

Unwilling Angel

By

Caitlyn Hunter

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Chapter One

"I see dead people."

The whispered, somewhat embarrassed words of a child from a popular movie several years back echoed dully in Emma's mind. Squeezing her eyes shut, she took a deep breath, counted to ten before opening them again and...the dead man was still there. Shaking her head to clear it didn't make him disappear. Squinting only made him a tad blurry, and tilting her head to either side like a curious dog just made her dizzy. No matter what she did, he remained right where he was, leaning with studied nonchalance against the wall beside the newspaper rack in KC's, arms and ankles crossed, smiling at her like she was the answer to all his prayers.

She turned and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the gleaming stainless steel of one of the coffee makers. One thing about Kyle, the owner of the combination deli/convenience store, he kept his place neat and tidy at all times. She should take a lesson from him, as the image staring back at her looked bedraggled and in need of more than a little cleaning up. Dressed in jeans and a ragged sweat shirt, with clunky snow boots on her feet and a knit hat snugged down over her hair, she could definitely benefit from a day—or three—at a spa. One of those fancy ones where they buffed and polished until you came out looking like a new woman. And if they could only work the same magic on her emotions and make her *feel* like a new woman, she just might go for it.

Leaning forward, she squinted to get a better look at herself. The whites of her eyes were threaded with red, and with the tired green of the irises, made her think of faded Christmas decorations that had been left up months past the season. Though she hadn't bothered with makeup that morning, lack of sleep had given her a permanent case of raccoon-eyes, and the grayness of her skin only completed the look.

She sighed. She should be ashamed to let anyone see her like this—even a dead man.

"I see dead people." The child's voice was insistent now with a slight plea, as if begging her to believe him. A shiver ran up her spine. She believed, oh how she believed. It was a chillingly accurate statement as far as she was concerned.

"You and me both, kid," she muttered, and then looked up at the clock on the wall above the dead man's head. It was four minutes after two in the afternoon, Monday, December...she wracked her brain to remember the date, something that often slipped her mind during school vacations. Oh, yes, it was the twenty-third. School had been out for three days. She'd spent nearly every waking moment of each of those days trying to finish her latest labor of love—and failing miserably.

Three days blown to hell, unless she could get through this despicable bout of writer's block, finish the young adult novel she'd been working on for nearly two years, and get up the nerve to actually submit it to a publisher. Then, well, then the possibilities were endless. Submitting the book would probably be enough to put a small dent in the depression that had taken over her life since her husband's death. If—and it was a very big if—she could actually sell it, it just might be enough to chase away this persistent hopelessness and give her something to live for again.

Desperate to fight her way out of the depression without using drugs, or worse to her way of thinking, going to a psychiatrist, she'd decided the book had to be finished and submitted before the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. If it wasn't, she planned to erase the file from her computer and chalk the whole venture up to another lost opportunity in her miserable life. What she would do after that, only heaven knew. The only thing she knew was that the world would go on—with or without her.

The dead man uncrossed his ankles, drawing her attention back to him. She'd worry about her mutinous muse later. Right now, she needed to deal with this latest—hitch in her stride—the dead man standing over there smiling at her. She looked at the clock again, thinking it might be important in the future to know the exact moment when she'd rounded that final, fateful curve on the road to insanity. Heck, she might even write a story about it: *Emma Trips the Light Fantastic*, or maybe, *Emma Goes Bonkers*.

It was bound to happen sooner or later. She'd known that, had been waiting for it all her life—or at least from the time she was about ten-years-old and rudely awakened to the fact that she was different from the other children in her fifth grade class. Up until then, it hadn't been a problem. Children were imaginative creatures, but when they reached the age where they were approaching puberty, their beliefs and creative outlooks on life were stymied. Her friends stopped enjoying her so-called imagination and started pointing their fingers at her instead. Since then, she'd been expecting insanity to come calling at any minute.

"You're just special, that's all," her mom had often assured her. A biased opinion, surely. Special she might be, but she'd learned fast that special meant different—and most people didn't take well to others who were "different." Emma herself didn't like it much. She longed to be a normal, everyday, average Josephine, instead of someone who heard voices in her head, or someone who knew things were going to happen before they actually occurred. Shuddering at another chill, she hunched her shoulders as if trying to hide from the next thought; she didn't want to be someone who saw dead

people, for crying out loud! Granted, that was a first for her, but with her luck, she figured it wouldn't be a last.

She'd spent her life doing everything she could to be—or at least appear to be—just like everyone else. Doing her best to behave as the so-called normal people did, she'd learned to interact with them and taught herself to tolerate their idiosyncrasies. Through it all, she'd instinctively kept her personal quirks and unconventional traits hidden. Hers, after all, were much more frowned upon than theirs.

Over the years, she'd kept a list of the many terms the commoners—her secret name for them—might use to describe her. It was saved on her computer and she often edited it, adding new terms as she heard them and changing the rankings. At present, her top three favorites were: raving mad—short, sweet, and to the point; loony-tunes—self-explanatory with a nice humorous bent; nutty as a fruitcake—descriptive in a festive sort of way.

She'd even started writing a children's book about the many ways of saying someone was insane: The ABCs of Insanity. Abnormal, bonkers, crackers, ditz; the list went on and on. Right now, at this heart-stopping moment in her life, she felt as if she'd touched them all on the long, winding journey that was her life up to this point.

The dead man, ghost—whatever the heck he was—cleared his throat and drew her attention back to him.

Wrapping both hands around the steaming cup of coffee, she reveled in the heat as she studied the...apparition. *I'm one up on you, kid. I not only see dead people, I hear them, too.*

He looked up and gifted her with a charming smile, then went back to perusing the headlines on that day's newspaper.

He doesn't seem to know he's dead. Should I tell him? If I do, will he disappear? Just... Poof! Could it be that easy to get rid of him?

He lifted his eyes, frowned at her then shook his head as if he knew what she was thinking.

Jiminy Christmas, *did* he know what she was thinking?

Holding the cup of coffee beneath her nose, she inhaled the appealing fragrance, and wished she could remove the lid and dive into the wonderful heat. She was always cold these days, had been ever since her husband died. It was as if Bill's death had leached all the warmth from her body along with all the hope from her heart.

And now she was seeing dead people. What next?

Could this be some sort of weird dream? If it was, why could she feel the heat and weight of the cup in her hand, and smell the tantalizing aroma mixed with a hint of balsam from the small Christmas tree standing on a table at the end of one of the aisles? Why could she see the colorful lights blinking manically? Why could she hear Judy Garland's lovely voice flowing from the speaker of the radio behind the counter as the DJ played, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"?

She almost snorted. Not much chance of that, Judy. Especially if this isn't a dream, and she was becoming more and more sure it wasn't. It was way too real to be a dream.

Narrowing her eyes, Emma studied the dead man. Perhaps he wasn't who she thought he was. Maybe he was one of those celebrity doppelgangers, those people who looked so much like famous movie stars or sports figures that they went around posing as them at parties, bar mitzvahs, and such. Or, he could be a distant family member, a cousin, say, who just happened to share most of the same genes as his more famous relative, Ted McNabb.

Old Ted might be more famous, but he was also very dead. Dead, as in no way could he be standing here in KC's checking out the local newspaper.

Good grief, she'd probably be seeing Elvis next. Or maybe Jim Morrison would swagger through the door, shake his curly locks and break into the chorus of "People are Strange." Shoot, at this point she wouldn't be surprised if a group of little green Martians appeared demanding to be taken to her leader.

She lowered her head, peeked at him from beneath her eyelashes. He looked good for a dead guy. Nothing like the last photograph she'd seen of him where he'd looked terribly old and washed out, like he was standing on his last leg—well, she guessed when the picture had been taken, he had been. But now, he looked more like the earlier pictures—tall with a slim build and a slightly craggy, albeit handsome and appealing, face.

Incredibly sexy, outrageously alluring; the man of her dreams come to life.

She peeked at him again and saw he was smiling at her now.

Could he read her mind?

He winked, straightened away from the counter, and started walking in her direction. Yikes! Dead man walking! She heard him laugh. Then the air around him seemed to shimmer and shift as he passed through a rack of candy bars—directly through it as if he were made of nothing more than smoke—and the old Almond Joy/Mounds commercial ran through her mind, "Sometimes I feel like a nut; sometimes I don't."

Ye gods, it was official. Emma Bradshaw, bored elementary school teacher, depressed widow, aspiring young-adult novelist, just tripped the light fantastic, took to the air and flew around the bend

into La-La Land.

"I see dead people." As Emma Bradshaw's thoughts rang clearly in his mind, Ted "Mac" McNabb grinned. He could read her mind. Cool. Finally, a plus to being an Apprentice Angel.

"Focus, Mr. McNabb."

The deep voice of Gabriel, his heavenly nemesis, blasted into his head and wiped away the smug smile. Cautious, Mac braced his feet and prepared to dodge the lightning bolt Gabriel had a tendency to flash from his eyes when he was annoyed. After a few seconds, he relaxed. Maybe Gabe's temper didn't extend down to Earth.

"Bite me, Gabe."

"No, thanks. Do your job."

When he got back to Heaven, he was going to go right over Gabe's head straight to the Head Honcho. He had a couple of bones to pick with the Big Guy. Controlling a wince as Emma squirted way too much cream into her coffee—hadn't the woman ever heard of too much of a good thing?—he catalogued his list of grievances.

First, there was this bit about being an Apprentice Angel. What a freaking joke that was. No way in Hell—or Heaven—was he going to put up with that. It was, in a nutshell, a kick in the ass. And that was putting it mildly.

Which brought him to his next complaint: why couldn't he get out a single sentence without peppering it with clichés? It was annoying, not to mention mortifying. He was a best-selling author, for crying out loud. Any writer worth his salt knew to avoid clichés...well, like the plague.

Damn! This had to stop!

"Pay attention, Mr. McNabb. I didn't send you down there to try to figure out your own problems. I sent you to help Ms. Bradshaw."

Mac rolled his eyes before fixing them back on Emma. Archangels, with their holier-than-thou attitudes and their asinine rules, were a major pain in the butt. Gabriel, in particular, with his multitude of brightly colored wings, gleaming halo, and sparking angel eyes, pushed all of Mac's buttons into overdrive.

Old Gabe was prone to change at the drop of a hat. His appearance, his clothes, hell, his entire being sometimes seemed as if it was in a constant state of metamorphosis. He could be a cranky, leathered old man one minute; a drop-dead gorgeous, ditzzy blonde the next; and a young, precocious child the minute after that. Then he could morph seamlessly into a snarling, rabid dog in the blink of an eye. It was a little disconcerting, even for someone who'd lived his life studying people and weaving the odd and often unbelievable personalities together to create interesting characters for his books.

A rolling rumble of thunder, followed by a bolt of lightning that pierced him right through the heart, made him jump. Shit! The fiery shaft didn't burn as expected, but was mildly warm, passing through him with only a brief jolt of awareness. Still, it was enough to make him stand up and take notice.

"You have a job to do, Mr. McNabb. Pay attention, if you please, or you will never make it to your Personal Heaven."

Mac ducked to the side as another bolt of lightning flashed then looked up to see the woman watching him warily. Had she seen that? He sent a pithy *"back off"* to Gabriel and plastered a smile on his face.

"Keep your mind on what you're there to do and I will. Ms. Bradshaw needs your help. Make the connection and get this done."

Uh-oh, how was he supposed to make the connection again? Okay, right, he had to hold Emma's hand for three seconds, then he would be "tuned in" to her for the duration of this assignment. When he'd accomplished that, he could move on to helping her with her book and convincing her to go to that Christmas party where she would meet a man—supposedly her soul mate. His lips moved into an automatic sneer. Christ, he'd been sent to earth to play matchmaker for the Archangels. Somebody up there was going to pay.

"Don't forget she's psi." Gabriel interrupted his thoughts, which was just one more thing to be pissed about. It might be cool to read someone else's mind, but that didn't mean he had to like his own being an open book to Gabe and his celestial buddies.

"What the hell's psi?"

"Psychic, precognitive and telepathic. Weren't you listening when I was briefing you? I don't do that stuff for my health, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, psychic. Okay, I get it. Don't have a clue why it makes a lick of difference, but I've got it."

