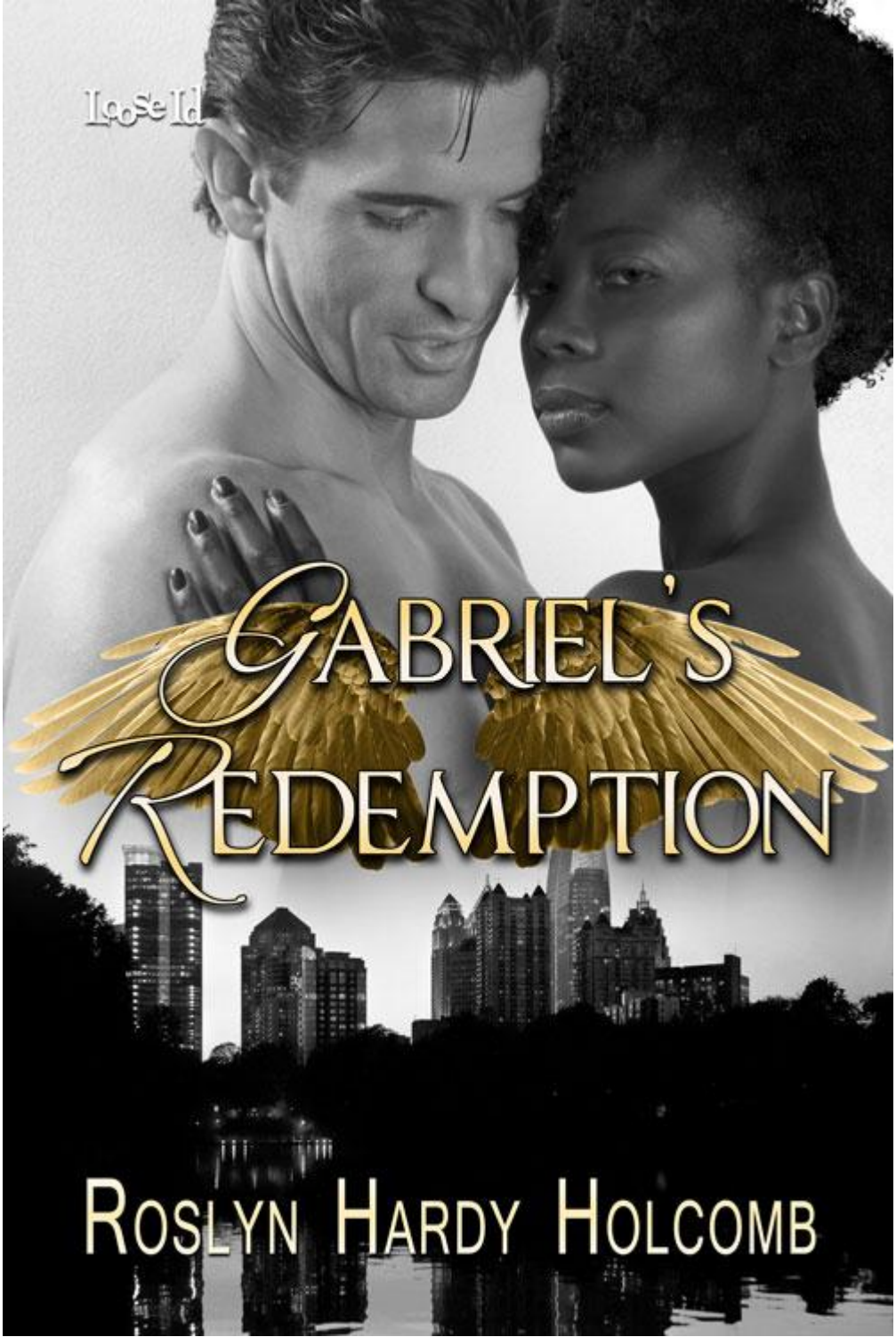


Loose Id



# GABRIEL'S REDEMPTION

ROSLYN HARDY HOLCOMB

# *Gabriel's Redemption*

*Roslyn Hardy Holcomb*



[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## **Gabriel's Redemption**

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eISBN 978-1-61118-400-6

Editor: Rory Olsen

Cover Artist: Valerie Tibbs

Printed in the United States of America

**Loose Id.**

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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## Dedication

*For my mama, Edith Smith Hardy (1929-2002), whose beautiful voice and love of spirituals inspired this book. Yes, Mama, I know I deserve a “church pinch” for writing dirty books.*

## Author’s Note

*Spirituals are a variation of folk music. Both music forms share a tendency toward improvisation. The song quoted below, “Ain’t No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down,” has been covered dozens of times by various artists, many of whom changed the lyrics in keeping with that tradition.*

## Chapter One

*Well go down yonder Gabriel.  
Put your foot on the land and sea  
But Gabriel don't you blow your trumpet  
Until you heard from me*

—Brother Claude Ely, *"Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down"*

The blow to the back of his head caught Gabriel unawares, dropping him to his knees on the unforgiving asphalt. Barely lucid but knowing he was in extreme danger, he sprang to his feet, blindly swinging his trumpet case at his assailant. In the dim light of the empty parking lot, it quickly became apparent there were at least two people attacking him. Even as the case slammed into an arm with a satisfying *crunch*, the other attacker grabbed Gabriel's arms, preventing him from doing further damage. Gabriel immediately brought the heel of one of his heavy boots down on an instep. The man restraining him cried out in pain. The first man, holding his left arm with his right hand, spoke up. Gabriel was so focused on getting away that it took him a moment to understand what the man said.

"Peace, brother. We mean you no harm."

"Well you sure as hell have a fucked-up way of showing it," Gabriel said, still struggling to free himself.

The man glared at the man holding Gabriel. After a moment he continued speaking. "I'm sorry that was an unfortunate...miscommunication. We just need you to come with us. I promise no harm will come to you."

Gabriel stopped struggling, having realized that continued resistance was only tiring him out and he needed all his strength if he was to escape. Plus his head was already throbbing like a son of a bitch, and moving around only made it worse. He was pretty sure he'd broken that guy's arm, so he shouldn't present any further problem, but the one holding him was a behemoth and showed no signs of tiring anytime soon. What the hell did they want? Surely if they meant to rob him, they would have done so, though they'd have to kill him to take his horn. It was a custom job, and he was still missing meals to pay for it. Both men were dressed similarly in white button-down shirts and dark, crisply pressed trousers. He shook his head, then immediately regretted it as he was hit by a horrific wave of vertigo. Once he'd regained his composure and overcome a disturbing urge to hurl everything he'd eaten for days, he addressed the two men holding him.

