledge her response.

"Oh." Her dark eyes went round. "But you're obviously in no shape to go anywhere. I'd be flattered if I thought this was my doing, but since I know it's not..." When he closed his eyes again, she poked him. "Hey! You need to stay with me here, bub."

"Can't." His head felt light, as if it would float off the bed if it weren't for being attached to his neck. He opened his eyes but was losing the battle to keep them open. "Tired." It was becoming too much of an effort to speak. Even the flare of alarm running through him at this weakness, so foreign to him before now, wasn't enough to stave off oblivion.

"Talon!" Rae's voice came as if from at the other end of a tunnel—it was tinny and faint. "Should I let him in? Talon?"

The pressure of the hand prodding at his shoulder and her anxious voice faded as darkness claimed him.

Chapter Seven

Rae sat back on her haunches. What was she supposed to do now? The person at the front door was persistent, rapping the door three times every thirty seconds or so. She couldn't ignore them – what if it was Talon's replacement?

Her flippin' guardian angel.

Her mother had always talked about those types of angels – “Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly” and other cautionary tales. But while her mother was convinced they were real, Rae didn't think *she'd* ever truly believed they existed.

Now she knew.

The knock on the front door sounded again. This time it was much louder, as if the person was now pounding on it with his fist. She got off the bed and hurriedly dressed. If all angels were as arrogant as Talon, she wouldn't want one to be cranky too.

Cranky, arrogant *and* a pain-in-the-ass angel was more than she wanted to handle at the moment.

She raked her hair back from her face with her fingers. She grabbed up her gun – just to be safe – and tucked it into the waistband of her jeans at the small of her back, then went slowly to the door. “Who is it?”

“I'm here about your brother,” came the response.

She frowned. He was here for Hunt? “He's not here.”

“I know that.” Irritation was quite distinct in that deep voice. “But if you care about him, you'll open the door.”

That sent chills racing across her skin. After taking a deep breath, she opened the door and jerked back when a fist came toward her face. It bounced off an invisible barrier before it could pass the lintel.

The part about other paranormal beings being barred from entering was true. She stifled a sigh of relief and looked more closely at the male at the door.

He was a tall angel—at least as tall as Talon, if not taller. Golden hair fell to his shoulders in waves and bright blue eyes were framed by long brown lashes. His expression went from irritated to congenial so quickly she almost thought she'd imagined the disgruntled look on his face. Almost.

The next thing she noticed was that he had wings the same gorgeous shade as Talon's.

Not her guardian angel, then. And if she was following things closely enough—the wings of the angels that showed up at the crime scene were gray, Talon said her guardian angel's wings were blue, and Talon's were red—which meant that *this* angel was in the same line of work as Talon.

Talon, who was an Angel of Retribution—the executioner of all things supernatural. A sleeping hunk of angelic beauty who was of absolutely no help to her at the moment.

When she said nothing in greeting, merely stared at the angel on the doorstep, trying to figure out if he was a good guy or a bad guy—and her roiling gut told her he wasn't wearing a figurative white hat—his brows drew down.

“Thank you for carrying one of the gargoyle claws on your person,” he muttered. “It helped me track you so much easier.” His bright blue eyes sparkled with such dark glee that Rae felt the hair on her arms stand at attention. “How much do you love your brother, Raegan Stark?”

She drew in a sharp breath. Her heart clenched, her breath stuttered. “What have you done to Hunt?” She stuffed her hands, cold with fear, under her arms.

“How much do you love him?”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “Where is he? What have you done?” She almost reached out to grab him but realized that would take her outside of the protection of the safe house.

“Answer the question.” The angel crossed his arms, a grin widening his mouth.

No doubt about it. This was the worst of the bad guys, as far as she was concerned—and she’d been up close and personal with *gargoyles*. But this being, with his gorgeous face and body, concealed oily blackness behind those good looks.

Evil cloaked in beauty was the scariest of all.

“I love him very much.” Rae dropped her hands to her sides and clenched her fists. “Why?”

With his left hand, the angel reached into a back pocket of his black trousers and pulled out what looked like a wallet. He flipped it open and Rae realized it was Hunt’s ID.

She stared at the gold badge, her eyes burning with tears she refused to shed. Drawing a deep breath, she looked up into that beautiful, deadly face. “Where is he?”

“What would you do to save him?”

She swallowed. Hard. There was almost nothing she wouldn’t do to save Hunt—he was not only her brother but her best friend, her confidant. And she had a feeling her love was about to be put to the test. “What is it you *want* me to do?”

His head lifted and he replaced the ID in his pocket. “Come with me.”

Rae shook her head. Going with him was a sure death sentence for her. She couldn’t help Hunt if she was dead. “I don’t think so.”

“Come with me or he dies.”

She tried to read his true intentions but was unable to see behind those ice-blue eyes. “How do I know you won’t just kill him anyway?” She glanced over her shoulder into the bedroom. Talon still slumbered, his face turned away from her. Rae looked back at the angel at the door and realized whatever happened now was up to her.

“You don’t.” He gave a nonchalant shrug. “But know for certain he will die if you don’t come with me right now.” He stretched out one arm, the fingers of his hand splayed in invitation. “Don’t try to stall for time, don’t try to wake Talon.” He smirked.

“Although his latest actions—from what I could hear of them, anyway—give me hope that he may come over to our side in the end.”

She frowned and leaped to Talon’s defense. “Just because he and I... That’s no reason for you to think he’s any less dedicated to his job.” She pushed aside the sadness that crept over her. He had been her lover for just today—he had a job to do and the heavens to go back to.

“Isn’t it?” The angel crooked his fingers. “In the two thousand years I’ve known him, I’ve never known him to break the rules quite like this.” His eyes narrowed. “Enough dawdling. Come now and save your brother.” When she continued to hesitate, he bit out, “This offer is good for three more seconds. One. Two...”

“All right. Okay!” She couldn’t take the chance that he’d kill Hunt, even though she knew this was more than likely a trap for Talon. With her as the bait. Rae reminded herself that she wasn’t entirely helpless. She had her gun and she had her training. If it was the last thing she did, she’d even the odds for him.

She picked up her jacket from the chair by the door where she’d tossed it earlier and shrugged into it. Taking a deep breath, she stepped out onto the porch and started to pull the door closed.

“You might want to leave Talon a note,” the angel said, putting a hand on the door to keep it from closing all the way. “We wouldn’t want him to wake up and be worried.” When Rae only stared at him, he made a shooing motion with his other hand. “Well? Go on. Leave him a note. Tell him you’re taking a trip with his old friend Xerxes.”

Xerxes. The one that Talon had been tracking.

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh and tell him to be sure to come alone.”

She went back into the house and rooted through the desk until she found pen and paper. Her note to Talon was brief and succinct. She hesitated a brief moment, then added *Love, Rae*. And just to make sure he knew she was armed, she drew a small gun beneath her name, making it look like part of her signature. Just in case Xerxes wanted

to see the note.

While she felt like she'd known Talon forever, felt like she knew him on a very basic, instinctual level, she wasn't sure that in such a short amount of time it was possible to feel deeply enough to build any kind of lasting relationship. But she did care for him. A lot. She didn't want to see him hurt. Or worse.

Wiping her clammy palms on her jeans, she walked to the door and stepped outside.

Immediately Xerxes frisked her, first her front and then, spinning her around, her back. When his hand skimmed over the gun she had tucked in her waistband, he chuckled. "Isn't that cute. You think you can do anything to me with that?"

"I could try." It hadn't done any good with Talon, but he'd been expecting the bullet. Maybe if she caught Xerxes off guard it would work. She only knew she had to try.

"Mmm." He turned her around to face him and kept one hand wrapped tight around her upper arm. "You could. But then you'd only make me angry. The only thing that can end my existence is a sword wielded by another Angel of Retribution." He smirked. "But maybe I'll let you keep your little pistol. The thought of a puny mortal trying to defend herself against one from the realm of Others amuses me." He walked several paces, dragging her along with him. About twenty feet from the house he stopped and spoke a few words in a language she'd never heard before.

The air before her swirled, colors of sand and sky mixing in a whirling kaleidoscope. Then another place appeared before her, like looking through a window into someone's house. It seemed to be the inside of a building, dim and dusty, with long, narrow benches and statuary.

"We'll use a portal so Talon can track us. I wouldn't want to make it *too* hard on the boy." Xerxes grinned. "Let's go." He shoved her through the opening.