"It's important because you can use it. Get your mind in the game and watch for the right time".

"Alright, already. Now get out of my face, will ya?"

Watching the ghost of her favorite author walk toward her, Emma didn't know whether to laugh, or cry, or toss the hot cup of coffee in his direction and run screaming out into the snow. A phrase her mom had been fond of danced merrily into her mind and decided it for her. *Wigged out, for sure.* The

memories it brought back were of a much happier time in her life and surprised a giggle out of her.

The dead man chuckled, and her laughter faded away on a gasp of apprehension. He stopped in front of her and his hand cupped her chin, pushing up gently to close her gaping mouth. Then he took her hand and linked his fingers with hers, holding tight for a few seconds.

"Hello, Emma Bradshaw."

She jumped. His hand moved to her elbow and he turned her so she was facing the plaid-covered back of the old man in front of her in line.

She stiffened, opened her mouth to tell him to leave her alone, but caught herself in time. Wouldn't that be something? Kyle and the other customers would look at her as if she'd lost her mind—which she very possibly had—and would slowly back away in an effort to put as much distance as possible between themselves and the crazy lady who talked to invisible people.

She clamped her lips together and didn't make a sound. His hand moved to her back and rubbed gently in small circles as if he was soothing a fractious baby.

It was strangely calming and frightening at the same time.

The old man finished paying for his purchase and stepped aside with a cheerful, "Have a Merry Christmas, Kyle."

"Yeah, same to you, Ron. Tell Alice not to let you stuff yourself on turkey and cranberry sauce. Hey, Em, how're you doing?"

She did her best to smile, but didn't make it. Opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again when nothing came out. Placing the coffee on the counter, she covered her mouth with her hand, cleared her throat, tried again. "I'm good, Kyle, how are you?" She was amazed when her voice came out sounding almost normal.

"Same old, same old." He nodded at the coffee. "You all set?"

The dead man moved his hand up to her shoulder and squeezed. "Pack of Marlboros." She cut her eyes at him then jerked them back to Kyle, waiting to see if he had heard. When he only looked at her questioningly, she shook her head and said, "Just the coffee today, Kyle. Thanks."

The dead man chuckled. "Yeah, if I had stayed away from those things when I was alive, I might still be kicking today."

Kyle took her money, wished her a Merry Christmas, and never once said a word about the dead man standing next to her. Emma nodded, mumbled, "Merry Christmas," then did the only thing she could think of—she turned tail and ran.

Chapter Two

Out in the parking lot, Emma skidded to a halt beside her car, juggled the cup of coffee, and dug her keys out of her coat pocket. Jamming the key into the ignition before she was fully in the car, she prayed she could get out of there before she did something stupid—like go back inside and ask a dead man to get in the car and come home with her.

She'd fantasized about this man for a long time, dreamed about one day meeting him in the flesh. Well, her dreams had come true, sort of. And wasn't it just her screwy luck he had to die first?

"Better a dead man than no man at all, right?"

It was a gravelly whisper, coming from the direction of the passenger seat. Dreading what she would see, she turned her head.

"Damn it," she gasped out, though it was no surprise to see him sitting there. He had a smug smirk on his face.

"Go away!" She dropped the coffee cup in the holder and covered her eyes with her hands. "Go. Away. Now."

He laughed. "Sorry, Emma, no can do. I'm staying until I've done my job."

She pulled her hands away from her eyes and covered her ears. "I don't hear anything. You're just a figment of my imagination."

"Have it your way, but I'm not going anywhere."

Her hands moved to her mouth to hold in the scream. She might have let it out if she could be positive it was only from frustration. Trouble was, there was a good dose of terror mixed in with the aggravation, and she'd be darned if she let him see her sweat.

"Tough cookie, huh? No sweat, I can handle it."

Emma straightened her shoulders, narrowed her eyes and scowled, giving him her best, fierce, evil-teacher look. He only smiled at her and settled more comfortably in his seat.

She huffed out a breath and reached for the gear shift, but didn't move it to reverse. Instead, she white-knuckled it then turned and stared belligerently at the man sitting beside her. He was looking out the window at the snowflakes lazily drifting from the leaden sky. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally turned back to her.

"Are we going or what?"

She gave him a pointed look, but didn't answer.

"What?"

"Seat belt."

He laughed so hard, he ended up hugging his belly with one hand and knuckling the tears from his cheeks with the other.

Patient and determined, she sat and waited him out.

He swiped at his eyes, then rubbed his hand on his jeans. "Emma, I'm already dead, remember?"

"No one rides with me without wearing their seat belt; I don't care if they're dead or not. It's the law and I'm not getting a ticket just because of your stupidity."

"I don't need a seat belt. If you get stopped, the cop's not going to notice me sitting here, much less ticket you because your passenger doesn't have a seat belt on. Trust me on this." He smiled.

She arched her right eyebrow. "Buckle it."

"Oh, for Christ's sake." It was a disgruntled mumble, but he fastened the seat belt.

Satisfied, she put the car in reverse and wheeled out of the parking space, almost grazing the car next to her. Pulling out of the parking lot, she came within inches of hitting an oncoming car.

He grabbed the dashboard and she smirked.

"Jesus, I can see why you insist on people buckling up when they ride with you. I thought it was the law in this state that you have to pass a Driver's Education course before they give you your license."

"I passed that course with flying colors, I'll have you know."

"Yeah, and how many years ago was that?"

"Watch it, bud."

He tugged on the seat belt, crossed his arms over his chest, and stared out the window. "This is ridiculous."

"Why are you here? You're a dead man. I don't *do* dead people."

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm not here for you to do me, Emma. Actually, I'm here to do you. No, that's not right. I'm here to do something for you—if you'll let me, that is. Besides, I have a wife. If I was going to *do* anyone, I'd do her."

"Uh-huh, seems to me she might have a small problem with that. Let's see now, what was it?" She lifted one hand from the steering wheel and snapped her fingers twice in rapid succession. "Oh yeah, she's alive and you're dead. D-E-A-D, dead. I doubt even a dozen of those little blue pills could do much to alleviate that problem. Besides, I have a feeling she'd have a few issues with making love to a dead man."

"Got me there. Not gonna happen, anyway, no matter how much I'd like it to."

Intrigued in spite of herself, she asked, "Why not?"

"Against the rules; you can't have any interactions with anyone you knew when you were alive."

Who would have ever thought ghosts had rules?

"So, no, um, conjugal visits allowed, huh?"

"Not with anyone you knew when you were alive; not with anyone you didn't know when you were alive, either. No sex allowed at all in Pre-Heaven. Sounds more like Hell, doesn't it?" He crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. "Or purgatory."

She took a quick peek at the road, then looked back at him. "So, you're an angel? And angels aren't allowed to have sex—at all? Man!"

"Yeah, it's a sucky rule, but one you have to follow if you want to have any chance at all of reaching your Personal Heaven." He grabbed the dashboard. "Watch the road! I'm not looking to die again this soon! And I sure don't want to be the cause of someone else's death while I'm here."

She snapped her gaze back to the road in time to slam on the brakes and screech to a halt at the stop sign. "Oops! Sorry."

Strange how he sounded exactly like she'd thought he would from reading his bios on the backs of his numerous books—tough, compelling, with just a touch of dry wit to make it interesting. His voice was deep and a little gravelly, definitely sexy, even with that undercurrent of New York running through it.

She remembered taking each of his books out of her bookcase when she read of his death, spreading them on the floor around her, reading a passage here, a chapter there, staring at his picture, and mourning not only the loss of him, but the loss of all the characters he had created.

Stuart, Marv, Cassie, and Beth from the Protector novels, and Danny from the Chance Encounter novels—it had felt like she was the sole survivor of a vicious sickness that had run like wildfire through

her family and friends, leaving only her behind to grieve. She'd cried buckets and worn black for a week, had even considered covering all the mirrors in the house, but had stopped herself in time. Just because her favorite author died, was no reason to go overboard.

But this—having his ghost, or angel, riding in the car with her—now that was a pretty good reason to go straight from 'a little touched', as her grandmother so delicately put it, to stark-raving, foaming at the mouth, all-out insanity.

She snuck a look at him out of the corner of her eye then glanced at the dashboard clock: twenty-one minutes after two, on the twenty-third day of December. She looked out the window, noting the day. It was an ordinary winter's day in Maine. The sky was dismal, snowflakes danced in the air, the houses were fully decorated for Christmas, and the walls of snow created by the plows were only a mere smidge of what they would be before winter was over. Nothing new, but it was a red-letter day for her. She'd officially arrived at the end of her journey. Emma Bradshaw was now totally, completely, certifiably wiggled out.

He chuckled and she cut her eyes back to him. "What?" She rolled her eyes. She was talking to a dead man, one who in all likelihood could read her every thought. Why fight it?

"Okay, I give. Just what are you here to do for me?"

"I'd tell you, but that's also against the rules. You have to figure it out for yourself. If I tell you, that would make it too easy, and that's just not how the universe works."

"So, what, you're going to follow me around until I figure out what you're here for, and when I do, then you'll be gone?"

"Simply put, but, yeah, that's the idea."

"Well, how am I supposed to figure it out if you won't tell me? Are you going to give me a hint or a clue, at least?"

"I guess I could do that, although, technically, that's frowned on in my world. You're my first, and I haven't exactly memorized the rule book, so I don't know how helpful I can be with you."

"I'm your first? First what? Assignment? Haunting? Mission from God? Ghostly intervention? What?"

"Such a drama queen. Let's just call it an assignment. I like that better than the others."

"How many... assignments do you have to do?" She waved her hand. "Never mind, I don't want to know. So, what if I don't ever figure it out? What if you're stuck here for the rest of my life because I never get what you're here for?"

"Then I guess I fail as an Angel Apprentice and never get to go to my Personal Heaven. But you'll figure it out, Emma; you're a smart lady. I have every confidence you'll get it before long and set me free."

"You fail as an Angel Apprentice? What the heck does that mean? And what do you mean, you'll never get to go to your Personal Heaven?"

He sighed. "Okay, here's how it works. I'm dead, right?"

"You won't get an argument from me on that one."

"Okay, when a person dies—no, no, I can't tell you that. Let's see, okay, remember that story by Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*?"

"Of course, I do. It's one of my favorites. So, are you, like, a ghost of Christmas Past or something?"

"No, I'm a ghost of Christmas future, your future. Actually, you might say I'm more like Clarence, you know, George Bailey's Guardian Angel in *It's a Wonderful Life*?"

"So, what, you're going to show me what the world would be like if I'd never been born?"

"Nope, nothing as complicated as that. My assignment is to straighten out your life, kind of get you headed in the right direction. Hmm, maybe I'm more like Dudley in *The Bishop's Wife*. Yeah, Cary Grant—he fits me better, don't you think?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure, whatever you say. You're going to get me headed in the right direction, but you can't tell me what that is?"

"No, that would be cheating, but I can tell you it's important that you get this, not just for yourself, but for the world, for future generations."

"Oh, well, is that all? Gee, I know you're a rock-hard, no-holds-barred sort of person, but can't you sugar-coat it a little? I mean, future generations? Man."

"Oh, I can sling the shit with the best of 'em. I'm a writer, remember? But what good would that do? I'm trying to give it to you straight, Emma, so we can get this done and I can get on with my life."

"What life? Your life is over. You *were* a writer; now you're dead. Don't you get it?"

"Yeah, I get it, and just because I'm dead, that doesn't mean I've stopped writing. Maybe that's what my Personal Heaven is, a nice comfy office with a snazzy, juiced up computer, and all the time in the world to write whatever I want without ever having to worry about query letters, or synopses, or editors, or publishers and all that crap."

"Yeah, right; not even in heaven."

He laughed. "Yeah, it is a little far-fetched, even for us fiction writers."

Her eyes widened. How did he know she wrote fiction? She started to ask, then shook her head.

They'd get to that later.

"So, what do I call you? Ted? No, that's not your real name. Theodore? No, that doesn't fit; besides, I never liked the books you put out under that name." She made a face. "Bor-ing."

"Hey!"