"Sorry, guys. I'd really like to accommodate you, but Oprah says never go to crime scene number two. And I always try to obey our Lord and Savior, Oprah Christ."

Both men flinched at his words. "What does Oprah have to do with this? Your blasphemy is offensive."

Gabriel considered commenting on the irony of two men who'd just beaten the shit out of him being offended by a little blasphemy, but decided against it. "I have to do what Oprah says. Man, you should see my skincare regimen." Gabriel kept up his patter, his thoughts whirling frantically as he tried to come up with a means to escape. Just when he'd decided that he'd just have to try to fight his way out, the headlights of a large pickup truck flooded the parking lot. Before Gabriel could even get his bearings, his two attackers fled. It wasn't until he heard the roar of a car engine come to life that he realized that they must have had a vehicle parked somewhere in the shadows of the parking lot. Gravel from the many attempts at patching scattered in the car's wake. Predictably, the light over the vehicle's tag was out, rendering the tag illegible. Gabriel doubted his ability to read given his head injury; besides, it was probably a rental anyway.

He walked over to the truck as Pink, owner of the nightclub where Gabriel had just finished playing, stepped out.

"What the hell is going on here?" Pink's frown deepened as Gabriel began to gingerly probe the back of his head. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Those two guys just tried to kidnap me."

"Kidnap you? They must not know how much money I pay you."

"Yeah, I know." Now that his adrenaline level was dropping, the pain in Gabriel's head had intensified to an almost unbearable level. "You mind not shouting?"

"I wasn't," Pink said, though he lowered his voice anyway. Despite his size, Pink's voice was soft, almost musical, with an accent Gabriel had never been able to place. "Where are you hurt?"

"Mainly my head. I suspect I'll have a killer shiner in the morning. And I caught a punch to the kidney that will probably have me pissing blood for a minute—"

"Don't you think you should go to the ER?"

Gabriel shook his head, then grabbed it as it threatened to splinter like a piñata. "No. No. It's not that bad, really. If I could just go home and put some ice on it, I should be okay."

"At least let me take you home. You're in no shape to drive."

"I'll take you up on that," Gabriel said.

Pink started walking toward the nondescript red brick building that housed his club. He'd never bothered to put any identifying signage on it; his customers came to him entirely by word of mouth. "You'll probably need a tub of ice. Let me just get some from the machine inside. I doubt that dive you live in has an ice maker."

Gabriel frowned, unsure at the moment whether he even had a refrigerator. "That might be a good idea."

\* \* \*

Gabriel pulled the bedcovers over his ears in a futile effort to muffle the loud knocking at his front door. He sighed in relief as the noise ceased, and he laid his aching head back on his pillow. The respite was unmercifully brief, however, and he threw the blankets aside and stumbled out of bed, determined to disembowel whoever dared disturb him this early in the day. All his friends knew he worked nights, and even his neighbors made an effort to keep noise to a minimum. That last thought stopped him dead in his tracks. He turned and picked up the sizable handgun Pink had given him last night. After ensuring that the clip was still in place, he put it back on the table and picked up a pair of jeans from where he'd thrown them on the floor the previous evening. He grabbed the gun again. When he reached the front door, he stood to one side as he opened it. He paused, not sure what he'd expected, but this wasn't it. He looked down at one of the most unusual women he'd ever seen. She was short, petite even. He wasn't a tall man at five nine, and he still had more than half a foot on her. What she lacked in height, she more than made up for in hair. A huge afro that looked as though its owner simply let it go where it pleased more or less dwarfed her tiny frame. Fortunately she'd restrained it somewhat with a brightly hued scarf, or he would never have been able to see her face. And what an interesting face it was. Oval shaped, it was dominated by a pair of eyes so dark they were like staring at onyx; only unlike that gem, they were luminous as though lit from within. They were set off most attractively by a bright blue jewel... What the hell did they call those things—bindi?—which was centered right between her brows. Her skin was dark as well, so dark that it was as though it absorbed light and then reflected it back. He stared at her with the sudden knowledge that he'd known her before, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out where or when. So intrigued by her appearance, Gabriel failed to notice that she'd spoken until she reached up to touch his battered face.

"Oh no. They've already gotten to you," she said in a low, raspy voice so arousing that he actually gasped in response. He was so focused on his cock that it took him another moment to realize what she'd said.



Great, the most gorgeous woman he'd seen in a long time was either crazy, or somehow affiliated with muggers. Neither option boded well for them. "They who?" he asked, not bothering to move her hand from his face. It felt good, soothing and stimulating at the same time.

"The Redeemers. I knew they'd come for you."

"Who are they? A gang or something?" Gabriel frowned. He was familiar with most of the gangs and assorted lowlifes that peopled his less-than-optimal neighborhood, and he'd never heard of the Redeemers. He sighed when she stepped back, finally taking her hand away. He had an almost irrepressible urge to grab it and put it back against his face.

"Look, can I come inside? This is hardly a conversation I want to have in a hallway."

Gabriel shrugged and stepped away from the door. Even in his current battered state, he was pretty sure he could take on one undersized girl. He looked up and down the hallway of what even the most charitably minded could only call a tenement building before he gestured her into the apartment. Still holding the gun in one hand, he closed the door with the other, then leaned against it.

"Sorry I can't offer you anything to eat or drink. I've been working quite a bit and haven't been to the market in forever." The girl licked her lips nervously and nodded her head as Gabriel continued. "You might want to start off by telling me who you are and who the hell these Redeemers are and most importantly what the hell any of this has to do with me."

"Of course. Of course. I'm Ryannon, Ryannon Brooks. I have a place over in Little Five Points. I read tarot. Tell fortunes. That kind of thing."

Gabriel raised a hand to his head where the pain had suddenly intensified. "Please don't tell me you're a psychic or some bullshit like that."

"No. No. Gabriel. I'm not a psychic, I'm a knower."

"What the fuck is a... Wait. How did you know my name?"

She raised her hands, which caused the armload of bracelets she wore to jingle attractively. "Could we sit down? You don't look so good, and..."