"Hey!" Rae heard the echo of her voice through the cavernous room. She looked around as she moved slowly away from the portal. Columns covered in cobwebs

climbed three stories high, the scrolled tops fading into darkness. Near the top, here and there on concrete balconies perched gargoyles, staring down at her, their crimson eyes glowing in the gloom. Three...no, four.

She shot a glare at Xerxes. Even though she'd known he was using her to draw Talon into a trap, she somehow hadn't expected him to bring the gargoyles back into the picture. She should have known he wouldn't fight fair. "Where's my brother?"

Xerxes grabbed her arm and hauled her along until he reached the front of the large room. "I have no idea." He drew her up the three stairs that ran the length of the platform. He pushed her down onto a wooden chair.

Dust flew up, sending her into a sneezing fit. "But you said you had him," she said when she'd stopped sneezing.

"No, I didn't. I told you if you didn't come with me he'd die. I never said that I had him."

Rae swiped at her eyes, wiping away sneeze-induced tears. "But you have his ID."

He nodded. "Took it off his dresser while he was showering."

Dread iced her skin. She'd been had. Hunt had never been in danger and she'd gone off with Xerxes for nothing.

Talon would walk into a trap with her as the bait, just as she'd feared.

There *had* to be something she could do. "What is this place?" she asked, taking a closer look around. From the inside it looked like a church, and an old one at that. The dust and cobwebs strewn from the pews looked like they'd been there a long, long time.

"It's an old mission long fallen into disuse." Xerxes spread his wings and stretched. "It seemed...appropriate. People no longer come here to worship God. *I* no longer worship Him, either." He tucked his wings behind his back and leaned one shoulder against a nearby column. "Chuck!"

Rae watched a gargoyle lift himself off his balcony and fly down to the floor. He walked up the steps, settling his bat-like wings behind his back, his gaze focused on her

with malevolent intent. "Can I have her now?" A long, thin tongue swept over his lips. "I have plenty of ketchup." He bent toward her.

Rae shrank back on her chair. She slid one hand behind her back, beneath her jacket, and wrapped her hand around the grip of her gun. While part of her wanted to start screaming at the twisted reality she was faced with, she fought back her panic, knowing she couldn't let it distract her from the danger these creatures represented.

Xerxes put a hand on the gargoyle's shoulder. "Not now. Maybe later." When Chuck backed away, Xerxes said, "For now we need her. Take your position."

The gargoyle gave one last lingering look at Rae, then sauntered off into the shadows beside the altar area.

Xerxes looked at her and raised an eyebrow. With a shake of his head, he said, "You think that will work on *him*?"

It hadn't before, she knew. But for now it seemed she was safe enough. She gave a soft sigh and let go of her pistol, bringing her hand around to rest on her thigh.

One corner of Xerxes' mouth tilted. "Make yourself comfortable. But not *too* comfortable. Once Talon's regained his senses, we shouldn't have long to wait."

Rae sat still, trying to be as unnoticeable as possible. In his arrogance, Xerxes had left her untied and with her gun, and was now several feet away talking to the gargoyles. The dark gray creatures clustered around him, gazing up at his face in adoration as if he were a god.

And she guessed that was his goal, after all. To toss God off His throne. She remembered enough of the Bible to recall what happened the *last* time someone had tried that.

It hadn't ended so well. She could only hope Xerxes experienced the same sort of failure. *I wonder if God has a spare fiery pit lying around somewhere...*

Without moving her head, she glanced around the small mission. There didn't appear to be any other supernatural things hanging about—maybe, if she was quiet

enough, she could make a break for it. She had to try. Now that she knew Hunt wasn't in immediate danger, she had to do what she could so that Talon wouldn't walk into a trap.

She shifted on the chair. Xerxes and the others didn't pay any attention. So she sidled to one side, keeping a butt cheek on the seat while one hand went to her pistol. Rae glanced to her right, seeing that the way the wall had partially collapsed could afford her some cover from anything trying to get to her from the air. Which would be every creature in this room.

And if she made it to that side of the room, what then? She had no way of opening a portal like Xerxes had, nor had she any idea where they were. She'd just have to try to act like a mouse and tuck herself into a little cubbyhole somewhere until...

Until what? Until Talon arrived and still walked into a trap? Rae glanced over at the group of winged creatures. They continued to ignore her, but for how long? At least if she could find cover of some sort Talon wouldn't have to worry about her and could concentrate on those guys.

It was now or never. She'd have to make up a plan as she went.

She drew a deep breath and eased it out between her lips. Another deep breath then she jumped off the chair, yanking her gun free from her waistband, and hit the ground running. Shouts went up from behind her, but she didn't waste time looking. She knew what she'd see—snarling gargoyles and one mean-ass angel taking to the air to intercept her.

Rae ducked behind a column and searched for a way out. There was a doorway beyond the section of wall that had collapsed. She glanced upward and saw the gargoyles hovering, watching her, waiting for a chance to pounce.

She was going to do her best to disappoint them.

What worried her more was Xerxes. She couldn't see him anywhere.

One thing at a time, Rae. She took a breath and dove for the floor beneath the fallen section of wall. She slid head first under the plastered drywall and did a belly crawl,

following the baseboard on the remaining upright wall. The fallen wall jostled, the sound of footsteps crunching on top of it. It tilted further, threatening to crash down on her. She paused, a girly scream leaving her before she could stop it.

“Come out, come out wherever you are.” Chuck’s oily voice bounced off the ceiling of the old mission. “Whole or in parts, it’s all good with ketchup.”

“Me, I like ‘em with mustard.” Another gargoyle joined in, his chuckle deep and long.

Rae started crawling again, lips clamped tight against the urge to cry out. Damn vultures, she wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of knowing how much they were scaring the piss out of her.

She reached the edge of the wall and stopped again, gauging the distance between the wall and the doorway. There was about three inches that she could tell. Surely not enough for them to reach in and pull her out.

No guts, no glory. Jaw set, she scuttled forward as fast as she could. She’d just made it through the doorway when a hand came down and clamped onto her hair. As she was pulled up, she yelled, one hand going to the long fingers twined in her tresses, the other bringing the gun up and firing point blank into the belly of whoever—or whatever—held her.

A low grunt followed by a growl was the only warning she had before a large hand clamped around her wrist and squeezed. She held onto the gun, gritting her teeth against the pain, but when she heard bones crack and agony shot up her arm, she cried out. Her fingers reflexively opened and the weapon thudded to the floor.

“Stupid human.” Xerxes hauled her upright and watched with dispassionate eyes as she cradled her injured wrist. She saw with despair that if the bullet had managed to penetrate his body, already he had healed from the wound. Incredible.

“Your hopeless bid for freedom has only resulted in injury to you. It has not changed the outcome of the trap.” His voice was a low growl, icy with menace. He loosened his hand from her hair and wrapped his fingers around her upper arm. “Now

be a good girl and come back to your chair. There's a reason why I have it placed center stage."

As she was drawn back into the main chapel, she cast a last glance at her gun, lying on the floor just on the other side of the doorway. *Way to go, Rae.* She'd certainly blown it now.

* * * * *

Talon groaned and opened his eyes. He felt like he'd been flattened by one of the Titans—or several of them, for that matter. If it weren't for the fact that they'd been banished long before the Greek gods had, he'd think that was what had occurred.

But he remembered very clearly what had happened. He'd given in to temptation.

And he'd do it again, given half a chance.

Wanting to draw Rae near, he tucked his right wing in close to his body and rolled to his side, reaching out with his left arm. When he encountered empty space, he frowned. He was alone in the bed.

Talon rose up on one elbow. "Rae?" There was no answer. Memory returned and he vaguely recalled her telling him someone was knocking on the door. He also remembered telling her not to open it.

But if she'd thought it was her guardian angel, she would have felt safe, and rightly so, in opening the door.

He slid off the bed and grabbed his trousers. Once he had them on, he walked into the living room while he fastened the top button. "Rae?"

The house was empty. On the desk near the door he saw a piece of paper propped up between a stapler and a coffee mug. He snatched it up. Scanning the feminine handwriting, he tried to ignore the fine trembling that began in his fingers.

Xerxes has Hunt and says he'll kill him if I don't go with him. He says for you to come alone. It's a trap, I know, but I don't have any other choice. I'm sorry. Be careful.

Great Maker. Xerxes had Rae.