"Sorry, no offense, but they just weren't as good as the stuff you wrote as Ted McNabb. Not my cup of tea, I guess you could say. How did you do that, anyway? It was like you had two separate personalities going there. I mean, your writing style was completely different."

She thought about it for a second, then waved it away and went back to his name, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel and pursing her lips.

"Let's see, your real name—don't tell me, I'll get it."

Humming along with the Christmas carol playing on the radio, she sorted through all the info about this man in her brain.

"Sylvester! That's it, Sylvester Delbert Harris, right?"

He opened his mouth, but she kept talking.

"So, what do you go by? Sly? Or Del? Nah, too dorky. Personally, I like that other one; you know, the one you wrote romance novels under? Hunt Chance. Yeah, Hunt, I like that one a lot. It sort of fits you."

"Would you mind keeping your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the road?"

"What for? You're dead, remember?" *And it's not like anybody would care if I joined you.* She shook that thought off. "Answer my question. What should I call you?"

He frowned and curled his fingers around the armrest on the door, gripping hard enough to dent the plastic.

She laughed. He pulled his hand away and rested it on his belly, as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Call me Mac."

"Mac? I like Hunt better. It's sexier."

He mumbled a string of curse words, then shook his head.

"Look, Emma, I don't really care what you call me as long as you set your mind to figuring out why I'm here, so I can leave. I've got things to do, and people to meet." He glanced at his watch.

Emma grabbed his arm and pulled it over so she could take a closer look. "Your watch is exactly like the one my dad used to wear." She shook his wrist. "It's not working."

He pulled his arm away.

"It stopped when I died. Stay on track here, Emma—and keep your eyes on the road, for God's sake. We need to get this done. I'm more than ready to move on to my Personal Heaven and I have four more missions to do after this one. I've made it this far, and I'm not going to let you screw this one up. Dealing with Gabriel once is more than enough. Five lousy good deeds, one for each of the Archangels before I can get to my Personal Heaven. I gotta tell you, Judgment sucks."

She laughed.

"Oh, puh-lease, five good deeds? Is that all? You ought to be glad it's not a hundred or a thousand or something. Just think how long you'd be waiting, then. It could be hundreds of years before you got them all finished. So, the Judgment thing is real, huh? I'll bet there're a lot of really angry people up there."

"Look, forget I said that. I wasn't supposed to tell you about that. I have five to do and you're my first. I really don't want to go back and face Gabriel if I don't do this right. He'll probably yank that stick out of his ass and beat me with it."

"Wow, you really don't like him, do you?"

"It's not that I don't like him. I just, well, I guess you could say I don't like taking orders from anybody, even Archangels. Gabe's okay. A little sanctimonious for my taste, but he's only doing his job, I guess. Just chalk it up to my being grumpy about dying."

She laughed as she turned the car into her driveway, pulled to a stop, then shoved the gear shift into park and twisted in her seat to look at him. "Yeah, that would tend to make most people a tad bit cranky."

"It bites."

"I guess it does at that. So, you met Gabriel. Did you meet the others? There're five, right? Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Haniel, and..." She held up a finger for each one then waved her hand as she tried to think of the last Archangel's name.

"Uriel is the other one. And, if I understand it correctly, the number of Archangels varies with whatever religion you subscribe to."

"Really? I didn't know that. So, have you met them all? What do they look like? Do they all have wings and halos?"

He held up his hand. "I've met them and that's all you need to know."

She opened her mouth to ask another question, but he placed his hand firmly over her lips. "Don't bother to ask. I can't tell you anything else."

"Talk about something that bites. Can't you at least tell me if Gabriel has a whole bunch of wings

like I've read he does?"

"Nope. You'll have to wait until you get to Pre-Heaven—if you make it, that is."

"Hey, be nice. I'm just curious."

"Yeah, well, get over it. Focus your mind on figuring out why I'm here, and I'll try to give you all the help I can." He held out his hand. "Deal?"

She shook it. "Deal."

"Okay, let's get started. Are you going to invite me in?"

"Is that one of the rules?"

"Not really, I just thought it would be nice if you did."

"Oh, okay, then sure, come on in."

He disappeared in a flash. She blinked, then rolled her eyes and grabbed her coffee as she got out of the car.

Sneaky son of a gun, she thought as she hurried up the front walk.

Chapter Three

Inside, Emma found Mac stretched out on her sofa, with the TV remote in one hand and a smirk on his face.

"What took you so long?" he asked.

She slammed the door behind her and took a sip of coffee, then made a face when she realized she'd forgotten to sweeten it.

Well, gee, this is your first angel, Emma. Yeah, either that or my first trip into gaga land.

He chuckled. "You're not—how was it you put it before? Wiggled out."

"You *are* reading my mind!"

"Well, sure—it's one of the perks of being an angel."

"Well, stop it. I don't want you in my head, you pervert!"

"I can't help it; you think too loud."

"I think too loud? Come on, get real here, how can a person 'think too loud'?"

"Believe me, it's possible." He stood up, set the remote down on the end table and wandered over to her bookcase to study her collection of books. "Great taste in literature."

"You only say that because every book you ever wrote as Ted McNabb is up there."

"Yeah, like I said great taste. You've got a couple more of my favorites, too." He pulled out a copy of Clint Noble's *The Rise* and held it up. "This is a good one, the best he ever did."

"It's one of my favorites. Too bad he got clean."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Yeah, I guess, but his first six books—which were his best, in my opinion—he says he wrote them while he was either stoned or drunk. Then, he got clean, went Hollywood, and it was all downhill from there."

"Went Hollywood?"

She shrugged. "A lot of authors, especially when they get really popular and Hollywood starts begging for the chance to turn their books into movies, they, well, they get a big head or something. They churn the work out and don't give a hoot that it stinks."

"Huh, did I do that?"

"No, I can honestly say you were one of the few authors who didn't, and I'd think it was an even greater accomplishment for you. I mean, you were writing a series, you had to stay with the same characters and keep them true to the personas you gave them. You never once stumbled or even faltered in your writing style. Maybe that's because you got it all out of your system writing as Theodore Evans."

"Yeah, could be. So, what would you recommend for Mr. Noble, that he go back on the booze?"

"No! He just needs to find his imagination again, find whatever it is that sets his creativity free. Maybe another genre. Or an editor who has the guts to tell him where he's going wrong. A publisher who's interested in more than the bottom line, who wants to publish his book because it's worthy of being printed, not just because it has his name on it."

"Can't blame a guy for taking the easy money."

She stomped her foot.

"Oh, yes, you can! Or I can, at least. Some of that money was mine. I shelled out my hard-earned cash for several of his books before I learned to check them out of the library first. And, he's not the only one. A lot of famous authors are guilty of the same thing."

He held up his hand. "Hey, don't get your panties in a wad! I didn't say I didn't agree with you. I

just wanted to hear your theory. Actually, it's a pretty good one, but if you ever tell anyone I said that, I'll deny it with my dying breath. Oh wait, been there, done that, so I guess I'd deny it. Never mind, let's just say I'll never admit to it."

"Do you always do that?"

"What?"

"Talk in clichés like that?"

He scowled.

"No. It's something I picked up in Heaven. A bad habit, but I'll break it sooner or later." After putting the book back on the shelf, he wandered over to the desk in the corner and studied her computer.

When he reached out a hand to move the mouse, Emma gasped. "Hey! No one gave you permission to poke around in my private things."

He raised a brow. "Take a chill pill. I only want to see what you're working on. May I?"

"No you may not! I have some private files on there that you don't need to see."

"What do you think I'm going to do, steal your identity? Come on, Em, I already know what's on here. I just want to read what you have so far." He glanced at the clock on the mantle. "Don't you have a Christmas party you need to go to?"

"What do you mean, you already know what's on there? Have you been snooping around in my files?"

He rubbed a hand over his face.

"Emma, I was given your profile."

"My profile? You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not kidding. The AA's do complete profiles on everyone who needs a visit. All I had to do was touch your hand and I knew everything I needed to know about you. I can tell you exactly what time you'll go to bed tonight—midnight. And what time you'll get up tomorrow morning—six o'clock. I know what you're likely to eat for breakfast—oatmeal with raisins. I know that you'll take a few minutes to go to KC's for your daily fix of Green Mountain coffee—a large Southern Pecan with three packets of Splenda and way too much cream, that you'll come back here afterwards and sit down at the computer and try to bang out at least a couple thousand words on *Alien Eyes*."

She held up a hand to stop him. "Wait, wait. I can't take all this in." Shaking her head, she walked over and sat on the arm of the sofa, then popped back up almost as soon as her rear end touched. "Whoa! Whoa, just hold on a minute. How do you know about *Alien Eyes*?"

She hadn't told anyone about the futuristic young adult novel she was writing, no one except Cassie, her sister, and Cassie was sworn to secrecy.

Mac took a deep breath, and counted to ten before he answered. "I know everything the Archangels thought it was important for me to know." And that was all he was going to say about it. He had to divert her attention from the book before she figured out that was one of the reasons he was here. He didn't want her focused completely on that and ignoring the rest of her life. He'd never get to his PH that way.

She was staring at him, still shaking her head, and he tried to distract her with his most charming smile. It didn't work. Okay, time to change the subject.

"Emma, did you hear what I said a few minutes ago?"

She continued to stare at him and shake her head, so he took that for her answer.

"I asked you if you didn't have a Christmas party to go to."

She still didn't answer, and he huffed out a breath.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Emma. Shut your mouth and quit shaking your head. You look like the village idiot!"

That got her attention. Her head stilled, her mouth snapped shut, and when it did, she clapped a hand over it and squealed like she'd just seen a ghost. Well, he supposed she had, in a manner of speaking, but wasn't it a little late in the game to be reacting this way?

"Emma..."

She stopped squealing long enough to garble something behind her hand, then went back to screaming again. Mac finally got it. Apparently, when she'd closed her mouth, her tongue had been in the way of her teeth. "Serves you right." He slapped his hands over his ears when she screamed louder.

She glared at him, then ran over to the mirror hanging on the wall of the small foyer, sticking out her tongue and examining it when she got there.

He laughed.

"It's not bleeding, Emma." He walked over to stand behind her. She tore her gaze away from her tongue and met his eyes in the mirror—or would have met his eyes in the mirror, except he wasn't there.

"Oops."

She whirled around. "Oh my God, you're a vampire!"

His chuckle turned into a roar when she crossed the index fingers of both hands into a makeshift

cross and scurried away from him. She raced to the kitchen, and shuffled wildly through a glass bowl filled to the top with onions. A few seconds later, she gave up searching for whatever she was looking for and darted to the refrigerator.

Damn, if he wasn't starting to enjoy this mission. He hadn't laughed this much in a coon's age. Emma, if nothing else, was highly entertaining. He watched as she pulled out a small jar then yanked off the top and held it out in front of her. The smell of garlic drifted into the room.

He held up his hands in a peaceful gesture. "Emma, I'm not a vampire. All that stuff about them not casting a reflection in a mirror is all a bunch of made-up hooey, anyway."

She continued to hold out the garlic as she stared at him.

He turned back to the mirror. "See, there I am in all my glory, looking pretty damn good for a dead man, huh?" He bared his teeth. "Look, ma, no fangs. I do not have an urge to bite your lovely neck and drink your blood. As the kids nowadays say, lck. I have a reflection, as you can plainly see. It's full daylight; I'm awake and not curled up in a coffin sleeping. If the sun was out, it wouldn't burn me to a crisp. Ergo, I'm not a vampire, just your every-day run-of-the-mill Apprentice Angel. I forgot to, um, solidify my atoms; I guess you'd call it. All I have to do is think my image into being, and there it is. Have you ever heard of a vampire being able to do that?"

She lowered the jar, but kept the lid off. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

"Well, I can tell you one thing. You don't have to worry about 'going Hollywood' anytime soon. You've got enough imagination to fuel your stories for a long time to come."

"That's another thing, how do you know about my stories?"

"I told you, I've read your profile. I am not a spy. I merely wanted to read what you've done so far. It's an interesting concept; a group of teenagers brought together by psychic powers and using those powers to save mankind from aliens."

"Are you a...witch? Um, you know, a warlock?"

Running his hand through his hair, he shook his head.