Gabriel gestured toward his battered sofa while he sat down in one of the mismatched chairs that flanked it. After ensuring the safety was engaged, he carefully placed the gun on the coffee table.

She nodded at the gun. "I'm glad you've got that. They'll be back."

"They who? Could you please tell me what you're talking about?"

"The Redeemers are a cult."

"You mean of the grape Kool-Aid, purple Nike variety?"

"I probably wouldn't put it that way, but yeah, they're a cult," she said.

"And this pertains to me how?"

Ryannon leaned back on the sofa and crossed her legs, bringing Gabriel's attention, which had been focused on the gamine beauty of her face, to her legs, and then he found he couldn't look away. For such a tiny thing, her legs were surprisingly long and shapely, and set off by denim capris and wedge-heeled sandals, they all but made his mouth water. The light cotton blouse she wore over the capris was belted, emphasizing a tiny waist and small breasts.

"I suppose you could call the Redeemers a doomsday or End of Days cult. Their name is The Church of Jesus Christ With Redemption to Come."

Gabriel sighed. "Ryannon, as much as I'm enjoying this conversation, not to mention the opportunity to check you out, I had a less than stellar night last night, and I had really looked forward to spending my day in bed making love to my ice pack. Now unless you want to take its place, could we please just get to the point?"

"They think you're an apocalyptic trigger."

Gabriel closed his eyes. No way in hell did he want to hear the rest of this bizarre story. She was batshit crazy, but also crazy-hot. He sighed. Why was that always the way? The hotter they were, the crazier they were. After a moment, he

opened his eyes again. It wouldn't be the first time his cock got him into trouble. If worse came to worst, he could always duct-tape her mouth.

"Do I want to know what the hell an apocalyptic trigger is?"

"They think you will signal the End of Days."

Gabriel laid his head back on his chair. "See, you name a trumpet player Gabriel, and folks get all kinds of crazy ideas."

"They want you to bring on the final battle of Armageddon."

He couldn't help but laugh. "So my mom is right. I am the Antichrist."

Ryannon gave him an annoyed look. "I'm not even going to think about why your own mother would call you that," she said with a wry twist of her lips. "There is no such thing as an Antichrist. At least not in the way most people mean it."

"And how would you know that? Oh yeah, that's right, you're a seer or a knower or some such shit. If I hadn't had a headache before, I sure as hell would have one now. I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"It's a very long story. Bottom line is, they think you can bring on the Apocalypse."

"And they're trying to kill me before I can do it?" Gabriel asked, rubbing the large knot on the back of his head.

Ryannon shook her head, looking at him as though he was a bit slow-witted. "No. They want you to bring it on."

After closing his eyes for a moment, Gabriel brought his hand around from the back of his head to pinch the bridge of his nose. "I know I've smoked some bad shit in my day, but I could've sworn I was clean last night."

"It's not something you smoked. They're an End of Days cult. Their leader, Hezekiah, has told them that the time has come."

"So why do they need me, and what gave them the idea that I could do this?"

"Me."

“You?” Suddenly he’d had enough. He could only tolerate so much of the crazy, even in pursuit of pussy. He rose swiftly to his feet, though he immediately regretted it. The room seemed to sway for a moment before he regained his equilibrium. “All right, that’s it. You’ve got to go.”

Ryannon stood up as well, a look of concern clouding her pretty features. “I’m sorry, Gabriel. I know this all sounds nutty, but you’ve got to listen to me. You’re in a lot of danger.”

Gabriel grabbed her arm in an attempt to hustle her out of his apartment. “Damn right I’m in danger. My head is liable to fall off if I listen to any more of this bullshit.” Ryannon was surprisingly strong and difficult to move for a woman her size. Of course, she didn’t have a bitch of a headache like he did. After several unsuccessful attempts to move her to the door, he finally stopped trying and slumped back into his seat. “You’ve got fifteen minutes, lady, to convince me. Then you’re out of here, and I get to go back to bed.”

She nodded and returned to her seat.

“Okay, it’s complicated.”

“No shit. Just tell in me in simple language what the fuck is going on.”

“You’re sort of like an angel.”

Gabriel grabbed his head with both hands, immediately regretting that he hadn’t followed through with putting her out of his house. “Like an *angel*? How the hell can you be like an *angel*?”

“You’ve got to stop asking questions and let me tell you,” Ryannon said in an irritated tone. Then she embarked on a tale that made Gabriel wish he had a whole bag of seriously good shit.

“The Redeemers believe the End of Days is imminent, but they need the trigger to bring it about.”

“How?” Gabriel began, but she interrupted to rush on.

"Back when I was a kid and too stupid to know better, I told them about the existence of triggers. Angels really."

Gabriel couldn't believe he was participating in this conversation. "I can assure you I'm no angel. My own mother calls me demon spawn, and she should know. I even have sex." He leered at her suggestively.

"I said you were an angel, not a saint."

"Yeah, but I've done some pretty freaky shit. Surely that disqualifies me from angeldom?" If he'd hoped to surprise her, he was disappointed. She didn't bat a lash.

"God's been around for a while. I'd imagine it takes a lot to surprise him," she said with a shrug.

"Okay, if I'm an angel, why don't I have any wings?" Might as well go along with the crazy. Besides a little logic could hardly make the situation worse.

"You do. Have you ever tried to use your wings?"

"Seeing as how I'm not psychotic, or at least I wasn't before I opened the door to you, it never occurred to me that I might have wings."

She sighed, the breath streaming out heavily through her nose. "Okay. Focus, concentrate on your wings. If you want them, they'll appear," she said with exaggerated patience.

Gabriel stared at her for a long moment. As if this day couldn't get any crazier, now he had wings? She just stared back, obviously waiting for him to do...something. Clearly she was nuts, and apparently he was too, because he found himself focusing on wings as though it were the most normal thing in the world. Besides, once he finished this little experiment, he was getting her out of his house even if he had to call for backup. He closed his eyes so he could concentrate, and suddenly they were there. He felt them before he saw them, but he opened his eyes, and they were there. Nothing at all like what he'd expected. They weren't big and feathery like a bird's wing; instead they shimmered in a way that was almost ephemeral.

Gabriel rose to his feet, looking from one wing to the other. “What the hell?”

Ryannon looked up at him, her hands clasped in delight. “Oh Gabriel, they’re beautiful.”