Talon grabbed up his scabbard and fastened it around his waist, and adjusted the fit so he could easily pull his sword free. He knew he was going into battle and Rae's life—and that of her brother's—hung in the balance.

He pulled his pager free and clicked out a quick message to Gabriel, letting him know what had happened and that he was going after Xerxes. Alone, as the note instructed. He studied the note again, wondering if he was reading more into her signature than he should.

Did she love him? Or was that closing written because of the fear and stress under which she labored? He knew his feelings for her ran deep, but he'd thought that he would be an interesting interlude for her at best.

He quashed the quick rising of joy at the thought she might care for him. Because it didn't matter. He had a duty to perform, regardless of his feelings for Rae—or her feelings for him. There was no future for them, there couldn't be. He had to save her and then let her go.

With a muttered oath, he slid the note into his pants pocket and slipped the pager back into its holder. He yanked open the door with enough force to send it crashing into the wall and walked outside.

His eyes burned at the thought of the other Angel of Retribution visiting harm upon Rae. If he did... Nothing would save him then. To take the life of an innocent for personal gain was one of the highest transgressions an angel could make. Only true and lasting repentance would stave off the Great King's fury.

But Xerxes would be unable to obtain any mercy from Talon. His former mentor and friend had made his fight personal to Talon and that action, as far as Talon was concerned, spoke far louder than any pretty speeches Xerxes might make.

He stopped a few feet away from the house and forced his emotions aside. He had to concentrate so he could find—and save—Rae and Hunt, or all of them would die. Closing his eyes as he focused his energies, he cast out his senses for a glimmer of a trail he could follow.

Colors shimmered behind his closed eyelids. The faint echo of sounds drifted to his ears... Xerxes' voice, then Rae's. The whirling dervish of a portal opening. Talon strained to locate the portal Xerxes had used... *There!*

He opened his eyes and turned toward the direction Xerxes had gone. Then he chanted the words that would open an identical portal and take him to Rae. "*Nocto katharsi kleptum moresai.*"

The wind swirled, lifting grains of sand to slam against his skin in a stinging assault as the portal opened. He pulled his sword free and, keeping his grip light but firm on the hilt, stepped through the opening.

His eyes immediately adjusted to the darkness of the interior of what looked to be an old mission. Dust and webs clung to wooden pews. Up ahead Talon could see the chapel. Knowing Xerxes and his predilection for melodrama, that would be where he waited.

Talon gazed upward, checking for creatures that might be preparing for an aerial attack. He couldn't see anyone else, but that didn't necessarily mean they weren't hiding in the inky shadows of the rafters. He paused and listened. Aside from a few doves cooing from their nests inside the dilapidated building, he couldn't hear anything else. But he knew Xerxes and most likely some of his gargoyle minions were nearby. Talon needed to move carefully if he, Rae and her brother were to survive.

He moved to one side of the room and kept the wall to his back as he made his way forward. As he came nearer to the chapel, he saw Rae sitting in a chair on the platform, one hand cradling the opposite wrist. Pain flitted across her face but she appeared otherwise unharmed. But there was no sign of her brother.

With measured treads he stalked toward her, his sword held ready. Rae's gaze slid his way, though she continued to face forward. She gave the slightest shake of her head then her eyes rolled up as she looked at the ceiling.

So that's where they were hiding—directly above Rae. He nodded to let her know he understood her unspoken message. Moving only his eyes, he searched the shadows behind her. He couldn't see Xerxes, but he knew the other angel was near.

He reached her side. "Are you all right?" He could see the angry bruises already forming on her wrist and it was swollen, so he knew she lied when she nodded.

"They never had Hunt. I'm so sorry I led you into this."

"I don't see how you had much of a choice, since Xerxes told you Hunt was in danger." He heard the low flap of wings and knew the gargoyles were preparing their assault. Xerxes, as an Angel of Retribution, would have soundless flight and could attack unheard. "Try to get to cover," he said. As Xerxes swept down from the rafters, Talon ducked and lifted his sword.

Rae bounded off the chair but was brought up short by two gargoyles. She sent a desperate look Talon's way and he turned his gaze back on Xerxes.

"Don't want her getting away," Xerxes said, his voice as flat as his eyes. "She's my insurance." Something moved through his eyes, something very much like regret. "Even though I knew Gabriel would send you after me, I'm sorry he did."

Perhaps Talon could use that regret to his advantage. As long as Rae remained safe, he wanted to save his old friend if he could. "Tell me why you're doing this," he said, his voice low. "I need to understand."

"I'm not sure you could." Xerxes shook his head. "You're still so enamored with it all—the Great King, the idea of divine justice, even the reality that humans are His favorites." A scowl darkened his face. "Not to mention the fact that you seem to have yielded to the basest of emotions with that one." He gestured toward Rae.

Talon clenched his jaw. "That's none of your business. And she has no part in this. Let her go."

Xerxes raised his eyebrows. "Can't do that. Like I said, she's my insurance."

So, even if the fight was fair, Talon had no hope of winning. But just giving up wasn't an option, either. Before he could say anything else, the other angel attacked.

Talon blocked the blow and parried, forcing Xerxes to back up a few steps. He dodged a downward slash of Xerxes' blade. "It's not too late," Talon insisted. "Come back with me."

"Never." Xerxes came at him again with no hesitation in the thrust of his sword.

Talon knew his erstwhile friend intended to kill him. He jumped away from another blow, though the tip of the sword sliced across his belly. Sucking in his breath at the sting of pain, he brought up his own weapon and jabbed the point toward Xerxes.

When Xerxes moved to block him, he opened up his left side to attack and Talon didn't hesitate. He brought his right leg up and slammed his foot into Xerxes' ribs, knocking the other angel off balance. Then he jammed his sword against Xerxes' weapon and knocked it from his friend's grasp.

"Behind you!" Rae's voice echoed throughout the chamber.

Talon whirled to face the attacking gargoyle. The thing came at him in a rush, but left himself vulnerable. Talon jumped into the air, his wings flapping slowly, keeping him aloft, and swung his sword in a wide arc, slicing the creature's head from its neck with one strong stroke.

"Talon! Watch out!" Rae's shout ended in a small cry and he looked to see her cupping her cheek. Chuck's hand was still upraised, threatening another blow.

Seeing she was all right, Talon started to turn only to feel the fiery bite as Xerxes plunged his sword into Talon's shoulder. The sword dropped from Talon's numb fingers and he followed it to the ground. Xerxes withdrew the sword and pressed one foot between Talon's shoulder blades, right at the sensitive spot where his wingroot was, and shoved.

Talon went face first onto the floor and gingerly rolled to his side. He sat up and watched his friend as he circled him, bloodied sword only inches from Talon's head.

“What now, my friend?” Xerxes stopped in front of him. Blue eyes glittered with triumph. “You should have come to me in order to join our cause. Instead you came to try to overpower me.” He shook his head. “I taught you everything you know. You don’t have the ability to defeat me.”

If Talon died, he knew Xerxes would kill Rae. Fear for her tightened his throat. “It doesn’t have to end like this,” he rasped.

“Yes, it does.” Xerxes glanced over at the gargoyles with Rae.

Talon took the moment for what it was—a chance to shake up Xerxes that he’d never get again. He swept out one leg and knocked Xerxes’ feet from beneath him. The other angel went to the floor with a crash. Talon jumped on top of his friend, one hand wrapped around the wrist holding the sword, the other fending off Xerxes’ left hand.

Claws curled around Talon’s throat and yanked him up. One of the gargoyles that had been guarding Rae lifted Talon into the air and tossed him aside as if he were weightless. As he rolled to his feet, he saw Rae slide beneath a section of fallen wall. He realized the wall would keep her covered and protected until she could reach a doorway, and he let himself feel a measure of relief that she would get away.

Then he turned his attention back to the battle.

Chapter Eight

Rae scrambled through the doorway and snatched up her gun. Then she turned and went under the collapsed wall again and back out into the main chapel. The gargoyles had abandoned her as soon as they'd seen Talon gain the upper hand over Xerxes. There was no question of running, not when Talon was so hopelessly outnumbered.

As she got closer to the front without pews impeding her view, she blinked. Well, maybe hopelessly was the wrong word. Already the bodies of three gargoyles lay on the floor. That left only Xerxes and the gargoyle named Chuck.

Rae circled around until she could get into a position with a clear shot. As she brought her gun up in her left hand, her fingers trembled and the palm grew sweaty. She slipped the gun under her armpit and wiped her hand down the side of her jeans. Then she took the gun in her hand again.