"No, and don't get any bright ideas about tossing a bucket of water on me. It'll only piss me off more than you're already pissing me off."

"I'm pissing you off? Come on, you show up in my life after you're dead, start asking all these questions, disrupt my Christmas vacation, want to poke your nose in my personal stuff, and start trying to tell me what to do, and I'm pissing *you* off?" She snorted. "Get real, why don't you?"

"Emma, I'm here to help you. It's up to you whether you believe it or not, but I'm telling you I only have your happiness and emotional well-being in mind."

She turned and walked back into the kitchen. Picking up the lid to the garlic jar, she screwed it back on. "My emotional state is just fine, thanks, and I'm happy—deliriously happy, as a matter of fact. You can go back to wherever you came from. I think I can muddle through my own life without any help from you."

She turned yanked open the refrigerator door and slammed the jar of garlic in its proper place on the shelf.

"Uh-huh. So, you're telling me that wasn't you sitting on your bed last night, crying your eyes out and wishing you were dead?"

Emma felt the blood drain out of her face and her heart stutter in her chest. Grabbing the refrigerator door, she turned to glare at him.

"What part of 'go away' don't you understand? I don't want you here!" She banged her fist on the top of the door. "Damn it, I can't make it any clearer than that. What do I have to do to get rid of you?"

"For starters, you can get dolled up, go to the party, and have a good time. Meet new people, flirt with a man, hell, grab the first guy you see and try to give him a tonsillectomy. Better yet, bring him home, get naked and spend the next two days getting la—um, breaking a few rules, shall we say."

She snarled, then reached over and grabbed a knife from the rack sitting on the counter, pointing it in his direction. "Go! Away! Now!"

"You can't hurt me with that, Emma. I'm already dead, remember?"

Turning the blade, she rested it against the inside of her wrist. "I wasn't thinking of hurting you. If you think I came close last night, you haven't seen anything yet. Go away or I swear I'll do it!"

"Come on. What's so bad about your life that you'd think of throwing it away like that?"

"You should know. Didn't Gabriel tell you everything about me, right down to the kind of coffee I like and what I would do on a typical day." She tossed the knife in the sink, leaned against the counter. "What do I have to live for? Can you tell me that? Can you give me one good reason for not picking that knife up and slashing my wrists with it?"

He didn't say anything and she nodded. "Yeah, that's a tough one, huh? I've been trying to come up with a reason for the last two years myself and haven't been able to think of a single, solitary one."

She didn't see him move, but suddenly he was right in front of her. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "All right, Emma, I'll give you a reason. In fact, I'll give you several." He tipped her chin up with his finger. "Number one is your book, *Alien Eyes*. You're very close to finishing it, and trust me on this one—it needs to be finished."

She lowered her eyes. He gripped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed.

"Number two, that party I've been throwing in your face for the last hour. You need to get dressed and go. There is—are people there you need to meet."

She shook her head. He gripped harder and held her face still. "Open your eyes and look at me, Emma. Finally, there's Bill. He would be terribly disappointed if you killed yourself. You're a part of his Personal Heaven, but if you take your own life, your name will be erased from his list and he'll never get to see you again."

Jerking her chin away, she stepped aside and crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, then, serves him right. He shouldn't have died, should he?"

"It wasn't exactly his choice."

"Wasn't it? I told him not to go on that stupid hunting trip and he just laughed at me. Laughed! You'd think after twelve years he would have learned to at least listen when I told him I had a bad feeling about something." She slapped a hand down on the counter. "But, no, he packed his junk and went off with his buddies to play caveman in the woods while I sat home and worried myself sick! A week later, he swaggers in the door; bearded, filthy dirty, looking like some wild man. And his clothes are soaking wet from falling in the creek. Why didn't he take time to change them? Can you tell me that?" She stifled a sob with her hand. "He was smiling when he walked in the door. Smiling! 'Didn't I tell you nothing would happen?' he said." She closed her eyes. "Well, something did happen, didn't it? Two days later, he starts coughing but won't go to the doctor. A week after that he's in the hospital with pneumonia, and in two weeks he's dead. So, don't tell me it wasn't his choice!" She shoved her hand in her hair. "Men are so stupid."

"Hey!"

"Oh, don't even think about trying to argue with me about this. You're not exactly a shining example of making good choices, are you?"

He held up his right hand. "I'm completely innocent. My death is all the fault of the tobacco companies."

"Yeah, right, they tied you down and forced you to suck that smoke into your lungs until your body gave up the fight and had the audacity to succumb to cancer." She snorted. "Tell me another one."

"Okay, okay." Opening the refrigerator door, he peered inside, then shut it again. "God, I miss eating and drinking...and smoking." He leaned against the counter. "Here's the biggest reason of all. If you kill yourself, you'll never know what happens in the end. Aren't you the least bit curious to see how it all comes out? I am. Will Emma Bradshaw finish her book? Will she have the guts to send it to a publisher? Will she meet someone and risk her heart for love? I don't know about you, but I always loved finding out what comes next. Now, about that party, what do you say?"

She was shaking her head before he finished the question.

"Why not?"

"I'm not in a party mood. Besides, I'm no good at parties. All that socializing tends to make me want to run as far away as I can. I don't like going by myself and I hate trying to make small talk with people I don't know. More than that, I always feel uncomfortable, as if everyone's watching me and waiting for me to do something stupid."

"But you know these people. It's mostly the staff from the school, right?"

"Yep, and all those people will bring their...husbands, wives, partners...whatever. I'll be the only one there stag. That's no fun, so why should I go and make myself more miserable than I already am?"

"You should go because it's important for you to get out of this house and be around other people sometimes."

"I get out every day when school's in session."

"That doesn't count and you know it. Spending your day with a bunch of eight-year-olds can hardly be called socializing."

"Yeah, well, some of those eight-year-olds are a lot more fun than most grown-ups I know." She picked up her forgotten cup of coffee, took a sip, and grimaced. "Cold." Popping the lid off, she poured the coffee down the drain.

"Microwave broken?"

"No, the microwave's fine. I just don't like reheated coffee." She tossed the lid in the garbage, then walked outside to throw the cup in the recycling bin. When she turned and saw him behind her, she looked up at the sky. "We're supposed to get some real snow tomorrow. A white Christmas, won't that be nice?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess. You won't even consider going to the party?"

"Give it up, would you? Like I told you, I have my reasons for not going and you're not going to convince me any different."

He held out his hand. "Bet?"

She looked at his hand, then stuck her own out and shook. "Bet. What do I win when you lose?"

He held on to her hand as he smirked.

"You win another day with me and my sparkling wit and charming personality."

She smirked back.

"Nope. I win you going away and leaving me alone."

Squeezing her hand, he laughed.

"Deal. Now, what do I win when you lose?"

She squeezed back and jumped when her fingers sank through his and closed into a fist. She pulled her hand away and wiped it on her jeans.

"Oh, gag a maggot! That's gross!"

"Oops! Sorry, momentary fluctuation of my particles. Here." He held his hand out again and she took it gingerly. "Okay, Emma, when you lose—and take my word for it, you *will* lose—I get to read *Alien Eyes*."

"Okay, sure. Not gonna happen anyway, so what do I care?" She dropped his hand and walked back into the house. He was in the kitchen when she walked in. She slammed the door and glared at him. "I really wish you wouldn't do that!"

"Oh, come on, cut me some slack here. I'm dead, remember? I have to get my kicks any way I can."

"I'll give you some kicks."

He laughed. "I like you, Emma. I didn't think I would. In fact, before I came down here, I was sure I wouldn't. But you're different from most people—a little loopy, a bit sassy, but all in all, a very likeable person."

"If that's your idea of sweet-talk, I feel obliged to tell you, don't bother. You could go on like that until you're blue in the face, and I still won't go to that party."

Grinning, he took her hand and led her into the living room.

"Watch this." He waved his other hand in the direction of the fireplace, and though there were no logs or kindling on the grate, a fire blazed up immediately. "Cool, huh?"

"That's how you're going to get me to go to the party? Parlor tricks?"

"Forget the party. Let's sit down and talk for a while. Better yet, tell me a story."

"What? A story? What kind of story?"

He stretched out on the sofa. "I'm not picky. Tell me the one you tell your class every year about running away from home when you were eight. I like that one. It tickles my fancy, the idea of a child bundling a few shirts and a Chatty Cathy doll into a towel, climbing out her bedroom window, and heading off to the library to live. Go on, pull it up on the computer and read it to me."

Emma narrowed her eyes. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nah. You know, my wife used to do that. Read aloud to me, I mean. It always made me feel so...loved, I guess. Reading out loud is an art. Not many people know how to make a story come alive just by reading it." He yawned and snuggled down further in the cushions. "Read me a story, Emma."

"I don't get you. I thought you were so gung-ho on this party thing and now you want me to read you a story?"

"Yep, but not just any story—one of your stories. Any of them will do, as long as it's one of yours: *Runaway*, *No Monsters Allowed*, *Tiny Tim Turkey*, *Believe*. You've got a lot of them, so just pick one and let 'er rip."

He toed off his shoes and let them drop to the floor, then stacked his hands behind his head.

"Better yet, how about a chapter or two of *Alien Eyes*? Maybe I can give you a few pointers."

Chapter Four

Emma made a face. He was so smug, so confident he would get his way that she wanted to smack him. Since he would probably evaporate before her hand got anywhere near his cheek, she kept her hands at her side. Closing her eyes, she indulged herself with a little harmless fantasy instead; Mac tied to a stake, screaming as she lit the fire beneath his feet.

"Tsk, ts, Emma, such naughty thoughts. Remember, I can read your mind."

She kept her eyes closed and pictured him covered with tar and feathers, being lowered inch by inch into a cauldron of boiling oil.

"Ouch! There's that wicked imagination again. And you accused me of being a witch. Now, come on, let's hear a story."

She struggled against it, but she was tempted. Imagine getting advice from a best-selling author. It might be the push she needed to get her over this block and open her mind enough to let her finish the book. Then again, what if he didn't like it or found nothing but flaws or...

"Emma, I'm not going to nitpick it to death, for God's sake. Just start reading and I'll let you know at the end of each chapter what I think." He winked. "I promise I'll be gentle."

She shrugged then walked over to her desk, opened the center drawer and pulled out a hard copy

of *Alien Eyes*. When she looked back at the sofa, he had his eyes closed. Typical man, probably already asleep, she thought in disgust.

"I'm awake, Emma, and I promise I won't fall asleep. Angel Apprentices don't sleep.

Walking over to her favorite chair, she sat down, picked up the first page and started reading. At the end of the short prologue, she stopped and waited expectantly for his remarks. One eye opened lazily. "Good hook at the end of that one. More, please." The eye dropped shut again.

She slapped the pages down on her lap. "No way! You promised you'd tell me what you think. 'Good hook at the end' is not telling me what you think. Should I go into more detail about the planet? Should I leave out the Omiran words until later in the book? Should I just toss the prologue aside and start with Macy's story or the Orquad? What?"

He opened both eyes this time. "First, I don't think you need more detail about Omira. The story doesn't take place there; it takes place on Earth, so Omira isn't really important except that it's the planet where the aliens come from. As for the Omiran words, leave 'em in. They're very basic and you did a good job letting the reader know what they mean without bogging the story down with a lot of wordy definitions."

One hand came out from behind his head and he held it out with the thumb turned down. "You don't want to bore the reader that way. Leave the prologue in because it sets up the story, lets the reader know right off the bat what the conflict is going to be, and it also gives a good indication of the villain's personality."

The thumb turned up. "That Donahue's a nasty son of a bitch, isn't he?" He laughed wickedly and twirled an imaginary moustache. "Let's see, Macy's the protagonist in this first one, right? So, start the first chapter with her. I don't have a clue who or what the Orquad is." He held up his hand like a traffic cop when she started to tell him. "No, don't ruin it for me. I'd rather find out as the story unfolds."

She looked down at her hands and wondered how he knew *Alien Eyes* was the first book in a series of four. No one, not even her sister, Cassie, knew that she had rough outlines for three more, and an even sketchier idea for a fifth...provided she ever finished the first one.