“They’re wings.” Gabriel struggled to get the words out.

She frowned. “Of course they’re wings. What were you expecting?”

Gabriel stared down at her in disbelief. “Look, woman, you came to my house and told me I’m an angel. Did you really expect me to believe it?”

“Why not?”

“Why—look, just tell me the rest of the story,” Gabriel said. He couldn’t take his eyes off the wings, which extended nearly a foot beyond each of his shoulders and descended elegantly down to his feet. They looked somewhat incongruous with his destroyed jeans, not to mention his bare feet and chest. He felt that he should be wearing a long, flowing snow-white robe of some sort. “Do I get a flaming sword?”

“What?”

“Well, I got wings, I figured that maybe—”

“Wrong angel. That’s Michael. You’re Gabriel, the bringer of good tidings.”

“Okay,” Gabriel said as though that made perfectly good sense. “Go on with the story.”

“Hezekiah has been predicting the end of the world for years, back before I was even born, but he’s never given a date until now. Last year, he started saying it would happen this year. And after all this time, he finally gave a date.”

“Wait a minute,” Gabriel said, barely taking his eyes off his wings. “How do you know so much about these Redeemers? Are you one?”

Ryannon shook her head. “No. My parents were, but they left when I was still a kid.”

“Why? I mean, other than the obvious.”

Ryannon’s chest rose slightly as she took a deep breath followed by a heavy sigh. “I’ve known things all my life. Hezekiah would preach these long sermons

about Gabriel and his trumpet and meeting him in the air. One day, I just knew that wasn't the way it was going to be and said so."

She had his undivided attention now. "That probably wasn't very smart. What did he do?" Gabriel said.

"Told my folks I was a witch and tried to burn me alive."

"Whew. How old were you?"

"Eight."

"So, are you?"

"Am I what?" she asked, a frown marring the richly dark skin of her forehead.

"A witch."

"You mean to tell me you don't believe in angels, but you believe in witches?"

Gabriel gave her a pointed look as he gestured toward his wings. "Hello? Wings? Unless I'm on a really bad acid trip..." He paused as she rolled her eyes. "You clearly know something. So, are you a witch?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm not a witch."

"And you're not psychic..." He paused again.

"Really, I don't know what I am, if there's even a name for it. I've never met anyone like me before. I don't see things. I can't tell the future. I just know stuff." She rubbed her forehead, then added almost as an afterthought. "Oh, and I see auras."

"Auras?" He'd always thought this kind of stuff was freaky, and had paid it little attention. Now that he knew he had wings, it all seemed amazingly commonplace. "You know, people's colors? I can tell if they're sick or lying or just a bad person."

Gabriel rose from the chair and walked over to a large desk that took up most of one wall. The sophisticated electronics housed there stood out against the dingy walls of his apartment. He did some music production work from time to time and had several keyboards as well as various tuners and speakers. At the moment,

though, he was only interested in the state-of-the-art computer that sat in the middle of the desk. He sat down in the office chair that faced the computer.

"I'm absolutely stunned that you haven't been robbed blind in this neighborhood," Ryannon said.

"I have people."

"You'd have to have a freaking armada to keep this stuff from being swiped by Pookie, your friendly neighborhood crackhead."

Gabriel chuckled at her rueful tone. "What was the name of that church again?" he asked over his shoulder.

"The Church of Jesus Christ With Redemption to Come," Ryannon said as she walked over to join him. "I don't think you'll find much. Hezekiah keeps a low profile."

"Google is a wondrous invention," he said as he tapped the name into the search engine. Unfortunately she was right. There was very little information. There was an occasional blurb when the church did some good deed or another, but very little concrete information on them, not even so much as a photograph. Even their address was a PO Box.

"I told you," she said as he turned away from the computer in disgust. "They keep their business on the down low. They mainly recruit by word of mouth, so very few people even know about them."

They walked back over to the seating area and resumed their previous positions.

Gabriel took another deep breath. "I really don't think I can process any more of this right now."

"I understand, but you've got to get away. Hezekiah will be back for you."

"Where exactly am I supposed to go? And why can't we simply go to the law with this? After all, they did kick my ass in the parking lot last night," Gabriel said.



“Well, for one thing, having an aversion to straitjackets, I tend to keep the particulars of my talent to myself. And unless you’re planning to tell the cops about your recent feathery additions,” she nodded toward his wings, “which I don’t advise, by the way; I don’t know what we can tell them. I can tell you if we go running in there talking about apocalyptic triggers, we’ll wind up sharing adjoining Posturepedic cells.”

Now why did he find the slight bitchiness of her tone so appealing? Must be a character flaw. “No, that’s not what I had in mind. I was thinking more in line with a simple police report on the attack.”

“Sure the police could probably find them and even put them in jail, but Hezekiah would just send somebody else. I think getting away for a while is a better plan.”

Gabriel shook his head and almost groaned out loud. His eyes felt as though they were trying to escape his head, and at this point, he was prepared to let them go. He was in no shape to go anywhere, but really, what choice did he have? She was right. Running was probably their best option. Of course, that led right back to his first question. “Where exactly am I supposed to go?” he asked again. “I’ve never had to do anything like this before.”

Ryannon jumped up from the sofa and began to pace around the small space. “I don’t know. Believe it or not, it’s outside my usual realm of experience too. Don’t you have somewhere you can go for a few weeks?”

“Why just a few weeks?”

“The date he predicted is next month. October 22. Once it passes, he won’t have any reason to bother you anymore.”

“How do you know that his prediction won’t come true?”

She stopped pacing and came to a halt right next to his chair. “Why are you so open-minded all of a sudden? I just know. Okay?”

The bitch was back. “That’s right, you’re a knower,” he said in a snide tone, unable to resist giving her some of her own back.

“It’s not that, it’s just that I know what Hezekiah is. His colors tell me that. He’s not a prophet or seer; he’s an opportunist. Seriously. You’ve got to get out of town. Don’t you know anyone who could help you out? You’ve got to have friends or...”

Just as her words trailed off, he realized that he did know someone. Pink. There was all kinds of speculation about him, and it ran the gamut and straddled both sides of the law. Pink wasn’t the type to ask too many questions either. Still...

“Can other people see these?” He gestured toward his wings.

“Some can. Some can’t. It depends,” she said with a shrug.

“On what?” God, getting information out of the woman was damned near impossible.