She hadn't been successful when she was shooting at this thing in the alley, and she'd been using her right hand. Her dominant hand. Now she had to use her left hand and... God help her.

She took aim, bringing her useless arm up and letting her left wrist rest upon the right. Pain flared and she sucked in a breath. Clenching her jaw, she tried to ignore the throbbing wrist and instead focused on the fight in front of her.

Talon was bleeding from several wounds and had lost his sword. Deep gashes marred his chest and she saw blood dripping from Chuck's claws. Xerxes thrust his sword into Talon's side, laughing when Talon blanched and fell to his knees.

Chuck looked up, a macabre grin stretching his craggy face. Rae moved forward another step, getting lined up for her shot, and her foot nudged something on the floor, causing it to scrape against the concrete.

The gargoyle and Xerxes both looked her way.

So did Talon. None of them looked particularly happy to see her, but Talon especially seemed peeved. "Rae, get out of here!"

Xerxes jerked his head her way and Chuck started toward her, ambling along on stocky legs as if he were out for a stroll. As Xerxes prepared to finish Talon, Rae aimed at the gargoyle and pulled the trigger. The bullet bounced off Chuck's thick bony forehead.

"Ouch." Chuck moved steadily forward. "I think I just got bit by a mosquito." One corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk. "Oh no, wait. That was you, wasn't it?"

Rae didn't know which was worse—that she was facing down a gargoyle or that he was acting like a smartass street punk. Well, she amended, that he was a gargoyle was worse because he could probably snap her neck without even working up a sweat. Smartass street punk was irritating, but not nearly as threatening.

She lowered her gun half an inch and drew in a deep breath. *This is it, Rae. The defining moment. You miss this shot and you die.* She let her breath out slowly and, narrowing her eyes to better sight the trajectory, squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit its mark. Chuck yelled and grabbed his face then dropped to the floor and lay still.

When she looked over at the two angels, they were grappling over Xerxes' sword—Xerxes trying to thrust it into Talon and Talon trying to keep him from doing so. Rae ran forward until she reached Talon's sword where it had fallen beside the dusty pulpit.

She flipped the safety on her gun and tucked it into her waistband, then stooped and picked up the sword. It was so heavy she nearly lost her grip on it and instinctively brought up her right hand to help hold the hilt. Then she yowled at the agony that shot through her broken wrist and traveled up her arm, threatening to blow a hole through the back of her skull.

Biting her lip against the pain, Rae ran toward the combatants, dragging the sword along behind her. "Talon!" she shouted and, when he glanced her way, she bent and slid his sword across the floor to him.

He reached out and snatched it up, bringing it forward to deflect the downward thrust of Xerxes' weapon. She thought she saw Xerxes' eyes widen, but then the fight intensified, both males giving low grunts with each lunge.

Talon shoved Xerxes off balance. Xerxes stumbled down the steps leading from the platform. He slashed out at Talon but his weapon missed its mark, striking instead against the stone stairs and breaking in half. Xerxes fell and, before he could get up, Talon trod upon his sword hand, forcing him to release his ruined weapon. Talon kicked the broken piece away. "It's over, Xerxes."

"Wait!" Xerxes lay back, his chest rising and falling with his deep breaths. "You were right, my friend. I see that now. You're right."

Rae walked over and stood by Talon's side. Staring down at Xerxes, she murmured, "Watch out. It's a trick."

"You're probably right." Talon glanced at her then quickly looked back at his fallen friend. "But I owe him a chance to repent."

"Yes!" Xerxes closed his eyes. With a sigh he opened them and stared at the ceiling. He leaned on one elbow. "I've been so wrapped up in proving my point that I lost my way. I lost Him." His gaze drifted to Talon then Rae, and back to Talon. "But you can help me find my way back."

Talon nodded. "That's why I'm here." Although he seemed to relax a little, he kept his sword pointed at Xerxes. "You have a choice to make—repent and be prepared for the consequences of your actions, or..."

"Or you'll kill me."

"Those are the options, Xerxes. You most of all should know that."

Xerxes slowly sat up. He sighed. "Yes, I do know. But..." He lunged forward, knocking Talon's sword up and sending Talon staggering back. He bumped into Rae and she went down, the fall jarring her broken wrist. Pain barreled through her, sending quick nausea into her throat.

"I'm all right," she yelled. She didn't want Talon distracted by worry for her. As the two angels began battling again—this time both vying for control of Talon's sword—she scuttled back out of the way, holding her wrist in front of her. The pain had settled into a dull throb once again.

She knew her gun would be ineffective against Xerxes—hell, she'd shot him in the gut point blank and it hadn't phased him. She'd have to trust Talon to finish the job he'd been sent to do.

But watching the fight, seeing how exhausted and in pain he was, it was hard. She wanted to jump up and help him, to even the odds. But there was nothing she could do. Not now.

It was all up to him.

"It doesn't have to be this way." Talon's voice was harsh with fatigue. Rae bit her lip at the raw emotion in the low tones. He was battling for his life and for the life of his friend who was trying to kill him. "Come back with me."

"For what? Nothing's changed. Nothing's going to change." Xerxes bared his teeth. "I'd just as soon die."

"So be it." Talon shoved the other angel back and wielded his sword with deadly accuracy. Xerxes' cry was cut short as the sharp blade sliced through his neck.

Rae held her breath and stared at the now lifeless body on the floor. Bright blood pooled beneath it and slowly edged toward the head that lay a few feet away. She looked up to see Talon swaying where he stood. She got awkwardly to her feet and walked over to him, sliding her left arm around his waist. "Come on," she whispered. "Let's get out of here."

He shook his head. "I need to call for the Cleaners."

She noticed when he pulled his pager from its holder that his fingers trembled. He clicked a few buttons and then replaced the device. "They should be here..."

The wind whirled behind her. She turned to see a portal swirl open and three gray-winged angels stepped through.

"...anytime now. Stay here," Talon said to Rae and made his way over to them. His conversation took only a few moments. He came back to Rae, his face ashen with pain and, she knew, grief. "Let's go."

"We need to get you some medical attention." She put her arm back around his waist.

"And you as well," he murmured with a nod toward her wrist. "What happened?"

She shrugged then winced. "I tried to shoot Xerxes. Well," she amended, "I didn't realize it was Xerxes at the time, but he was pulling me to my feet by my hair and so I used my gun." She sighed. "All it did was piss him off."

"Mmm." Talon leaned heavily on her. "Well, lucky for us, these portals will heal us as we go through them."

"Really?" Her brows rose. "That's a nifty trick."

"Yes, well, we need to stay in fighting form."

Rae frowned. "Even the bad guys?"

"They serve their purpose too, Rae." His low voice held a rasp.

"I'm sorry." She rubbed her hand over his back, making sure to stay away from any wounds. "He was your friend."

"Yes, he was." Talon straightened with a low groan. "And I killed him."

"He didn't give you much of a choice."

"That doesn't make it feel any better." He looked at her. "Though if he had injured you any worse than he did..." He shook his head and brought one hand up, cupping her cheek. "I've never felt like this, like I could kill someone for something they might have done, had they been given the chance."

Looking at his battered body, she knew exactly how he felt. "I know what you mean." Seeing that he looked like he was about to fall over, she murmured, "Why don't

you open one of those portals of yours so we can get fixed? Well, not *fixed* in the neutered sense of the word..." Rae grinned. "But at least we won't hurt anymore."

His answering smile kicked up one corner of his mouth. He spoke a few words that were incomprehensible to her and a portal whooshed open. On the other side she could see the familiar surroundings of her living room.

"What... How'd you do that? You've never been to my home before."

"We don't need to have been somewhere to open a portal. I just think of where I want to go when I chant the words." His arm still hooked around her shoulders, he started forward. Rae kept up with him and they stepped through the portal together.

Immediately the throbbing in her wrist lessened. She looked down, flexing her fingers. In seconds, the pain was completely gone.

"I told you." Talon took his arm from her shoulders and stretched, his wings unfurling, the tips reaching up to brush the ceiling. All of his wounds were healed, not even one scar remaining to mar his skin. He relaxed and turned to her, taking her face between his palms. His face was serious, the look in his eyes a mixture of regret and sorrow. "This time with you has meant more than I can say, Raegan Stark. I'll never forget you."

Her stomach dropped. She pushed him away. "Whoa. What are you saying, Talon? You're leaving? Just like that?"