Oh, God, who was she kidding? It would take something of a minor miracle for her to finish this book and a major one for her to get up the nerve to submit it to a publisher. If she did that, she would need a super-sized one for an editor to actually like the thing enough to publish it. That made three miracles at the very least.

She looked at Mac. There, reclining on her sofa, idly rubbing his hand over his belly, was the only miracle she was likely to see in her lifetime. And she wasn't sure he was a miracle. He might be no more than figment of her insane mind, and here she was dreaming about three more. What an idiot!

Mac snapped his fingers.

"Take it from someone who knows, Emma, the greatest gift any writer can have isn't talent or luck—it's faith in what they write. Kind of like what Molly's dad tells her in *Believe*, and I quote, 'If you believe, anything is possible.' You're self-sabotaging yourself, thinking the way you are." He closed his eyes and put his hands back behind his head. "Don't call yourself out before you even step up to the plate, Emma. If you believe..."

She took a deep breath, then blew it out in a raspberry. He opened his eyes and grinned at her.

"What? You don't like having your own words tossed back in your face? Better get used to it if you're going to be an author. All those self-righteous critics out there love nothing more than to cram your own words down your throat. Trust me on that one, sweetheart. Chapter One, please."

Rolling her eyes, she picked up the next page and started reading. Before she got to the end of the first paragraph, a strange feeling came over her and she squirmed in her chair. It had been so long since she'd felt it that she almost didn't recognize it, but it was there—a desire to be around other people. Raising her eyes to look at Mac, she found his were open and staring intently at her. She stopped reading and the feeling escalated, going from a slight yearning for companionship to a sudden undeniable craving for...people, friendship, and laughter—most of all, laughter. The crisp, fruity taste of wine flooded her mouth, followed by the spicy taste of some sort of grilled meat. Before she could identify what it was, she was distracted by a wonderfully alluring aroma—Old Spice. Her father had always worn Old Spice aftershave.

If she could be said to have an ideal man, it was her father. Funny, charming, handsome, tender, and gifted with a storyteller's natural ability to captivate an audience, he was, in her mind, the perfect man. When she was a young girl, she'd wanted nothing more than to grow up and find a man just like him.

As if in a trance, she stood up, walked over to Mac, and dropped the pages of her book on his chest. Ignoring his raised eyebrows, she said, "I think I feel like a party after all. I'm going to go get dressed."

Mac allowed himself a satisfied smile as she walked away. "Well, well, well, that was fun. I think I could get used to this." He rubbed his hands together, then jumped and squealed like a girl when Gabriel suddenly appeared in front of him.

"Christ! Don't do that!"

Gabriel's wings fluttered and he turned into a stern, chastising old-maid school teacher, right down to the misshapen dress, the glasses riding at half-mast on her nose, and the haughtily shaking finger. Mac would have bet his life—if he had one—that beneath the dress, her stockings were rolled down to just below her knees.

"Language, Mr. McNabb." Gabriel morphed into his usual persona; everyone's idea of the perfect angel, complete with glowing halo, pristine white robe, and lustrous white wings.

Mac swung his legs down to the floor and stood up. Though he might feign irreverence, it was near impossible not to stand when faced with such an impressive being. "How's it hanging, Gabe?"

The air quivered around him and Emma's living room was suddenly changed into a huge conference room, complete with a large lavishly polished table with five plush chairs on one side and one on the other. Michael, looking suspiciously like an angelic version of Donald Trump sat in the middle, flanked on the right by Gabriel and Haniel, on the left by Raphael and Uriel. They were all dressed in expensive looking business suits and had their immaculately manicured hands folded on the table in front of them.

Mac hid the feeling of dread behind a sneer. "Well, well, Heaven's Dream Team. Words fail me.

"Sit, please, Mr. McNabb." Michael/Donald waited for Mac to do as instructed. "Do you remember your training class regarding free will?"

Mac swallowed uneasily as he looked down at his lap. "Uh-oh."

"Uh-oh, indeed," Gabriel said.

"Silence, please, Gabriel. I'll handle this. Well, Mr. McNabb, do you?"

"Yes...sir, I do."

"And do you remember the part about a subject being guided, but never forced to do anything against their will?"

"Sure, but she needs to go—"

"That is your opinion, Mr. McNabb. Every subject must be given the opportunity to make up their own mind about what they will or will not do. This is a cardinal rule for all angels, even apprentices." He looked at Gabriel and shook his head. "And you were afraid he'd concentrate too fully on the writing angle of this mission." He turned back to Mac. "Angels must never interfere with a subject's will."

"I know, but this is important. She has to go to that party—"

"No, she has to *choose* to go to the party. If she does not, then we—you—must find a way to bring about the desired results without forcing her to do so by mind control."

"Free will is the penultimate gift God gave to all human beings, and it is vital to every mission," Gabriel said righteously.

Raphael, Uriel, and Haniel backed him up by nodding and intoning in unison, "Free will is God's greatest endowment."

Michael/Donald cleared his throat. "If a person's freedom of choice is taken away, it undermines God's vision of humanity. Forcing someone to do something negates everything we are taught."

Mac scowled, looked at each of them in turn, then speared an angry look at Michael/Donald. "I suppose you're going to point your finger at me now and say, 'Mr. McNabb, you're fired.' Don't bother. You don't have to, because I quit." He slapped his hands on the table and stood up. "I don't want to play this game any more. Actually, I never wanted to play in the first place, so I'm done. Banish me to Hell or whatever you do with Angel Apprentices who don't live up to your standards. I don't care. You can find yourself another patsy to do your missions for you." He started to turn, and found himself back in his seat before he made it halfway around. "Hey! Remember free will? Practice what you preach, buddy."

Michael/Donald heaved a heavy sigh and the trappings of Donald Trump fell away. The large, gleaming conference table disappeared, as did the plush business chairs. All of the Archangels were now seated on stools with no backs, in a semi-circle around Mac, who sat on a similar stool in front of them. They were dressed as simply as he'd ever seen them dressed; long, white robes with their wings neatly folded and thin rings of braided silver and gold floating above their heads.

"Mr. McNabb," Gabriel said. "We do not want to fire you, nor do we want to 'banish you to Hell,' as you so dramatically put it. We also do not want you to quit. We merely want to point out that you must follow our guidelines if this mission is to be a success. Ms. Bradshaw must be allowed to make up her own mind about her life and you are not to interfere."

"Not interfere? God damn, that's a laugh..."

"Mr. McNabb! Language!" Gabriel roared.

"What are you gonna do, wash my mouth out with soap? God damn, God damn, God damn!" On the last word, his mouth was flooded with a sickly taste and when he wiped at it, his hand came away covered in bubbles. He surged to his feet. Archangel or not, he wasn't going to put up with being treated like a child!

Gabriel's wings fluttered as he too stood and held his hands out in front of him, curling the fingers in and out in a "come ahead" gesture. Mac had every intention of doing just that, but he was pushed back and held in place by an invisible force.

Michael laid a hand on Gabriel's arm. "This isn't getting us anywhere. Clear the soap out of his

mouth, please.”

The disgusting taste of soap was replaced with a spicy mint flavor. Mac wiped his hand over his mouth and checked to make sure there were no more bubbles. Then he looked back at Michael.

“Mr. McNabb, let me put this to you in terms you’ll understand. This is a contract, and you have a deadline. If that deadline is not met, there will be a...kill-fee; I believe you call it in your profession. The fee will be yours to pay, not ours, and it will involve an increased number of missions before you are considered to be suitable for Heaven Proper. However, if the deadline is met, and you are successful, you will move on in your apprenticeship and there will be no extra missions required of you.” He spread his wings. “Do we understand each other, Mr. McNabb?”

“What happens if I voluntarily renege on the contract? If I refuse to do what you want? You gonna kill me again?”

“No, Mr. McNabb, we will not kill you again. You will be sent to AE.”

“What the hell is AE?”

“Angel Exile.”

“Oh, please. You guys need to stop watching so much reality TV”

“AE, Mr. McNabb, is very real and it isn’t what you might call pleasant. It’s dark and there are chains involved. It can also be costly, time wise. For every cycle of the moon that you spend there, one aspect of your Personal Heaven will be taken away. When they are all gone, you will be left for a time—I believe it’s a matter of a few hundred years or so—to contemplate whether you would like to change your status. If you do, then you must start building your reward system back up in order to be considered for entry into Heaven again.”

“Shit! Why don’t you just send me to Hell and be done with it?”

“We will not send you to Hell, because you don’t belong with Satan. You’re a child of God and he doesn’t give up on his creations easily—no matter how recalcitrant they are.”

Mac thought about it for a full minute. He didn’t want to give up his Personal Heaven. If he did, there was no chance of ever seeing Carmelita again and no chance of being left alone to write as much as he wanted. When he’d died, he’d had ideas for three books swirling around in his head, and he really wanted to write them. Writing, for him, was the only thing he’d ever wanted to do, the only thing that had the power to make him truly happy. Until Carmelita came along, that is.

He didn’t want to be an Apprentice Angel, didn’t want the responsibility of guiding Emma and setting her on the destined path for her life. But if he didn’t at least try, he would never get to his Personal Heaven.

When he finally spoke, it was belligerent at best.

“Fine! I’ll do it your way. Now, can we call an end to this stupid fiasco and let me get on with it?”

Michael smiled indulgently. “Certainly.” He waved a hand, the air shimmered, and Mac was back in Emma’s living room once again.

Emma was just coming out of her bedroom when Mac appeared beside the sofa. He was... sparkling like he was being transported aboard the Starship Enterprise. When he stopped flickering and was once more a solid figure, he scowled at her.

She took a step toward him.

“Oh, jeez, does that hurt?”

He rubbed a hand over his face.

“No, it doesn’t hurt. It is, however, a little off-putting. Christ, beam me up, Scotty. The Archangels are really into pop culture.”

“Are you okay?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t I be okay? I’m dead and all my molecules have just been torn apart and then reformed—but other than that, everything’s peachy keen with me. Is that what you’re wearing to the party?”

She looked down at the silky black pants and the multi-colored sequined jacket she had on.

“What’s wrong with it?”

He scoffed. “Why aren’t you wearing a dress? Some little black nothing that calls attention to your cleavage and shows off your legs.”

Tugging on the jacket, she said, “It’s winter in Maine and it’s snowing out there. My legs are nice and warm, and they’re going to stay that way.” She cupped her hands under her breasts. “I don’t have much cleavage to show off so what would be the point? Besides, I’m not going to this party to snag a man. I’m going because I suddenly felt the urge to be around some people—live people as opposed to dead people, I mean.”

“Well, hey, if you want to live up to the old-maid school teacher image, it’s no skin off my nose.” He sniffed as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m surprised you don’t keep a cat.”

She fisted her hands on her hips.

“What’s the matter with you? Did that Star Trek routine you just pulled scramble your brain or something?”

He flopped down on the sofa and tunneled his fingers through his hair.

"Sorry, I'm sorry. This isn't your fault and I shouldn't be taking it out on you. Dealing with Archangels pisses me off."

Emma walked over and sat beside him, taking his hand in hers, relieved when her fingers closed around solid warmth instead of slipping through.

"Hey, what happened? You want to talk about it?"

He squeezed her hand.

"Thanks. It's really nothing, just a little run-in with Gabriel and his cohorts. Look, Emma, you don't have to go to this party if you don't want to. Why don't you stay here and we can pop some popcorn and watch an old movie. Or maybe read some more of your book. Whatever you want."

She looked down at their joined hands.

"Do you believe in signs?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, little things that happen, and if you don't ignore them, change the direction of your life." She raised her eyes to his. "I don't know—karma, kismet, whatever. Those funny feelings people sometimes get that tell them not to get on that plane or not to turn to the right, but go to the left instead."

"Sure, I mean, I guess I believed in them when I was alive. I probably even followed some of them. Why do you ask?"

"Well...don't laugh, okay? When I was reading to you earlier? I got this feeling that I should go to this party. And then, something really weird happened. I, um, well...I smelled Old Spice aftershave lotion." She watched him closely. At the first hint of a smile, she was going to get up and walk out of the room, but he just raised his eyebrows. "My dad always wore Old Spice and when I smelled it, I remembered something he always said to me when I was feeling down." Dropping her gaze to their hands again, she hesitated.