“On their state of grace. You can make them go away, though.”

“And that would be how?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Same way you got them. Focus on them going away, and they will.”

Gabriel closed his eyes again to concentrate, and he felt the wings fade away, their disappearance so gradual, it was as though they’d never been there. He immediately missed them and almost wished them back.

## Chapter Two

Ryannon stared as Gabriel opened the door to his apartment and a big bald man entered. When he'd told her he had a friend who could help, she hadn't expected anyone who looked as though he rolled with a biker gang. It was a chilly late September morning, but he wore only a T-shirt, jeans, and heavy steel-toed boots. His heavily tattooed arms bulged with muscle that would have intimidated even if he hadn't towered over her. Dude was damned scary looking. But from the cool colors that made up his aura, she could tell that she had nothing to worry about, though for the type of help they needed, the criminal element might be necessary. When Gabriel made the introductions, she immediately recognized the man as the proprietor of the club where Gabriel worked. She'd even been there a few times.

"Damn, man, you look like shit. Did you finally come to your senses and call me to take you to the hospital?" Pink asked as he entered the apartment.

"No." Gabriel walked back to his chair and sat down. He gestured for Pink to do the same. "I need to get out of town for a while."

Pink gave Ryannon, who had remained standing, a pointed look, then looked at Gabriel again, one dark brow raised in inquiry. "A while?" he asked, clearly feeling Gabriel out.

"A few weeks. A month at the most."

"Someone after you?"

When Gabriel hesitated, Ryannon nodded in response.

"Drugs?" Pink continued.

"Of course not," she said with a snap of her teeth, then opened her mouth to explain further, but he gestured for her to remain silent.

"The less I know, the better. I only asked about drugs because I don't fuck with that shit."

"That's good to know." Gabriel finally spoke up.

"Are the folks who are after you local?" Pink asked. "Do they know the area?"

Gabriel looked up at Ryannon. She shook her head. "No," he said, "they're not from around here."

"Then you'd be better off staying put. Atlanta is a great town to go underground. It's practically a rabbit warren of little neighborhoods and enclaves. It's always better to be in a big city than a small town. You'd stick out too much as strangers. Small-town people talk; in big cities they keep to themselves. I think I've got just the place for you and your lady to go."

Ryannon opened her mouth to correct him but was silenced again. This time by Gabriel. He shook his head sharply, the movement quickly followed by a groan of obvious pain. She walked over to him and placed her hand on the back of his neck. He looked up at her touch, and she looked down at him. It was all she could do not to gasp. Seriously. The man was gorgeous. Would she go to hell for crushing on an angel? It's not like she would be the first. She didn't need any special talents to know that. And he was a trumpet player too? He was probably knee-deep in panties by the time he finished his sets. Who could resist? His curly hair was nearly black and looked as though he hadn't bothered to comb it before answering the door, so it had a sexy just-out-of-bed look. His face was long and narrow with a square jaw and the most sensuous lips she'd ever seen on a man. Though he looked pretty haggard right now, the frankly appreciative look in his amber-colored gaze was enough to make her uncomfortable. "Gabriel, you really need to see somebody."

"I'm fine. I just need some more Advil. It's on my bedside table. Will you get it and some water for me?" he asked, gesturing toward the open bedroom door.

Ryannon did as he asked and left the room. Gabriel's apartment was really only two rooms with a small kitchenette at one end of the living room. His bedroom was small but neat. The bed was unmade, but aside from an ice pack, there was no clutter on the nightstand or the chest of drawers that flanked the large bed. A small cooler, still filled with ice, was on the floor next to the bed as well.

After detouring to the kitchenette to get the water, she walked back over to Gabriel and Pink. Their low voices had continued while she completed her task, and she suspected that Gabriel had gotten rid of her so he could talk to Pink privately. Just as she returned to Gabriel's side, Pink rose to his feet.

"I don't have to tell you not to use your credit cards or cell phones." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a large wad of cash. "This should last y'all for a while, and I can get you more if you need it. When y'all get to the condo, there'll be new cell phones for you there so you can use them. The phone inside the condo will be secure as well."

Gabriel nodded as he took the money and placed it on the coffee table. Pink started walking toward the door, but stopped and turned around as though another thought had occurred to him.

"You got something for her?" he asked Gabriel, who shook his head. Pink frowned as though he was thinking. "She's so little, the recoil from every gun I've got would probably break her wrist. I'll see what I can find. If I get something, it'll be in the condo as well." Ryannon hesitated as he took a couple of quick photos of them both with his phone. Gabriel didn't seem concerned so she decided not to ask what they were for. After a few more remonstrations for them to be careful, Pink left the apartment. Ryannon immediately turned on Gabriel.

"Why on earth did you let that man think I'm your girlfriend?"

He looked up at her. Pain had left his eyes red-rimmed and slightly bloodshot and had lent a grayish cast to his swarthy complexion. "You've got to come with me, Ryannon," he said in a soft tone.

"What? I barely know you," Ryannon said. What was the man thinking?

“Think. You know these people. What do you think they’re going to do when they can’t find me?”

Ryannon dropped back down onto the sofa as the reality of her situation sank in. He was right. They’d be back at her shop in a flash, and this time she wouldn’t be able to palm them off with half-assed information. “Oh my God.”

“Precisely.”

Ryannon suddenly felt light-headed. More so now than ever she regretted telling the Redeemers anything about Gabriel, but she’d never thought they’d find him in a city this size. Besides, what else could she have done? If she’d known they were coming... Clearly she’d started to believe her own press. Knower, seer, or whatever the hell she was, she didn’t know everything. “I’m guessing it’s probably not a good idea to go back to my place to get some things?”

“Probably not. Do they know where you live?”

Ryannon didn’t try to hide the bitterness she felt. “They found my shop, so I would guess they could find my apartment too. It’s not far from there. What am I going to do about my cat?”

“Cat?” Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Don’t you think that’s taking it a bit far?”

She shrugged. More witch stereotypes. “I told you I’m not a witch. Geometry has been with me since I was a kid. She’s very old now and doesn’t do much but lie in the sun.”

“Geometry?”

“It was my favorite subject in school. I did mention that I got her when I was only fourteen, right?”

“You don’t have anyone that could keep her?”

Ryannon felt panicky at the thought of being away from her pet. “My folks are out of the country. They won’t be back for a while,” she said, shaking her head.