He brushed his fingers against her cheeks. "I can't stay, Rae. You know I can't stay."

"So it's wham-bam, thank you ma'am, and that's it?" She jerked away from him and walked a few paces away. Whirling around, she stalked back and jabbed her finger into his chest. "You owe me more than that." She swallowed the hurt that tightened her throat. She backed up and wrapped her arms around herself. "I... I thought we had something. That I meant...*mean* something to you."

He took two steps forward but stopped at her raised hand. "Rae... You do mean something to me. Something I thought would never happen."

“And what’s that, Talon? You finally found a piece of tail that tempted you down off your cloud?” The words were harsh, but no harsher than the pain tearing a hole in her heart. She watched his face and saw his lips thin.

“Tempted me to stay off that cloud.” His voice was gruff. He glanced down at the floor, not meeting her eyes. “Tempted me to wish for something that’s not possible for someone like me.”

She drew in a breath and held it a moment. “What do you wish for, Talon?” When he didn’t respond right away, she took his hands and twined their fingers together. “Tell me. Please.”

He looked at her then and her breath hitched at the rawness of the love and sorrow in his eyes. “Family. Love.” He shook his head. “That’s not something angels do.”

“But *you* do. Love, I mean.” Rae tightened her fingers on his. “Don’t you?”

His silence finished her.

Unsuccessfully biting back a sob, she turned away from him. “Just go, then,” she said in a voice tight with tears. “Get out.”

Chapter Nine

Talon hesitated. He hated leaving things this way with Rae in such emotional turmoil. But he should go. He should.

But his heart had other ideas. With a low groan, he walked over to her and turned her by the shoulders. Yanking her into his arms, he slanted his mouth over hers. He swallowed her sob and put everything he was feeling into the kiss.

His love. His desperation.

And she gave back tenfold.

When he broke away, she wrapped her arms around him, her fingers digging into his back. “Don’t go,” she pleaded. Her tears wet his chest. “Don’t go, not yet.” She looked up at him and his heart broke to see the misery in her eyes. “At least... Let me see that cloud of yours.”

“Rae... That’s really not a good idea.”

“Why not? With Xerxes gone, the danger is over, right?” She stroked across his collarbone with shaking fingers. “I’m just asking for one more time, Talon. Give me something to replace the terror of the last couple of hours.”

He’d never known he could be so weak. But as he took her in his arms again and opened another portal, the feel of her soft, warm body against his sapped his will. In two seconds they were standing on a cloud. Talon quickly used his glamour and made the cloud solid and warm. He enclosed a pocket of breathable air around them and placed her on her back gently, as if she could be easily broken, though he knew it wasn’t the case. She was one of the strongest women—human or otherwise—that he knew. But, still, she was mortal.

“This is amazing,” she murmured, running her hands through the cloud and scooping some of it up onto her palms.

“Ordinarily they’re not this solid.” Talon lightly tangled his fingers in her hair. “I had to make it like this so you can be here.”

“Well, whatever you did, it’s wonderful.” Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Talon came down over her and placed a kiss on the corner of her mouth. “When I knew he’d taken you...” He rubbed his nose against hers. “I’ve never felt that kind of fear.”

“He didn’t hurt me. Well, not much.” She looped her arms around his neck, stroking her fingers through his hair. “Even though I know you were prepared to do it, I’m sorry about your friend.”

Talon swallowed. He’d been doing his job for so long it had become rote. But this was the first time he’d had to go after another Angel of Retribution, the first time it had been a friend. His eyes burned. “I...” He shook his head.

“It’s all right, Talon.” She urged his face to hers and placed a light kiss upon his lips. “It was his choice, no matter the reasons behind it. You gave him a chance and he didn’t take it.”

He knew she was right and at some level he was fine with what had happened. But he also knew this was something that would stay with him forever. And for an angel, forever was a very long time.

“Hey.” Rae placed another kiss on his mouth. “Let’s put it behind us for now, okay? We...don’t have a lot of time together, right?”

“Probably not.” Determined to make the most of the time they did have, he shook off the sadness. This would be the last time he would be with Rae, this woman he...

Loved.

He wouldn’t have thought it possible for him to feel love in the romantic sense of the word. Oh he loved. He loved Yahweh with an adoration that was indescribable. He

loved humanity because it was part of his job. But to love one person above all others wasn't something he'd been prepared to experience.

And it scared him to his bones.

Because after this brief time together, he'd be separated from her forever unless he could find a way to see her again. Yet having him pop into her life every few months or so for a day or two at a time... Would that be fair to her?

No. So he'd take this moment he'd been given and say goodbye.

With that thought in mind, Talon decided he would make this last time together as good for her as it could be. He would make her senseless with pleasure before he gained his own. He took her wrists and raised her hands above her head. "Are you warm enough?"

She nodded. "I'm fine." She started to bring her arms down.

Talon gently held them in place. "Leave them there. I don't want you to do anything except lie back and enjoy." He pulled her t-shirt up and over her head, dropping it onto the cloud. He stared down at the pale flesh above the lacy cups of her bra. His heart began thumping behind his ribs and blood engorged his cock. That quick, he was ready.

But not yet.

First, it was Rae's turn.

With hands that shook with need he reached for the front closure of her bra and unfastened it. He pushed the white cups aside and brushed his thumbs across the silken tips of her breasts. As much as he wanted to lose himself in the slick heat of her body, to slide his cock inside her, feeling her tight around him then stretching to accommodate him, Talon knew it wouldn't be enough. He wanted to make her mindless with need, to satisfy her slowly.

Pushing her breasts together, he buried his face between them, inhaling the floral scent of her perfume. His thumbs strummed her nipples, coaxing them to harden

further for him. Her moan enticed him to squeeze and pluck at her nipples while he placed kisses on the satiny skin of her stomach. When he moved back to her breasts, her hands went to his head and held him as he took one straining nipple between his lips.

“No you don’t.” He grabbed her hands and put them over her head again. “I told you not to move.” With a small stroke of glamour, he looped cloud matter over both wrists, anchoring her hands in place. Though the fluffy stuff was soft against her skin, it wouldn’t release her until he told it to. “That’s better.”

“Talon, I want to touch you.” Her demand was more like a wail and for the first time since he’d known her, a small pout formed on her lips. He couldn’t resist, leaning down to kiss her. But as she slid her tongue between his lips, he left her mouth, trailing a path down her throat to one firm breast.

He tongued the taut nipple before sucking on it. She moaned, arching into his mouth. When he grasped her nipple between his teeth and gently bit, she shivered, her body shuddering against him.

He moved his mouth to her other breast, his fingers plucking at the reddened tip of the one he’d just abandoned. Sliding one hand down her slender torso, he unfastened her pants. Leaving her breasts for a moment, he yanked her jeans off, along with her panties, and tangled his fingers briefly in neatly trimmed hair before he dipped between the swollen folds of her sex. One long finger circled the opening of her sheath.

She tensed and moaned. “Talon, please!”

“Please what, honey?” He continued to move his finger around and around. Sliding down until his mouth was flush with her pussy, he lightly flicked her swollen clit with his tongue. It was already slick with desire. He couldn’t resist. He swiped the flat of his tongue from her opening back up to her clit.

She tasted sweet and tart and so hot he could hardly keep himself in check. But this time was for her. It was about her desire, her need. He’d make sure she found her release before he took his.

It was time that she saw she didn't always have to be the strong one, that she could let someone take care of her. He wished it could be him for the rest of eternity, but that fate wasn't in store for him.

A thought hit him and he smiled. There was something he could do that no human male could. But he'd have to time it just right.

"Tell me what you want, Rae. I'll give it to you." He flicked his tongue against her clit, back and forth.

She keened and pressed against his face. "Suck me." Her words ended on a gasp.

He pulled her clit between his lips and suckled gently, brushing the swollen nub with the tip of his tongue. When he pushed one finger into her pussy, she moaned and bucked against him. Glancing up, he saw her hands moving restlessly, straining against the bonds around her wrists.

Adding another finger, he began plunging his fingers in and out. Fast. Deep. Hard. She twisted and writhed beneath him, her voice hoarse as she called out his name. He splayed one hand over her belly to hold her in place and kept up his relentless assault. Calling upon his glamour, he shaped cloud matter into a slender, spiraled shape and moved it so the tip rimmed her anal opening.