"Well, don't stop now, what did he say?"

She raised her eyes, but didn't look directly at him. "Beware of hobgoblins, Emmy; they'll screw up your life if you let them."

"I don't get it—unless you're saying you think I'm a hobgoblin and I'm going to screw up your life."

"No, no. See, my dad loved Ralph Waldo Emerson. He used to read him a lot. One of Emerson's well-known quotes is something about a foolish consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds."

"Maybe that angel transport did scramble my brain. I'm still not getting it."

"My foolish consistency, well, at least for the last two years, ever since my husband died, is that I've been, um, pulling in on myself and closing everyone else out. You know, my sister is about the only adult person I really take the time to talk to any more. I mean, sure, I'll have conversations with the other teachers at school, but that's about it. I don't call my friends or meet them for dinner. I don't try to make new friends." She waved her hand at a pile of Christmas cards on the coffee table. "It's amazing, really, that stack of Christmas cards. I haven't bothered to send any out since Bill died, yet every year my friends and family send them to me."

He patted her hand.

"It's only been two years. Your friends, the ones that are worth anything at least, understand what you're going through. And they'll still be there when you get through it."

"Yeah, I guess. Anyway, it surprises me that they haven't given up on me. They've hung on no matter how much I try to shut them out."

"Okay, I get it now. So your hobgoblin is not socializing more, right?"

"Yes, it's become a habit to come straight home after school, hole up here in this depressing house and maybe, if I'm lucky, get a few pages done on *Alien Eyes*." She tugged at her pants. "I don't even go shopping anymore and I used to love to shop. I loved finding just the right dress or shoes for a party or other special occasion." She brushed her hand over the jacket. "I bought this a few weeks before Bill died. It was for a party we were supposed to go to that Christmas. Needless to say, I didn't go to the party that year, but I don't have any excuse for not going last year and I have even less of an excuse for not going this year. So, I may not like it and it may be hard, but I'm going. It's time to banish the hobgoblin from my mind." She stood up.

"Emma, are you sure about this? Really, if you don't want to go, then don't go. Stay here with me and you can practice carrying on a conversation with someone who's got a few more than eight years under his belt."

Leaning over, she kissed his cheek. "You're sweet, but I think it's time for me to do this."

Grinning, she winked. "My dad's probably turning somersaults in his grave."

She walked over to the foyer closet and pulled out a winter coat then turned and looked at him.

"Um, you're not going to show up at the party or anything, are you?"

"Not if you don't want me to."

She shrugged on her coat.

"Thanks, I appreciate it. It isn't that I don't want you there, it's just that I'm getting so used to having you around. I'm afraid I'll do something stupid like start talking to you, and, well...you know."

"Your friends will think you've wiggled out?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Okay, you have my solemn promise I won't suddenly appear at your side. But, Emma, if you have any trouble and need me, just...I was going to say call, but I'm not sure if my voice will carry over phone lines; so just think about me, and I'll be beside you in a flash."

"That's exactly what I don't want to happen, but thanks for the thought. I'll be okay."

"I'm sure you will."

"Don't wait up," she called as she walked out the door.

Chapter Five

Emma was late, but she told herself it was fashionable to be a little late to a party. Only the losers showed up right on time and stayed until the hostess had to shove them out the door. Besides, Susan was a widow, and probably understood the reluctance that dragged at Emma's heels as well, if not better, than Emma did.

But that didn't mean she could sit out here in her car forever, especially since she'd turned the engine off and the night was freezing cold. If she sat here much longer, she'd turn into a human Popsicle. Plus, the snow had stopped and the wind had died down, so she wouldn't have to wrap her scarf around her head and risk messing up her hair if she went in now. She gripped the door handle hard, took a deep breath, and pushed open the door.

She still had to give herself a little pep talk to get her feet moving. "Just do it, Emma. If you're uncomfortable and want to leave, you can. Susan will understand and no one's going to hogtie you and keep you here if you don't want to stay." Stepping gingerly out of the car, she continued to mutter to herself as she walked up Susan's freshly shoveled walk to the front door. "You can do this. Just smile." She bared her teeth, but it felt more like a sneer than a smile. "Oh, for heaven's sake, you wuss, smile like you mean it." Her lips opened in a full-tooth smile. "Jeepers, Em, tone it down. They'll think you're drunk or something. Smile, pretend someone just told you an amusing story—and stop talking to yourself!"

She reached for the doorbell, but before she could press it, the door opened and she was pulled inside the house and into an exuberant embrace.

"Emma!" Susan exclaimed. "You came! Oh, I was hoping you would."

It wasn't hard to smile like she meant it when she was greeted so warmly. She kissed Susan's cheek, then whispered in her ear. "I'm going to do my best to have a good time and not put a damper on your party. If you see me slipping, just give me your best evil-teacher look and I promise I'll straighten up."

Susan laughed and held her out at arm's length. "You'll do fine, but I promise I'll keep an eye on you. Here, let me have your coat."

Emma slipped out of her coat and peeked into the living room while Susan hung it in the foyer closet. Stifling a moan when she saw all the other guests, she closed her eyes and vowed she would not be a party-pooper. When Susan's hand slipped into hers, she opened her eyes.

Gripping Susan's hand in hers like a lifeline, Emma took a deep breath, then blew it out slowly and smiled at her friend. "Okay. Let's brave the lion's den, and then I want a really large glass of chardonnay."

Susan winked. "That's my girl. I think you know almost everyone, so why don't I introduce you to the ones you don't know, and then we'll get you that wine."

"I love a woman with a plan."

"Look everyone, Emma's here!"

Emma had to wonder what she'd been worried about. Susan was right. She did know almost everyone in the room and she waved as they all called out to her. Keeping the smile on her face, she exchanged pleasantries with the guests as she and Susan made their way across the living room and into the dining room where a lavish buffet table was set up. Susan stopped two times to introduce her to people she didn't know.

"I think that's it, except for Andrew. He's bound to be in the kitchen by the bar. Let's get you that wine. Then you can mingle all you want."

By the time they made it into the kitchen, several of Emma's good friends had joined them, each one buzzing about what they'd been doing since school had let out. Emma felt the warmth of their welcome clear down to her toes and remembered her words to Mac about the pants keeping her legs warm. Turned out, she could have worn a little nothing of a dress as he put it, and been toasty warm all evening. Well, except for the time it took to walk from the car to Susan's front porch.

"What are you grinning about, Em?" Pam Richardson asked.

"I'm just so happy to be here with you guys."

"We're really glad to see you here." Kelly Taylor handed her a napkin-wrapped canapé. "We missed you, Em."

Sandy Hickman patted her arm.

"We were beginning to worry we'd lost you forever."

Emma blinked to hold back the tears, then laid her head on Susan's shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I know I haven't been the best friend to all of you." One tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

A snowy white handkerchief seemed to appear out of nowhere and blotted the tear away.

"Here, here," a strange voice said. "No crying until after New Year's. It's a rule. What have you ladies been saying to her to make her cry?"

Emma's fingers closed around the appetizer, crushing it into an unrecognizable blob. She looked up—way up—into a pair of eyes the color of the sky on a warm autumn day. Mac's eyes, the eyes of an angel—or at least the eyes of the only angel she'd ever known. Deep blue, shot through with streaks of gossamer gray, they filled her with warmth and sent her thoughts reeling off in unexpected directions. She couldn't look away.

"Emma, this is my cousin, Andrew Dawson. Andrew, my good friend and fellow teacher, Emma Bradshaw." Susan took the flattened hors d'oeuvre from her hand, replaced it with a glass of wine. "I'll just get you another one of these, Emma. Why don't you go on into the living room with Andrew and I'll bring it right out?"

Andrew smiled and took her arm.

"Susie needs to get out of the classroom more. She treats us all as if we're a bunch of unruly students."

Emma couldn't think of a single thing to say, couldn't think of anything really but those compelling eyes. It was a good thing he was guiding her through the crowd of people, because she wasn't looking away any time soon. When she finally opened her mouth and spoke, she didn't have a clue whether her words made any sense.

"Um, I guess it's one of the hazards of the job."

"Not one you'd fall victim to, I hope."

The corners of his eyes crinkled appealingly when he smiled, and she found herself thinking of angel wings. She blinked, breaking the spell at last. "I'm not making any promises."

He steered her to the only corner of the room that wasn't completely overrun with party guests. Beside Susan's towering Christmas tree, the twinkling white lights reflected in the blue of his eyes and she was caught in the magic again. It was as if his eyes had been sprinkled with angel dust—the kind dreams are made of. Even through the haze of wonder, she could see he was tall with a muscular build and a confidence that seemed to radiate from his pores. His face was an engaging blend of sharp angles and rugged toughness, but when he smiled down into her eyes, the rough edges softened into boyish charm.

She was helpless in the face of that smile. Then he spoke, and his words made her heart do a funny little dance in her chest.

"I hate to start us out with a cliché, but where have you been all my life?"

Mac, with his propensity for clichés had, at times, amused her, annoyed her, or made her want to slap him. This man's words, corny though they were, filled her with anticipation and a heat she hadn't felt in a long time.

When Emma walked out the door, Mac looked up at the ceiling.

"You hear that, Gabe? I tried to get her not to go, but she wasn't having any of it. She wanted to

go, and she made up her own mind. I may have given her a little push in the beginning, but in the end she made the choice herself."

Emma's computer beeped and he looked over at it. On the screen was a cartoon of an angel leaping around in apparent ecstasy. The cartoon faded away and was replaced with the words, "Jumping for joy!"

Mac frowned.

"Nobody likes a smart ass angel, bub."

The words changed and flashed demandingly. "Read the book!"

"All right, all right, don't get your wings in a tangle. He picked up the hard copy of *Alien Eyes* from where he'd dropped it on the coffee table. Squelching a vague urge for a cold beer and a cigarette, he settled in to read Emma's masterpiece.

Several hours later, he placed the last page on the sofa with the others then picked them all up and tapped them on the coffee table to straighten them into a neat pile. Good book; in fact, he couldn't find anything he would change about it. Emma was a good writer with a spectacular imagination. He smiled. This might be easier than he'd thought.

So, what the hell was he supposed to do now?

He looked at her computer and considered. It didn't take him long to give in to the impulse to walk over and turn the thing on. As the screen lit up, he laid the pages neatly on the desk then pulled up the file for *Alien Eyes*. Scrolling through to the last page she'd written, he looked guiltily over his shoulder, then placed his fingers on the keyboard.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Mac jumped and did his best to look innocent when he turned around to stare at Gabriel.

"Do what?"

"Must we go through this again?"

"What?"

Gabriel heaved a sigh strong enough to blow Mac's hair back.

"Free will, Mr. McNabb. Surely, you haven't forgotten what we told you already." He waved at the computer. "That is a violation of Ms. Bradshaw's free will. Besides, if you finished the book for her, it wouldn't be hers, would it?"

"I was just going to give her a little push. She's having a problem deciding which way to go with the plot."

"Precisely. It's her problem and her solution to find. Tell me, what makes you so sure she hasn't already come up with a plan?"

"Has she?"

"I don't know, and it wouldn't matter if I did. This is her book, the child of her imagination. Do you think she'll appreciate you finishing it for her?"

"I'm not going to finish the thing. I was only going to get her going again, for Chr—crying out loud."

"Ah, you're learning. There's hope for you yet."

Mac stood up. "Look—"

"No, Mr. McNabb, you look. How would you feel if someone stepped into the middle of one of your manuscripts and finished it the way they wanted it to be written instead of the way you wanted it to be written?"

Mac snorted out a laugh.

"You haven't met many editors have you? They do that all the time."

"Not to that extent, no. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't it the job of the editor to help an author polish a manuscript, not to change it? They might make a suggestion or two, but they don't change anything without the author's approval. Right?"

"Okay, okay, sheesh. I was only trying to help."

"I realize that, but you must remember what we told you about free will. Ms. Bradshaw will finish the manuscript in due time—without any help from you."

"Then what the he—heck am I doing here?" Gabriel didn't say anything, merely raised his right eyebrow. "You mean I can't even make suggestions?"