“I wonder if Pink could help arrange something—”

Ryannon shook her head again. "I doubt she'd go with anyone else. She has quite a nasty attitude with pretty much everyone but me. I'd hate for someone to get hurt." Ryannon also doubted anyone else would tolerate the cat's bullshit. It would be all too easy for her to mysteriously disappear. She held out her arms so he could see the long scratches that adorned each one.

He whistled through his teeth. "What the hell is she, a cougar?"

Ryannon smiled. "No, just nasty-tempered and determined, but I can't go away for a month without her."

Gabriel rubbed his forehead as though in thought, then finally nodded. "My guess is they probably haven't had a chance to regroup from last night. It's still *quite* early." He gave her a baleful look. "They'll come after me again before they come for you. So if we go to your place right away, we should be able to get out undetected. Besides, how much trouble can one small cat be?"

\* \* \*

She damned near took his eyes out.

As he followed Ryannon into the apartment, there was a large gray blur as the feline launched herself at him. He could only thank God for quick reflexes, or he would've had lacerations to compound his head injury. Ryannon grabbed the cat as she tried to jump at him again.

"Geo! Geo! No!" she said, holding the cat, which settled down immediately. "I'm so sorry Gabriel. She's territorial, but she's not usually this mean. Are you okay?"

Gabriel wiped his hands over his face to check for injuries. Then he took a good look at the animal sitting contentedly in Ryannon's arms. Aside from its bright turquoise blue eyes, the cat looked like a huge bundle of long gray fur.

"That's the biggest fucking cat I've ever seen."

Ryannon continued to cradle it in her arms. "It's mainly fur. When she gets wet, she's no bigger than a gray squirrel." She began walking toward what he assumed was the bedroom of the tiny apartment. "I've got to get her into her carrier,

and that's always a bit of an ordeal. I need to pack a bag too. Have a seat. I won't be long."

Gabriel looked around the apartment, which was decorated in what could best be described as New Age chic. The large velvet sofa was a deep plum color with a rainbow of silk pillows scattered over it. The silk curtains at the windows and plush rug on the floor looked luxurious and seductive, at least it would have if not for the crystals on every flat surface. Some were as large as a basketball, and the range of colors was almost blinding. Sitting in a place of honor on the low coffee table was a large crystal ball. Its presence made Gabriel wonder if she did readings from home or if this was her personal style. Judging by the bohemian way she dressed, he guessed it was the latter.

Gabriel took a seat on the sofa, which was so comfortable that he slipped into a light doze while he waited for Ryannon to return. After a while, she came out of the bedroom, Geometry's carrier in one hand and a colorful duffel bag in the other. He stood immediately to take the bag from her.

She looked up at him, a frown marring her pretty features. "Do you think it will be okay if I call a friend to check in on my shop? I keep irregular hours, but I do have regular customers and vendors, so I can't just disappear."

"Vendors? I thought you were a fortune-teller?"

"I'm not a fortune-teller. I read tarot, but really, I don't need the cards. I also sell things in my shop, essential oils, crystals, and a few other items."

Gabriel looked down at her, surprised that he felt so comfortable and was actually looking forward to spending time alone with her, despite the beyond bizarre circumstances. He was hardly a people person, but Ryannon intrigued him in a way he'd never experienced before. If he could manage to avoid triggering the Apocalypse, this little adventure might even be fun.

"I don't see why not. Pink said not to use our cell phones. I probably wouldn't tell them too much—"



Ryannon cut him off with a short laugh. "I don't think I'll be sharing the details of this situation with anyone. Cindy's cool. She knows about my talents, but I never told her about growing up with the Redeemers or any of this stuff. I would prefer to come out of this situation without ending up in one of those oh-so-fashionable wraparound jackets."

Gabriel had to grin in return. "You have a point there. Why don't you go ahead and call your friend? After that, we'll head on over to the condo."

\* \* \*

The condo was located in Midtown, one of the busiest areas of the city. It seemed like an odd place to go to hide, but as Ryannon thought about it, hiding in plain sight began to make sense. She had been so flustered when Gabriel told her she would have to come with him, she hadn't given any real thought as to exactly *where* they would be going. Now, as she stood in the middle of the very posh condo, she realized that at least some questions were in order. She turned to look at Gabriel, who had entered the room behind her and stood holding their bags while she held Geometry's carrier and litter box.

"Obviously Pink's been holding out on me. Who would've thought that old boy would have a place like this," Gabriel said.

"Well, he does own a nightclub." Ryannon felt compelled to point this out. She really didn't want to think that she'd be spending a month in a place acquired through criminal means. It would harsh her mellow, not to mention seriously wreck her karma.

Gabriel's upper lip curled as he gave a derisive snort. "Clearly, you've never been inside the club."

"Actually I have," Ryannon said as she wandered over and opened the first door in the long carpeted hall. Finding a bedroom as she expected, she carefully placed Geometry's carrier inside. The cat wouldn't be pleasant to deal with anytime soon, so she preferred to put off extracting her from the carrier as long as possible. "I saw you playing there last year. That's how I knew you were an—"

Gabriel cut her off. "Please, no more Apocalypse talk. If I'm going to end the world, I'd rather not think about it at the moment. I don't think my aching head can take it." He gestured toward the now closed bedroom door. "You want to take this one?"

Ryannon paused. She understood why Gabriel didn't want to talk about how all this had come about, but she did have a great deal more to tell him. He did look rather tired, though. "Sure. Why don't I put my things away and let Geo out. Then I'll see what's in the kitchen, and we'll have a bite to eat."

Gabriel continued down the hall and stopped at what Ryannon assumed from the imposing double doors was the master bedroom. He opened the door, and she heard the soft *click* as he flipped the light switch. There was a long pause; then he turned toward her again.

"I think maybe you might want to take this one."

Ryannon didn't even try to hold back her giggle as she looked into the room. Tiffany blue brocade wallpaper covered the walls, at least the ones that didn't shimmer with silver gilt mirrors. An enormous chandelier hung over the bed, which like all the furniture was classic French provincial. Ryannon tried to imagine gruff Pink in the room, and her giggles intensified.

"Either this is his girlfriend's place or your friend is *really* in touch with his feminine side. Do you think it comes with a prince to kiss me awake in the morning?"

Gabriel gave her a speaking glance before he turned back toward the first bedroom.