She gasped. "Talon." As the firm probe slipped through the tight ring of muscles, his name ended on a moan. He mentally manipulated the hardened cloud, stroking slowly into her anus. His own arousal spiraled higher and higher, making his cock hard and drawing his balls tight to his body.

"Come for me, honey." With quick movements, he flicked her clit with the hardened tip of his tongue. Thrust his fingers as far as they'd go. Twisted the probe. Beneath his splayed hand he felt her belly tense, then she screamed and her tight passage convulsed around his fingers.

Before her tremors ceased, he reared up and shoved his pants off, then replaced his fingers with his cock and drove deep. Her orgasm still fractured her body and her

sheath squeezed his shaft, milking him, encasing every thick, hard inch of him like a hot, slick glove.

Talon slid his hands under Rae's hips and lifted her, allowing him the deepest possible penetration. His movement lifted her off the anal probe and she shrieked in another orgasm. As his control eroded more and more, every thrust into her snug pussy came faster. He closed his eyes and bit down on his lip, hard, feeling every ripple of her cunt over his thick length. He was close. And he wanted her to come with him.

Harder and faster he drove into her. Her hips rose to meet his thrusts. His pubic bone slammed against her swollen clit on each downward lunge. He felt the beginning contractions of her channel. Her cunt spasmed around his turgid length and she screamed her release.

His balls tightened and, on a long, low groan, he gave one final thrust, holding himself deep inside her as he ejaculated over and over. Her contractions seemed to go on and on, milking him of every drop. Finally emptied, he collapsed on top of her. He dissolved the cloud around her wrists. Her arms wrapped around him, hugging him close.

He rested against her, his head pillowed on her full breasts. Knowing his energy was sapped and that he'd soon lose consciousness, he shifted to one side, letting his cock slide free from her warm pussy, though he kept his face nuzzled against one of her breasts. Aware of Rae's fingers sifting through his hair, he succumbed to darkness.

Rae held Talon in her arms, loving the feel of his breath on her skin, the warmth of his big body against hers. She reached up and brushed away a tear hovering on her lashes, determined not to spend her last hours with him acting like a crybaby. If this was all she could have, then she'd enjoy it to the last millisecond.

Of course, it would be better if he were actually awake and enjoying it with her. She sighed.

“Goodbye sex isn’t always what it’s cracked up to be.” The deep male voice startled her.

Rae let out a little squeak and craned her neck to try to see the speaker. She looked up and saw a winged pirate with the most beautiful lavender eyes she’d ever seen. The *only* lavender eyes she’d ever seen. She blinked. And blinked again. Somehow she could believe gargoyles were real, and angels too. But a pirate—complete with billowy shirt and red sash around his waist—with wings? A little weakly she said, “Ahoy there, matey.”

He already didn’t look happy to see a naked Talon passed out on top of her. At her greeting, his frown deepened though she’d swear there was a muted twinkle in his eyes. “My name is Gabriel.” He started to reach for Talon.

“Wait!” She clasped him closer to her. Talon wasn’t the only naked one here—she didn’t want to lose her cover.

The pirate rolled his eyes. “Oh please. Like I haven’t seen it before.” He reached for Talon again.

She held on. “You haven’t seen it on me before. Wait, please.” When he straightened, she asked, “Exactly who are you?”

“I’m Gabriel. His boss.” He crooked a thumb at Talon.

Gabriel. *Gabriel*? She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Gabriel as in the archangel Gabriel?”

He nodded.

Holy crap.

“May I have my employee?” He bent and this time she let go, though she grabbed her clothes and held them in front of her as she scrambled rather inelegantly to her knees.

Gabriel held Talon in his arms as if he weighed nothing. He stared at Rae and shook his head. Letting loose a loud sigh, he said, “I suppose you’d better come along too.”

“To where?” And in a slightly smaller voice, she asked, “Could you turn around, please?”

He rolled his eyes but obligingly turned his back to her. “I need to get Talon back to the office. We need to talk.”

The office. As in... “You mean heaven? You’re taking me to heaven?” She shot to her feet and dressed as fast as she could. As Gabriel opened up a portal, she grabbed up Talon’s pants. On the other side of the portal she could see an office, two white-winged angels standing on either side of the door.

That was heaven.

Ho-ly crap.

Chapter Ten

Rae watched with wide eyes as Gabriel laid a still sleeping Talon on a long chaise in the very opulent office. She quickly laid the leather pants across Talon's groin, giving him some modicum of modesty. As she looked around, her breath stuttered at the magnificence of what was before her. When she saw the room on the other side of the glass window, her heart started pounding away in her chest like a mad thing.

A gold throne faced her. The light that reflected from its surface and bounced around the pure white room was blinding. "That's...that's..." Her mouth was just flapping and making noise with no connection to her now overloaded brain.

"The Great Throne Room." Gabriel pushed a button and a set of purple curtains glided across the pane, blocking her view. A slight smile—not a mean one at all—played about his mouth. "I think perhaps we'll do without that particular distraction."

He walked to his desk and opened a drawer. After pulling out a small tapered clear bottle, he went over to Talon. "Let's just see if I can wake him." He glanced at Rae. "I'm going to transfer some of my power to him. If that doesn't do it, there's always this." He lifted the bottle with a grin. Looking back at Talon, Gabriel placed one hand on the top of Talon's head. Talon's eyes fluttered but remained closed. Gabriel gave a shrug, uncorked the small bottle and waved it under Talon's nose, then backed several feet away.

Talon sputtered and bolted upright, his eyes wild. When he saw Gabriel he relaxed only slightly. His head swiveled and he saw Rae. His shoulders slumped and relief spread across his face. "Are you all right?" he asked, his voice husky.

Alarm flared through her. She sidled closer to him, keeping an eye on the pirate angel. "Shouldn't I be?"

Talon swung his legs around, putting his feet on the floor. He bent and shoved his feet into the legs of his pants, pulling them up and quickly fastening them. He held out his hand and she took it, allowing him to pull her down onto the chaise beside him. With his fingers wrapped firmly around hers, he asked, "Why did you bring her here, Gabriel?"

"Because she's an integral part of the proceedings." The archangel walked around behind his desk and sat down. He settled his wings over the back of the chair and pulled on the cuffs of his puffy shirt.

"Um, what proceedings?" Rae had only been part of official police proceedings and she had a feeling what was going to happen next wouldn't even be close to what she'd experienced in the past.

"Talon completed his assignment, which was expected." Gabriel steepled his fingers and rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. "What was unexpected was his...dalliance with you."

"It's not a dalliance." Talon tightened his hand on her fingers. "I love her."

She knew it wasn't possible for a heart to stop beating. But everything went entirely still in the room. It wasn't until Talon whispered, "Breathe, sweetheart," that she realized she was holding her breath.

"I do, you know." He partially turned on the chaise to face her. "I didn't expect to. I didn't want to. But your heart drew mine."

Contentment spread through her like warm rain. She raised her free hand and stroked her fingers down his lean cheek. "I love you too."

Gabriel abruptly stood. "But how can you?" He walked over to them and stood a few feet away. "So the sex is good, maybe even great. That's not enough to build a lifetime on." He didn't look at either of them as he said this, so she wasn't sure what his feelings about it were.

But she agreed with him. "No, it's not." She saw the funny look Talon shot his boss but ignored it for now. This was important. "And while I think the past day and all the

danger we've been in has taught me a lot about him, relationships built on heightened awareness usually don't last, either. But there's more to it than that." She paused, biting her lip, not sure if her next words would make sense. "It's as if my soul recognizes him. I *know* him. I know he's honorable and decent, and a good ma..." She heaved a sigh. "Angel. He's a good angel."

"And so you see the problem." Gabriel walked back to his desk and leaned his buttocks against the front edge. "As an Angel of Retribution, Talon is immortal and his place is here. You, as a human, can't live here." He paused and stared at them with an air of expectation.

Talon's hand tightened on hers so that she let out a soft protest. His grip immediately lessened and he brought her fingers to his mouth, pressing a light kiss on her knuckles. "And if I weren't an Angel of Retribution?" he asked Gabriel.

"You would do that?" Gabriel straightened. His lavender eyes glittered with an emotion Rae couldn't read. "Give it all up?"

"Give what up? Talon, what's he talking about?" Rae glanced from one angel to the other.

Talon's chest lifted with his deep inhalation. "It seems I have a choice to make. Remain here, in my job as an Angel of Retribution—"

"And give up all contact with this particular human," Gabriel interjected.

"Or I can give up my job and everything that goes with it."