"On the contrary, you can make all the suggestions you want, but it will be up to her to decide whether to take your advice or not. That's as it should be."

"All right. So what do I do now? She's at the party, and I imagine she's met the guy she needs to meet. Right?"

"You don't need me to answer that question, Mr. McNabb. Use your connection."

"Oh, right." Mac shut his eyes and concentrated on Emma. After a few seconds, he nodded.

"Okay, good, that's good. We're halfway home!" He held out his fist to bump knuckles, but when Gabriel only smiled at him, he let it drop back to his side. "Right. So, if I can't work on her manuscript and am only allowed to make suggestions, what do I do until she comes home?"

"Do what you want, but stay away from her book. She's the only one who can write it. Why don't you draft a sample query letter for her? Or a synopsis? She's going to need help with those when the

time comes.”

“Do you know how much I hate writing query letters and synopses?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Gabriel smiled and disappeared.

“Shit, God damn pissy angel.”

“I heard that, Mr. McNabb!”

Mac turned his back, made an obscene gesture then, giving himself a mental pat on the back for not voicing the sentiment behind the sign, studied Emma’s desk. Pulling open the center drawer, he smiled. Emma, it seemed, was as tidy with her work area as he had been with his own.

He took a moment to contemplate what Carmelita had done with his things after he died, then shook off the morbid thoughts and snatched a legal pad out of the drawer. The pencils in the holder were all Number 2 Ticonderogas, a personal favorite of his. On a whim, he pulled open the middle right hand drawer and laughed. She had a stash of chocolate, exactly where he’d kept his; far in the back, almost but not quite hidden behind a box of envelopes.

“Oh-ho, look-it here.” He picked up a Milky Way bar, another favorite, held it to his nose and sniffed. The temptation to open it and take an enormous bite was powerful, but he resisted. Stealing chocolate was on a par with plagiarism in his mind. Besides, the gooey concoction would sit like cardboard on his tongue and wouldn’t give him half the pleasure just smelling it did.

He shrugged and tucked the candy bar back into its hiding place. Picking up the pad and pencil, he walked over to the sofa, propped his feet on the coffee table and the pad on his knees. He stared off into space for a few minutes, running ideas through his mind, and rejecting them all. They sounded amateurish, predictable, and downright foolish, not up to his standards at all. Writing, like eating, drinking and smoking, was another pleasure that had been taken from him until he got to his Personal Heaven.

Sighing, he put the pencil down and laid his head on the back of the sofa, imagining what he was going to do first when he finally did make it. He wanted a cigarette, a stiff drink, and Carmelita—not particularly in that order. The cigarette would be all the better after Carmelita, but the drink would be a good way to break the ice, so to speak.

They’d had a happy marriage for the most part, but things were going to be much better for them in his PH. There would be no need to fight over his time, she’d be there when he wanted her to be there and go away when he wanted to work. He wouldn’t have to worry about drinking too much or smoking until his throat was raw while he struggled through a rough patch in a manuscript. He could eat whatever he wanted without worrying about his weight, his health, or how he would look on TV when he was on the road for his next book tour. He’d never have to write another query letter, or synopsis, and all his books would be snapped up for immediate publication. He wouldn’t have to deal with an agent or a publicist or an editor. Best of all, he could have Carmelita whenever he wanted her, whether she was in the mood or not, and he’d never have to take another little blue pill just to get it up.

He patted his groin. “Stick with me boy, we’re going to have it made in the shade.”

A rumble of thunder rolled through the room and he laughed.

“What’s the matter, Gabe, jealous?”

A bolt of lightning speared through the air, close enough that he felt its mild heat. “Christ, be careful!”

“You might want to check in on your charge, Mr. McNabb, instead of weaving prurient fantasies. I believe she’s about to have a break-through and how she reacts could very well dictate the outcome of this mission.”

Mac sat up, closed his eyes and pictured Emma in his mind. She was driving through the heavily falling snow. When he tuned into her thoughts, he listened for a minute, then grinned and transported himself into her car.

Chapter Six

Emma glanced in her rearview mirror and smiled when she saw the steady beam of Andrew's headlights behind her. He'd insisted on following her home because of the weather, which had worsened while they were inside at the party. The snow was falling steadily and the wind was blowing fiercely enough to cause white-out conditions at times.

Andrew had wanted to drive her home, but she'd managed to talk him out of that, telling him she had an early morning appointment the next day and needed her car. He'd looked so downfallen, she hadn't had the heart to turn him down when he had insisted on following her to make sure she got home safely.

She forced her eyes back on the snowy road, then turned the car's heater down to low. She was toasty warm, and at that moment didn't think she'd ever feel cold again. In fact, she couldn't even remember what it felt like to be cold. Just knowing Andrew was behind her and seeing his headlights in the mirror was almost as good as looking into his beautiful eyes.

Marveling at the feeling, she wondered if her body was trying to send her a message—or maybe it was her heart. She'd been fighting this strange coldness for almost two years, ever since Bill died, but one look in Andrew's eyes had banished the feeling.

Oh, heavens, was she falling in love?

Shaking her head over that, she assured herself she might be smitten, but she definitely wasn't falling in love. Besides, she didn't believe in love at first sight. To her, love was like growing a rose in Maine. With careful nurturing and tending, it might survive, but one careless misstep or below-average cold snap, and it was lost forever. Her chance at love had come and gone with Bill. Perhaps if she'd insisted he not go on the hunting trip, or if he'd listened to her and stayed home, they would've had a chance at happily ever after. But he'd laughed at her warnings and gone on his way—and ended up dying just as she'd said he would.

And she'd spent the last two years blaming God, then blaming herself, and finally, blaming Bill.

There's your hobgoblin, Emma—trying to find someone to blame for something that no one could have stopped or prevented. That's the way life is sometimes, totally unpredictable. The words flowed into her brain, seeping sluggishly into every nook, spreading warmth then solidifying into a rock-hard certainty.

Not God's fault, not mine, not Bill's, just a quirk of fate. She'd never thought about it like that before.

Was it possible she was being given another chance at love? If she was, would she take it or turn away and stay cocooned in her hum-drum little world?

"It's your choice, Emma. The only sure bet we're given in life is that it is what we make of it."

She jumped then turned her head and frowned at Mac.

"What are you doing here?"

"You only said you didn't want me at the party. You didn't say anything about the ride home. I was bored, so I thought I'd keep you company."

Emma glanced in the rearview mirror and smiled at the lights behind her.

"I have company. Now, go away."

Mac turned and looked, then raised his eyebrows.

"You snagged one, huh? Is he going to spend the night?"

"No, he's not going to spend the night. What is it with men that they're constantly preoccupied with sex? He was worried about me driving in the snow and asked if he could follow me home to make sure I get there all right."

"He asked? Why didn't he just follow you?"

She sniffed. "He's a gentleman. Unlike some people I know."

"I'm not a people, I'm an angel. The rules are different for us. I don't suppose you bothered to point out that this car has four-wheel drive."

"No, I didn't and I also didn't point out that the road crews..." She rolled her eyes. "Oh, boy, Mac. This man is... Oh, I don't know—he's fascinating. He's a psychology professor and he's taking the next year off to participate in some experiments at Princeton in—hold on to your hat—parapsychology! Can you believe that? We spent most of the evening huddled together in a corner of Susan's living room, discussing precognition, telekinesis, ESP...ghosts, for crying out loud." She waved a hand, then slapped it back on the steering wheel when the car hit a patch of ice and skidded briefly. "He's interested in it all. He *believes* in it all! He's like the perfect man for me—in terms of an information resource for *Alien Eyes*."

Mac snorted. "Yeah, right, you want to pick his brain. Come on, Emma; get real, that's not why you find him so fascinating."

She clenched her fingers around the wheel.

"I don't know what I'm doing. I mean, it's been years since I was interested in any man other than Bill. I don't know how this dating stuff works anymore. All I know is that when I look at him, I get this incredibly warm feeling that I haven't felt in a long time." She dialed the heater down another notch then

muttered, "Darn it, if I can't be truthful with an angel, then who can I be truthful with?"

"Got me. Spill."

She shot him a peeved look.

"Okay, you asked for it. I'm not just warm, I'm burning up. Is this what the kids mean when they say, 'she's hot for his bod'? And if it is, what do I do now? I'm a teacher; I have to act with a little decorum. I can't just throw myself at him and have some sort of...sleazy affair."

"Why not? What does being a teacher have to do with your love life? You had sex with your husband and it didn't interfere with your job. Why is having sex with this man different?"

She rolled her eyes again and Mac grabbed the steering wheel as the car veered to the right.

"Stop doing that. You're going to get us killed!"

"Yeah, well, you're already dead, and I might be better... Never mind. It's different because I was married to Bill." She waited a beat. "Like, duh."

"Right back at you. Get a clue, Emma. You're not going to lose your job just because you're sleeping with a man you're not married to."

"Uh-huh, you don't know much about small towns and their education systems, do you?"

"Jesus Christ, marry the man if you have to. Then have sex with him."

"I can't marry him, you moron! He lives in Boston and for the next year, he's going to be in New Jersey! What am I supposed to do, quit my job and chase after him?"

"Beats me. All I know is if you want him, you better reach out and grab him, because you might not get another chance."

She moaned, a long, low, sound of despair.

"I'm completely lost here, Mac! Tell me what to do, for God's sake."

He held up his hands.

"Whoa! No, uh-uh, absolutely not. I've already gone a round with the Archangels over that one. You have to figure it out for yourself, make your own choice, do what you think is right. I won't—*can't* tell you."

"What good are you, then? You're supposed to be my Guardian Angel, right?"

"No, actually I'm not your Guardian Angel. I mean, sure, you have one, but it isn't me."

"You said you were like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*. And Clarence was George Bailey's Guardian Angel." She smacked the steering wheel. "Act like a Guardian Angel, for pity's sake, and tell me what to do!"

"I'm not your Guardian Angel, Emma. I'm not here to watch over you or protect you. I'm here to help you work through this...crisis in your life. I can't tell you what to do!"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him pinch his thumb and forefinger together then drag them across his lips. He said nothing.

"Look, I have contradictory feelings about this. I need some help. If I get involved with Andrew, it can't go anywhere, not even to bed for a one-night stand. I'm not a young woman, who's free to sleep with any man she's attracted to on the off chance that I'll fall in love with him. I mean, I've had my chance at love, and I doubt I'll be given another one. Life just doesn't work that way."

Mac blew a raspberry through his tightly closed lips, but still didn't say anything. Running out of patience with him, she reached over and pinched his arm, but her fingers sank into his skin like a hot knife through butter. She balled her hand into a fist and punched his shoulder, falling sideways when her hand plowed through him without meeting any resistance at all. As she fell, her left hand yanked the steering wheel and the car lost traction. She jerked it back, but it was too late. The tires slid on the icy pavement, turning in a circle until it was facing the wrong direction. Andrew's headlights, which had instilled a feeling of warmth in her earlier, now made her shiver in dread. They were headed right for her car. She pumped the brakes, tried to turn and swerve into the other lane, but there was very little chance of stopping the out-of-control skid and avoiding an accident.

She yelled at Mac to get out of the car as Andrew's headlights came closer. Right before the heart-stopping screech of metal meeting metal, she heard Mac yell, "Oh, shit! Gabriel, help!"

"Emma! Emma, sweetheart, wake up! Come on, I know you can do it! Wake up!" The words, though whispered, were intense enough to get through the thick fog clouding her brain. So was the cold. She could feel the iciness of the pavement seeping through her thin slacks, but she couldn't summon up the will to move.

When Andrew's arms came around her, and she felt his warmth, she took a deep breath and willed her eyes to open, but they wouldn't cooperate. Desperate to move, she sent frantic signals to her arms then to her legs, but they were ignored. Nothing was moving.

"Oh my God, I'm dying. I don't want to die. Mac, oh God, Mac; are you there? Please, Mac, please, I don't want to die alone."

"Shh, Emma. Everything's going to be all right."

"What's going on? Why can't I open my eyes?"

"You're unconscious. Your air bag malfunctioned. Andrew pulled you clear of the car and laid you on the road to check you over. No broken bones, but you're gonna have a hell of a knot on that hard

head of yours.”