"Wait. You might want to let me get Geo first." That stopped him dead in his tracks, and Ryannon hurried to retrieve her cat.

\* \* \*

Ryannon quickly freshened up in the master bathroom after setting up Geometry and her disposable litter box in the room. Oddly enough, despite its glitzy

appearance, the room was quite cozy. Ryannon had to smile at the incongruous visual of her vividly patterned patchwork duffel bag on the chrome luggage rack.

After ensuring that Geometry was okay, she left the bedroom to prepare dinner. The kitchen was large and well stocked. After checking out the pantry and refrigerator, she decided to heat up some soup and make grilled cheese sandwiches. She was just flipping the last sandwich when Gabriel made an appearance. She'd heard water running and assumed he was taking a shower, and his slicked-back, wet hair confirmed it. Even wet, his hair was beginning to regain its curl. One precocious lock had escaped and lay enticingly against his high forehead.

Ryannon plated the sandwiches and ladled the soup into bowls. "Have a seat." She gestured toward the breakfast bar at the end of the kitchen. "Hope the menu is okay with you."

Gabriel took the soup bowls and plates from her hands and, balancing them with a proficiency that indicated professional experience, placed them on the bar. "If I know Pink, anything here tastes good. The man is obsessed with good food."

They sat down next to each other on the high bar stools. Ryannon tasted her soup. Just as Gabriel had predicted, it was delicious. They finished their meal quickly.

"I've got to get some sleep. Will you be okay if I catch a few?" Gabriel asked after a jaw-cracking yawn.

"Of course."

"You know anything about guns?" he asked as he rose from his seat. "Pink said he'd leave a piece for you."

Ryannon shook her head. "No, not really." Her parents were hydrologists who traveled around the world drilling wells and doing other missionary work. Even if they hadn't been ardent pacifists, their experiences in some of the most conflict-torn areas would have given them an aversion to guns. But circumstances altered cases, and if a gun could keep her from being captured by the Redeemers, she could always cleanse her aura later.

“I didn’t think so. I’m guessing he left the stuff in that hall closet.”

Ryannon followed Gabriel back into the foyer and watched as he opened the closet door. There were four shelves in the small closet as well as hooks and racks for hanging garments. It was empty now save for a large box on the center shelf and what she immediately recognized as a shotgun on the bottom shelf. Gabriel picked the weapon up.

“Sawed-off shotgun. Illegal as hell, but perfect for someone like you,” he said softly.

Ryannon frowned, pretty sure that there was no such thing as a gun that was perfect for her. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“You don’t have to aim it. Just point the muzzle toward the center of his body and pull the trigger. Yeah, the recoil will probably still put you on your ass, but at least you won’t have to worry about broken bones. And sometimes just the sound of the shell being jacked into the chamber is enough to stop even the craziest motherfucker in his tracks.”

Not totally convinced, Ryannon took the gun when he handed it to her. It was heavy, but not as heavy as she’d expected. “You seem to know a lot about guns.”

“I’m a Southern boy; of course I know about guns. My old man was quite an outdoorsman. Not my thing really, but I know my way around them.” He removed the lid from the box and took out a small box. “Good. I was sure Pink wouldn’t forget shells. I’ll have to show you how to load it.”

Ryannon placed the gun back on the shelf with a gingerly movement. She watched as Gabriel continued going through the box. There was another stack of cash, two cell phones, and what looked like passports. Passports? She really hoped they wouldn’t be needing those. Gabriel handed her one of the cell phones, pausing for a moment to lean against the door frame of the closet. He picked up the shotgun and ammunition and walked into the living room. The weapon, with its shortened barrel and battered wooden stock sawed off at the midway point, looked incongruous in the elegantly decorated living room. She watched closely as Gabriel

carefully checked to ensure the weapon was unloaded. He walked her through the procedure of unloading and reloading the magazine and the chamber. She struggled with it; the weapon was awkward, the mechanism a bit stiff in her small hands. When she was finally comfortable with those maneuvers, Gabriel taught her to chamber a shell.

“Come on, baby, grab that bar like you mean it,” Gabriel said as she struggled with the stiff action bar. Her head snapped back as she looked up at him in shock at his use of the endearment. He apparently hadn't even realized what he said as he sat opposite her, frowning when she almost dropped the gun. His eyes met hers as his frown intensified. “Jesus, Ry, you need to pay attention. I'd prefer that you not blow any of my body parts off.”

After that Ryannon forced herself to concentrate, and before long she was able to load and unload the gun, if not with proficiency, at least without any loss of limb or life.

Gabriel nodded as she chucked the shells out of the chamber again. “Good. I think you'll be okay. Load one more time, but don't jack it. Keeping it in your room under your bed is probably best. Now I've got to get some sleep.” He rose from the chair and stood, frowning down at her. “What are you going to do?”

Ryannon shrugged. “I don't know. I brought some books, and there are a lot of movies here too. I'll probably just relax.” At least as much as she could with a gun under her bed.

Gabriel leaned forward and briefly touched her lips with his before casually turning and walking to his room. Ryannon watched him stroll away, stunned by what he'd just done. She could all but feel his lips still against hers. His full bottom lip was just as sensuous as she'd imagined, and even that brief salute had left a definite impression. Clearly his use of the word baby before wasn't a slip of the tongue, or was it? What the hell was he thinking?

\* \* \*

What the hell was he thinking? Gabriel couldn't help it; she'd looked so determined while she handled that shotgun. He could tell she was scared to death of the damned thing, but she was a game one. It was all he could do not to grab her and kiss her; especially when her lips separated just a bit, and the tip of her tongue peeked out as she concentrated on her task. He wanted to taste that tongue. Now. Actually he wanted to taste every square inch of that compact little body, but first he wanted to spend an entire day just sucking on that tongue.

It had been a while since he'd had more than a passing interest in anyone sexually. Just thinking about his last relationship made him queasy. What a train wreck, but it wasn't like he hadn't known that going in. When would he learn to stay away from head cases? Damn. He'd been taking some time to get over that relationship, and now... He thought about the stunned expression on her face when he kissed her. Hardly the reaction he was accustomed to, then again, he knew he looked like hell at the moment. Of course, maybe she was simply responding to the notion of being courted while they were on the run with a passel of crazy people on their tail. He had to agree. This was hardly the time for him to be interested in sex. He laughed bitterly. Tell that to his cock. His last thought before he drifted off to sleep was the most disturbing one of all. What if it was more than just sex?