As the realization of what he was saying sank in, Rae jerked her hand away and stood. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You're saying..." Her eyebrows rose. "You're saying you'd give up your immortality. You'd become human."

He took a deep breath. "That's exactly what I'm saying. I'd give it all up. For you."

Her breath hitched. She wanted him—she loved him, she was sure of it. But she couldn't let him give up his immortality for her. It was too much to ask.

“You must realize, both of you, what this entails.” Gabriel straightened and walked over to Rae. He put his hands on her shoulders and stared down at her. “If Talon chooses to give up his job, he loses his wings. There’s no negotiation on this. You’ll both retain your memories of this time, of what he was, and he’ll age—and die—just like any other human being. But if he stays here, you will be sent home, all your memories of him and your time with him erased. He alone will remember your love.”

She stared up into those eerie lavender eyes. Needing to put some space between them, she shrugged away from him and paced to the curtained window. “That’s not fair!” She crossed her arms. “If you’re going to erase my memories, erase his too. He shouldn’t have to remember what we’ve shared and know he can’t...can’t...” She broke off as tears clogged her throat.

Talon went over to her and pulled her into his arms. One big hand cradled the back of her head, holding her face gently against his chest. “But if we’re together, you and I will keep our memories, sweetheart. And we’ll have a lifetime together.”

“A human lifetime.” She leaned back and stared up into his face, her gaze searching his. “That’s pretty short, comparatively speaking. Are you sure you want that?” She glanced at Gabriel and then looked back at Talon.

“I know that I want to wake up next to you every day for the rest of my life. I want to see gray creep into your hair and these—” he caressed the outer corner of her right eye with one flat-tipped finger—“grow deeper because you’ve led a happy life. I’d like to think—I hope, anyway—that I can make that happen.” He paused, his eyes darkening. “Unless...you don’t want me?”

How could he even wonder that? Rae wrapped her arms around him and hugged him close. “I love you. I’ll take you for as long as I can get you.”

Talon closed his eyes and breathed deeply, pulling Rae’s natural fragrance into his lungs. Opening his eyes, he nodded to Gabriel. “Let’s do it.”

“You’re sure? Both of you?”

“Yes.” The word was spoken in unison and without hesitation. Talon smiled and pressed a kiss on top of her head.

“Very well.” Gabriel walked over to them. “Step away from Raegan, please.”

Talon reluctantly let go of Rae and backed up a few paces. Gabriel stood in front of him and studied him for a moment. Seeming to accept what he saw in Talon’s expression, the archangel gave a slight smile and shook his head. “I never thought you’d be one to yield, Talon. If I can lose you to a woman’s love...” He shook his head again. “Well, I hope it isn’t contagious.”

Talon grinned. “It just might be the best thing that could happen to you, Gabriel.”

“You think?” Gabriel seemed to ponder it briefly then said, “Nah. Not for me. I’ve been alive millennia more than you. If it hasn’t happened by now, it’s not going to.” He shrugged. “Besides, I make it out into the field so seldom that, well, what’re the odds of it happening? Let’s get on with this,” he went on, obviously wanting to drop the subject.

Talon squared his shoulders and stared straight ahead. He heard Rae’s indrawn breath as she waited for him to become human.

“When your wings are gone, so will all the things that made you an immortal. Anyone looking at you – even if it’s someone who’s known you for two thousand years, aside from myself, of course – will see a human, not a former angel. So you and Rae will be safe from any retribution that might otherwise have been sought.” Gabriel took a breath. “It has been a great joy and privilege to work with you all these years, Talon.” His voice was low and a bit on the husky side. “I count you among my friends.” He cleared his throat. “What the Great King has bestowed, by His authority I now take away. *Kropsta merlina raptoricus ne.*”

With those words, Talon felt a slight tingling at the base of his wings, then a prickling rush that made him want to wiggle his shoulders to alleviate the itch.

Rae gasped. “Talon. Your wings are gone.”

He raised his eyebrows and twisted his head to look at his back. For the first time in his very long life, there were no crimson feathers behind him. He wasn't sure how he felt about that—although to a certain extent he felt sadness that this part of his life was over. He looked at Gabriel. "I thought it would hurt."

"Why?" Gabriel gave a little frown. "Being made into a human isn't a punishment. It's not a reward, either. It just is. There's no reason for the process to cause pain." He pressed his lips together and Talon could tell his former boss hid a grin. "Although I can kick you or something, if that would make you feel better."

"No, thanks. That's all right." Talon held out his hand and the archangel and he grasped wrists in a warrior's handshake. "Thank you. For everything."

Gabriel nodded and released him. "We may want your help from time to time. Perhaps as a liaison between the Angel Department and humans. Would you be willing, if we need you?"

"Anytime, you know that." Talon turned to Rae as she walked over to him. He slid his arm around her waist and felt his stomach flip when she did the same to him without having to fight her way around feathers. Such a little thing, but at the same time, not so little after all. It would take some getting used to.

"I'll open a portal for you to Raegan's apartment. When you get there, I'll have legal documents waiting for you." Gabriel's smile was fleeting. Talon could tell his boss—his friend—was emotionally moved by the whole thing and trying his best not to be.

"That quick?" Rae asked.

Gabriel quirked an eyebrow. "You have heard the word 'miracle' before, I assume?"

She pursed her lips. "Is it sacrilegious to call an archangel a smartass?" she muttered.

Gabriel laughed. "You've made a good choice, Talon." He spoke a few words and opened a portal.

Talon saw a big bed and glanced at Gabriel.

The archangel shrugged. “Thought I’d save you a few steps.” He looked from Talon to Rae. “I wish you both a good life together. I’ll be seeing you again someday.”

Rae walked over to him and, going up on tiptoe, placed a kiss on his cheek. “Thank you so much.”

Talon joined her and held out his hand. She took it, twining her fingers in his. They stepped through the portal – and into the rest of their lives – together.

Once in her bedroom, Rae released Talon’s hand and picked up the folder lying on the bedside table. Inside it, as promised, were legal documents – a birth certificate with the name Talon Aeries on it, a social security card under the same name and a bank statement showing a balance of... Her brows shot up. A whole hell of a lot of zeroes. “Whoa. Look at this.” She showed the bank statement to Talon. If it was right, Talon wouldn’t have to work a single day the rest of his life.

He looked at it and gave a low whistle. “Looks like my time as an Angel of Retribution paid off.” Shadows drifted through his dark eyes.

She laid the folder down and put her hands on his shoulders. “What is it?” Her stomach twisted to think he might already be regretting his decision.

He sighed. “I was just thinking of Xerxes. I wish it had turned out differently.” He shook his head and linked his fingers at the small of her back. “But *this*... This I wouldn’t change for anything.” He dipped his head and kissed her, a gentle meeting of lips that quickly deepened.

It didn’t take long for them to yank off their clothes. They fell onto the bed in each other’s arms, lips and tongues mating, making unspoken promises that Rae was determined would last. “I love you,” she whispered, stroking her fingers down his strong back.

“And I love you.” Talon pressed his lips between her breasts. He lingered there a moment before sliding sideways to capture one soft nipple in his mouth. The nub tautened, his sucking motion setting up an answering throb in her clit.

His stiff cock rubbed against her thigh, leaving a slick trail of moisture. And just that quick she wanted to taste him. She gave his shoulders a shove and followed, using her body to turn him onto his back. "It's my turn to drive you crazy," she whispered and took his shaft in her hand.

The skin was soft, covering a thick hardness with veins that throbbed with heat. She dipped her head and licked across the crown, delighting in the shudder that worked its way through his big body. The taste of his arousal was salty and addictive. She twirled her tongue in the slit at the tip, drawing more of his essence into her mouth. Then she took him between her lips, rubbing the flat of her tongue against the underside, just beneath the flared crown. His hands fisted in her hair. His hips lifted slightly, driving his cock a little deeper.

Rae let him slide free from her mouth and nibbled and licked her way down his shaft. When she reached his balls, she flicked one and then the other with the tip of her tongue. He gasped and surged against her. "Take them in your mouth, honey," Talon muttered, his fingers tightening in her hair. "Suck them."

She obliged, taking one testicle in her mouth, suckling gently. Keeping her fingers wrapped around his cock, she slid her hand slowly up and down, swiping her thumb across the weeping tip with each pass. She moved to his other testicle, drawing it between her lips and working it with her tongue. Then she released it and blew across his skin, smiling when he shivered.