“Are you all right? Why didn’t you get out of the car when I told you to?”

“Hey, I’m okay and you will be, too. I’d be willing to stake my life on that, especially if Andrew has anything to say about it.”

“You don’t have a life to stake!”

“Okay, I’d be willing to bet my wings Andrew’s going to pull you out of this.”

“You don’t have any wings, either!”

“Christ, woman, just be quiet and let your mind come back. You’re not going to die. You have my word—and Gabriel’s—on that.”

“Emma, Emma, darling, open your eyes...oh, God, please, I just found her; don’t take her away. Please, I’ll do anything!” Andrew rocked her gently, dropping kisses on her cheeks, her temples, her nose, as he alternately pleaded then demanded. When his roving mouth finally landed on hers, she moaned.

“Yes! Thank you, thank you,” he mumbled without moving his lips and she managed to put an arm around his neck, but she didn’t have the strength to pull him closer like she wanted to.

“Emma?”

In answer, she moved her lips against his and opened her mouth in invitation. His immediate response sent a thrill through her body, chasing away the last of the cold, firing the blood in her veins. She threw her other arm around him and met his tongue with her own in a primitive dance of welcome coupled with an outrageous yearning.

Mac cleared his throat.

“Go away,” Emma muttered against Andrew’s mouth without thinking.

Andrew pulled back as Mac chuckled. Mortified, Emma said, “I, uh, I wasn’t talking to you.”

Andrew looked around. “I’m the only one here.”

“Well, no, actually, you’re not.” She could feel her cheeks heating, but went resolutely on with her explanation. “I know this sounds crazy, but I have an, um, angel with me. His name’s Mac and he’s standing right beside us.”

Andrew didn’t say anything, he just watched her expectantly. Knowing this might make or break their relationship, she went on, “He’s been with me since this morning and he says he’s here to get my life back on track, but so far we haven’t done much but argue.”

“Hey!”

She looked up and over Andrew’s shoulder. “Oh, hush! It’s the truth and you know it.” She looked back at Andrew. “He’s very ornery and he’s only an Angel Apprentice, which I don’t think makes him very happy.”

“I’m happy, I’m just...reluctant, I guess you might call it. Or maybe I’m just anxious to get this mission finished so I can move on.”

Looking back at Andrew, it surprised her to see him smiling at her. She thought he’d be looking at her like she was a lunatic. Maybe, if he could accept this, there was hope for them after all. She smiled back, but her amusement was chased away with his next words.

“Are you sure he’s an angel? He could be a ghost, or maybe a puca.”

Well, so much for Andrew believing her. He obviously thought she was a nutcase. Pulling her arms from around his neck, she crawled off of his lap, then rose awkwardly to her feet. When she swayed, Andrew stood up and put his arm around her.

“Emma, wait, let me help you. It might be best if you didn’t move around very much until the paramedics get here and have a look at you.”

She shook her head, tossed a scowl in Mac’s direction, then turned back to Andrew. “I’m fine. I need to get my cell phone so we can call this in.”

“Wait a minute. I’ll get it for you. Here, climb in my truck. We can’t drive anywhere, but it’ll be warmer in there than it is out here. At least you’ll be out of the wind.”

She pulled away from him. “Fine. My phone and my insurance card are in my purse. If you’d bring it to me, I’ll make the call and copy down all the necessary information for you.”

He smiled at her again; obviously the man didn’t have a clue that he’d just cut this relationship off at the knees.

“Aw, Emma, give the guy a break.”

“Leave me alone,” she muttered.

Andrew turned around and walked backward. “Did you say something?”

“No.”

He grinned.

“Hey, maybe it was your angel. Do you think, if he stays around long enough, I’ll be able to see him, too?”

She ignored him and climbed into the cab of his truck. Man, she was already sore. She’d probably be a walking train wreck by this time tomorrow. Groaning, she slammed the door, then leaned back against the seat and watched Andrew walk to her car. Mac appeared beside her.

“You okay, Em?”

"I feel like somebody worked me over with a baseball bat, but I'll be fine. Would you look at that thing?" She pointed toward her car.

"You're lucky you weren't hurt worse than you were."

"Yeah, I guess." But she wondered if it might have been better if she hadn't survived the accident.

Mac had no trouble reading her thoughts. "Emma, it isn't your time. You have things to do yet, and though it won't be easy, I promise it will be an adventure."

"What have I got to do?"

"You know I can't tell you that, but I hope you'll take it on faith and move ahead with your life after I'm gone—no matter what happens."

"You just want me to figure this whole thing out so you'll get your chance at your Personal Heaven."

"No...well, yes, I hope you do, but here's a newsflash for you, Em. I think you can have a long and happy life if you just put a little bit of effort into it."

She snorted.

"Sure, I'll do that. Who knows, maybe I'll become a best-selling author like you, or maybe I'll finally find a man who accepts me for what I am, get married and have a couple of kids—but don't hold your breath on that one. Oh, wait a minute, I forgot, you don't breathe any more. Well, don't bet your nonexistent wings on it, then."

"I must have really screwed this whole thing up if you're thinking like that. Stop crying the blues. It's depressing, not to mention, nauseating—even to an angel who hasn't had anything to eat in the last six months."

She smirked at him, then nodded toward Andrew who was climbing into her car through the passenger side door.

"Look at him. He's probably the last gentleman left on earth. And he's perfect for me, but I don't stand a chance because he thinks I'm nuts. I might have been able to hide my quirks from him for a while, but he knows now, and he'll jackrabbit out of here as soon as the cops show up. He won't be able to get away from the crazy lady fast enough—you just watch."

Mac kissed a tear off her cheek.

"Come on, Emma, I don't think you're giving him enough credit. Didn't you say he's interested in the paranormal and he believes in it?"

"Sure, but believing and seeing are two different—" She broke off and closed her eyes. "Oh my God, oh my God, Andrew!" Grabbing the door handle, she tugged as hard as she could, but it wouldn't open. "Andrew! What's the matter with this thing? Mac, get this thing open. We've got to get him out of that car!"

"Why? What's going on, Emma?"

She looked out the rear window.

"I saw it! Help me, Mac! We have to get him out now!"

Mac looked behind them, but didn't see anything. He reached around Emma and pulled up on the lock. It didn't budge. "Must be jammed from the wreck." Scooting over to the driver's side he tried that door, but it wouldn't open either.

"What did you see? God damn it!" He stabbed at the button to try to roll down the window. When that didn't work, he looked at the ignition. "Shit! Where are the keys?"

Emma reared back in her seat, lifted her legs and tried to kick out the windshield. Her feet bounced off the glass without so much as cracking it. She tried again with the same result. "Damn it! Safety glass! Mac!" She grabbed his arm. "You have to go over there and get him out. There's a car heading in this direction. The driver's going to come around the curve and lose control. He's going to ram into my car." She was staring out the back window. "There! I can see his headlights. Please, Mac, please. Get him out! My car's going to explode and Andrew'll be killed!"

Mac shot a glance out the back window, muttered, "Shit!" then disappeared. He was back in a flash. "Emma, he can't see me or hear me. I can't do anything."

She buried her head in her hands.

Mac put his arm around her. "Emma, listen to me. You can warn him. Send him a message telepathically. It's his only chance."

She dropped her hands and looked at him.

"I've never done that before and he's not telepathic. There's nothing I—"

"Just do it, Emma. You have to try, or he's going to die."

She clutched her stomach then nodded. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and concentrated on Andrew. "*Get out of the car now. Get out and move as far away as you can.*"

She opened her eyes and stared through the blowing snow, repeating the message over and over in her head, willing Andrew to appear outside her car. When he finally did, she closed her eyes again briefly, then glanced behind them.

The headlights from the oncoming vehicle were stronger now, and Andrew was still standing beside her car, not moving. "*Get away, get away now.*" He moved, staring toward his truck in

astonishment. Then the lights rounded the curve and Emma moaned. “*Get away, Andrew!*” The car was coming fast, obviously out of control, and it swerved until it was pointed straight at Andrew. At the last minute, he threw himself to the side and rolled into the trees bordering the road. The car stuck hers with a terrible crash and exploded on impact.

Emma pounded on the window and yelled Andrew’s name, then turned to Mac. “You have to go check to see if he’s okay. When you come back, see if you can’t bring his keys back with you. Unless they fell out in the wreck, he has to have them in his pocket.”

Mac disappeared as Emma dropped to the floor and ran her hands under the seat, searching frantically for the keys.

Not finding anything, she pulled herself back on the seat, muttering to herself about the idiocy of taking the keys out of a wrecked car that was clearly beyond any hope of ever being driven again. She turned around and spotted the small inset window in the back windshield of the truck. Why hadn’t she thought of that before? She broke a nail freeing the latch, but she got it open and shoved her body through as she yelled first for Andrew, then for Mac.

“Emma!” Mac’s voice was welcome, but it wasn’t the voice she wanted to hear.

“Where’s Andrew?”

“He’s over here in the trees. That flying leap he took saved his life, but it also broke his leg.”

Emma scrambled over the side of the truck’s bed and followed Mac’s voice. She found them in a matter of seconds and dropped to her knees beside Andrew. He was sitting up, leaning against a tree, and massaging his temple as if he had a horrible headache.

“Andrew, are you all right?” His left leg was bent in a place where it shouldn’t bend. “Oh, ouch. That looks like it hurts.”

He looked up at her. “Not as much as it would hurt if you hadn’t warned me.”

Her mouth fell open.

“You got it! I mean, you heard me? I wasn’t sure you would because I couldn’t get the window to roll down. Wow, I must have really been shouting, huh?”

He cupped her cheek with his hand. “No, Emma, you weren’t shouting. You know it and I know it. You got your message across without even opening your mouth.”

She didn’t say anything, just watched him warily. *Well, here it comes*, she thought. *Exit stage left away from the wiggled out woman*. He was going to walk out of her life as fast as he’d walked in. She looked down at his leg. Well, maybe she would be the one to walk away, but it was all the same in the end, wasn’t it?

“Emma,” he whispered and she looked at him.

“Look, you don’t have to say—”

He silenced her with a kiss, a warm, understanding, accepting kiss that promised everything she’d ever wished for.

Mac cleared his throat.

“I hate to interrupt, but I think I’m done here.”

Emma opened her eyes and looked at Andrew. He was watching her, his beautiful eyes were warm and full of passion and distracted her until Mac cleared his throat again. She looked up at him.

“Where are you going? We’re not through yet.”

Mac smiled.

“Oh, yes, we are. It’s been a real pleasure, Emma. Enjoy your life.”

“Mac? I don’t understand. I still don’t know what to do with *Alien Eyes*.”

“You’ll figure it out, with a little help from your friend.” He gestured toward Andrew. “Believe in yourself, Emma, that’s the most important thing.” He winked. “And beware of those hobgoblins.”

She smiled as she held out her hand. “I think I’m actually going to miss you. I wish I had a bell to ring. Maybe if you got your wings, it would help you on your way to your Personal Heaven.”

He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“Don’t believe everything you read...well, everything you see. That’s a lot of bull...hockey. Only angels I’ve seen with wings are the Archangels and I’m pretty sure they have them just so they can lord it over us lowly Apprentice Angels. Besides, I’m going for the gold—halo, that is. That’s the key that’ll unlock the gates to my Personal Heaven.” He kissed her hand again. “Tell Andrew he’s a very lucky man.”

With that he was gone.

“Emma?” Andrew turned her face to his. “You okay?”

She laughed. “Yes, Mac’s gone. He said to tell you—well, never mind. I’ll tell you later.”

“I wish I could have seen him. Do you know how lucky you are to have had an encounter with an angel?”

She looked into his eyes, felt the now familiar warmth and smiled.

“Yes, now that you mention it, I do. Come on. Let’s see if we can get you up off of this cold ground before you catch pneumonia.”

Andrew gripped her hand. His answer was enough to make her feel as if she’d just earned her own golden halo. “I’ll get up, but I’m not going anywhere—not for a long time.”

The End

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Author Bio

Caitlyn Hunter recently moved with her husband from Maine to western North Carolina. Though she misses the cold and the snow, she's happy to be back in the South, surrounded by family and her beloved Blue Ridge Mountains once again.