Propping herself on one elbow, she looked up at his face. His eyes glittered with heat, the irises so dark they looked black. His jaw was taut, the tendons in his neck corded with the control he exerted. Holding his gaze, she dipped her head and took his thick cock in her mouth, taking him as deep as she could.

He shouted and bucked up against her, driving his cock into her throat, making her gag. He immediately pushed her away. "Honey, I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

Rae waved him off, coughing. She swiped her fingers over her eyes, removing moisture, and took his cock in her hand again. "It'll take more than that to buck me off this particular horse, mister."

Concentrating on pleasing him and breathing through her nose, she worked her way down his thick length as far as she could. Holding her hand at her lips, she marked the depth she could comfortably take him. Then she started pleasuring, swirling her tongue against him on the downward stroke, sucking him with firm pressure as she drew back. He thrust into her mouth, his harsh breathing and low groans encouraging her.

She moved her other hand from his thigh to his balls, rolling them over her fingers and gently squeezing in rhythm with her suckling. She increased her speed and the pressure of her mouth. More fluid spilled onto her tongue, thicker in viscosity than before, and she knew he was close.

"I'm going to come, sweetheart," he warned and tried to pull away.

She hummed a negative response, which made him groan again, louder this time. Pleased with the result, Rae hummed again and was rewarded by another groan. He began pumping his hips faster, shuttling in and out of her mouth. He shouted and stiffened, his release spurting with hot jets against the back of her throat. She swallowed and kept softly sucking until he finally stilled.

With gentle hands he pushed her away. She rolled onto her back and stretched, smiling in contentment. He started to say something but stopped. "What?" she asked.

"I wish I'd met you sooner. You complete me."

She hadn't been expecting that. Reaching up, she brushed Talon's hair away from his face, tucking it behind his ear. "You make me happy," she whispered, her heart full.

A slow smile tilted his lips. "I'm about to make you even happier." Wedging his broad shoulders between her thighs, he hooked her legs over his back. He tangled his fingers in the curly hair sheltering her sex and then spread her labia with his fingers.

"You're so pretty here," he mused, his voice raspy with returning arousal. "Soft and pink." He pushed one finger into her slick channel. "Hot and so wet."

He shifted, his finger leaving her to slip between her folds. His hot breath puffed against her swollen pussy then his tongue thrust inside her sheath. A whimper left her and her hands closed around clumps of bedding. Her eyes drifted shut. She lifted her hips, heels digging into his back, wanting him to push deeper. Instead, his tongue slid from her passage and flicked at her swollen clit. Then his mouth closed over the throbbing nub and suckled fiercely.

Her breath whooshed from her lungs. White light exploded behind her eyelids. The muscles of her pussy clamped down around his tongue and she shuddered through an orgasm that left her gasping. Before the final tremors passed, Talon flipped her over. He pressed his mouth to her tattoo. "Tell me about this."

She shivered as his warm breath washed over her skin. "I got it ten years ago on a whim. Out of all the tattoos to choose from, the angel seemed to call to me." She turned her head to look at him. "But white wings didn't seem right. The more I thought about it, the more red seemed appropriate." Her smile was as sultry as a summer night. "I guess even then I was drawn to you."

He brushed another kiss to the tattoo then kissed his way down her spine. His mouth feathered over her buttocks and she sighed and moaned, moving her hips restlessly as arousal began to tighten her womb once more.

Talon muttered something rough and too low for her to make out clearly, but it sounded like "sweet mother of God." He tugged her hips up so that her ass was raised in the air. Big fingers kneaded her buttocks, pressing them together then pulling them apart to reveal the puckered rosebud of her ass. He stroked his fingers through her slit, gathering her cream. Pressing a finger to her anus, he rimmed her. "I'm sorry I don't have any clouds handy."

Rae laughed then moaned when he slid his finger, slick with her juices, through the snug ring of muscles. She shivered, her body tightening, heat and ice running under her

skin. He added another finger and scissored them, stretching her, sending a sharp dig of pain along her nerve endings that quickly melded into hot, wicked pleasure. His fingers filled her ass while a craving, hollow emptiness filled her pussy. She wanted him inside her.

“Talon!” She groaned and pushed back against his fingers. Looking over her shoulder, she caught her breath at the dark look of arousal on his beautiful face. “I wouldn’t have thought—with your background and all—that you’d want to do something like this. It’s so...*bad*.”

“Even good men have a little bad in them.” He grinned and pressed his fingers deeper into her ass. “But I had no idea that bad could be so good.”

She felt his cock stroke through her folds, the tip sliding up and bumping her clit. Then he withdrew his fingers and the hard curved head of his cock nudged her anal opening. The hunger, the heat grew as he pushed forward slowly. “Heaven above, you’re so sweet. I can’t wait to fuck you here.”

He thrust forward and paused, letting the sting fade while he rocked his hips back and forth, letting her get accustomed to his girth. And it burned, sweet lord, it burned. But the forbidden aspect taunted her, tempted her. She wanted more.

As he pulled back, not all the way out but letting his cock head rest just inside her opening, Rae gasped. He spread more of her cream around her stretched entrance and, using that hot slickness, drove his cock all the way into her in one slow, inexorable glide. Pain seared her but as he drew back, the pain slid into pleasure. His next lunge brought back the sting of pain and a sensation of being so full her arousal spiraled ever higher. Panting, trembling, all she could do was lay beneath him, letting him claim her in this darkly carnal way.

His hands gripped her hips. Talon moved gently, rocking back and forth. He slid one hand around and found her throbbing clit. She gave a keening mewl and shoved her hips back against him. “More,” she rasped, her throat so tight she could barely speak. “Harder.”

Talon groaned and sped up his thrusts. The pressure was indescribable—her passage gripped him so snugly he thought the top of his head would blow off. Both of them. His pleasure strained inside him, eager to be set free, drawing his balls tight and hard against his body.

He slid two fingers along either side of her clit. Claspings it gently between them, he moved his hand up and down, working the sensitive nub. Rae moaned, arching beneath him, her buttocks slamming back against his groin with each of his downward strokes. Her channel rippled around him. He growled and ground his forehead against her shoulder. His thrusts came faster, harder, pounding into her with a ferocity that stole his breath.

“Oh God, Talon. I’m coming.” Her wailing moan echoed in the small room.

He reared back and rammed his entire length inside her in one demanding thrust. A white, blinding fire seared through his groin. He roared, caught in a whirlwind where nothing existed except his aching cock and hard swollen balls as they clenched. He heard Rae’s echoing scream as she found her release at the same time. His seed jetted into her in wave after hot wave, his fingers digging into her flesh. He shuddered again and again until finally he sagged against her. They both fell to the mattress, spent and exhausted.

He had presence of mind enough to slowly pull out of her. She gave a low moan. Talon pressed a kiss to her shoulder. “Are you all right? I didn’t hurt you?”

She shook her head against the pillow. Her eyes were closed, the dark lashes casting minute shadows against her cheeks. “A little, but it felt good.” A smile tilted her full lips. “We’re definitely going to be doing that again.”

He grinned and got off the bed. “I’m glad to hear it.” He went into the bathroom and cleansed himself. Realizing this was the first time he’d made love to her and hadn’t passed out afterward, he paused. It was a nice change.

Shaking his head, he got a fresh washcloth and wet it. He went back into the bedroom and climbed onto the bed. He ran the cloth between her buttocks, gently washing her. He lightly pressed the cloth against her swollen and sensitive anus. She sighed and lifted her ass slightly, pushing into his touch.

“Feels good?” he asked.

She nodded. When he withdrew the cloth she turned over and looped her arms around his neck. “Everything with you feels good, Talon. I love you.”

“I love you, Rae.” He leaned in and kissed her. This was the beginning of the rest of his life. As he held her in his arms, felt her heart beating against his chest, he knew without a doubt he’d made the right choice. Eternity would have been empty without her in his life.

In her arms he’d found his home.

About the Author

Sherrill Quinn grew up in Northeast Ohio on the southern edge of the snow belt. After sloshing through too many winters of ice and snow, she moved to southern Arizona where she's lived since 2000. After twenty years building a career in Human Resources, she went back to her early love of writing and started a second career in erotic romance in early 2005.

Sherrill welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Sherrill Quinn

Demon of Her Dreams

Ellora's Cavemen: Seasons of Seduction I *anthology*

Jewel of Apthgar

To the Victor Go the Spoils

Wicked Omen



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com