## Chapter Three

Ryannon awakened as the smell of bacon and maple syrup wafted into the room. Disoriented for a moment, she glanced over at the snow-white chair where Geometry had taken up residence. She sighed. That chair would be covered in long gray hair in no time. She needed to find something to cover it. She sat up on the bed where she'd curled up to watch TV a couple of hours ago. Given the aromas coming from the kitchen, Gabriel was already up and cooking. The grumble in her stomach compelled her to follow the delicious smells. After freshening up in the spacious bathroom, she went to the kitchen, stopping short at the sight in front of her.

"Your wings are out," she said.

Gabriel turned away from the counter where he was removing waffles from the waffle iron. Ryannon took a deep breath. He wasn't wearing a shirt, and the firm muscles of his chest and arms were lightly dusted with dark hair. The hair whirled across his flat stomach before arrowing down into the waistband of his low-slung jeans. There was something almost primal about the combination of skin and the glory that was his wings.

Gabriel glanced at his appendages self-consciously. "It's strange, I just don't feel right without them now. Like they're a part of me, and I'm naked if they're not out."

"That's understandable. I would imagine if I had wings, I'd want them around me all the time too." Gabriel wasn't the first winged being she'd encountered, but his were some of the most striking. The almost six-foot wingspan glowed in an iridescent array of colors that complemented the golden hues of his aura. She nodded to indicate his shirtless state. "Is it safe to be frying bacon without a shirt?"

Gabriel grinned as though he'd sussed out her discomfort. "It's okay. I do a trick that I learned from my old man. I fry the bacon on the waffle iron and then add the batter. No splatter, and it tastes fabulous. Hope you don't mind breakfast for dinner. The fridge and pantry are fully stocked, but I only know how to cook breakfast food."

Ryannon took a seat at the bar. "No problem. They look delicious."

He stacked a couple of waffles on a warmed plate and placed it in front of her, along with a pitcher of warm syrup and the butter dish. By the time she'd dressed her waffles, Gabriel had joined her at the counter, an impossibly large stack of waffles on his plate. She tucked into the delicious dish and watched in continuing amazement as he demolished his waffles in short order.

"You can seriously hide some groceries, can't you?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I like food." He rose from his seat and then circled around the counter to the waffle iron. He looked at her with a raised brow. "You want seconds?"

Ryannon shook her head. "No. If I hang around you for long, I'll be as wide as I am tall."

"Yeah, and you still wouldn't be any bigger than a minute." He chuckled as he poured more batter into the waffle iron.

Before long, he was eating another large stack of waffles. Ryannon rose from the bar and began cleaning the kitchen. He kept a neat apartment. Why did he leave the kitchen looking like a goat had exploded? Gabriel threw back his head, laughing at the consternation she knew must be present on her face.

"My mom always said I was the only person she knew who could wreck a kitchen making a PB&J. Let me finish, and I'll help out."

"No. No. You cooked. I'll clean up. It's only fair." Ryannon began rinsing dishes and placing them in the dishwasher, which was adjacent to the sink.

"So why did you tell those crazy people where to find me?"



Ryannon bobbled the bowl she was drying. Now that was unexpected. She took her time drying the bowl and putting it away. "I thought you didn't want to talk about it," she demurred while hand-washing another bowl. The rubberized bottom didn't look as though it would fair well in the dishwasher.

"Hey, you sent crazies after me. At the very least I should know why. Considering that I'm having all manner of impure thoughts about you, I thought it might be a good idea to make sure you're not some psycho before I pursue anything."

Ryannon barely noticed the bowl crashing to the floor. She stared at him as he stood and walked around the counter to rinse his plate. He stooped to pick up the bowl, which was fortunately made of some unbreakable material and was undamaged by its precipitous fall.

"What did you just say?"

He leaned against the counter. Did the man stand upright for anything? Amazing how he said the most incredible things with almost casual aplomb.

He didn't pretend to misunderstand her. "I said I've been having impure thoughts about you. If the way you look at me is any indication, you've been having the same. About me, that is. I think it's a good idea to hear the whole story before this goes any further," he said, rinsing the bowl in the sink.

Ryannon thought about denying the attraction, then shucked the idea. First, the man was so gorgeous, she'd have to be dead not to be attracted to him. Plus, given the way she'd been looking at him, she'd only look foolish and dishonest if she said otherwise. "Even if I am interested, this is hardly the time—"

Gabriel took the drying towel from her hands and sighed as he interrupted her. "Yeah, I know. Seems to be the story of my life. I never meet anyone at the right time." He shrugged as though to indicate that the matter was out of his hands and he was okay with that. "So you want to tell me the rest of the story?"

Ryannon laid her hands flat against the cool, dark surface of the granite countertop. Like everything else in the condo, the kitchen was top-notch and had obviously been done by one of the city's top designers.

"I told you I grew up with the Redeemers." He nodded, bending at the waist to place the bowl in a drawer. "Well, when Hezekiah showed up at my place, I freaked."

"Did he threaten you?"

"He didn't have to. You might recall that the man did try to burn me at the stake."

Gabriel resumed his slouching posture against the counter. "There is that. So you told them—"

"Well, I didn't think they could find you from the information I gave them. I'm so sorry."

Gabriel shook his head. "They probably would've have found me anyway. I mean, if I was looking to bring on the Rapture, a trumpet player named Gabriel would be irresistible, and I'm pretty well-known in the area."

"Is the trumpet the only instrument you play?" she asked, easing back from him a bit. Somehow, despite his relaxed posture, she felt almost as though he was stalking her. Odd, the man didn't look like he could even be bothered to breathe independently, yet he kicked all her senses into overdrive. She could feel her nipples pebbling under the soft cotton of her shirt. For once, she wished she'd worn a bra, though she didn't usually bother with one, being significantly less than an A-cup.

Gabriel settled back even more comfortably on the counter, his wings glistening in the last rays of the setting sun streaming through the kitchen window.

"No. I pretty much play everything. Piano, guitar, and trumpet are my specialties, though."

"That's impressive. I had piano lessons as a child, but I have no talent in that area."

"And I can't read auras," he said with a shrug. "I guess we all have our talents. I've been playing since I was a kid; I don't really think about it much anymore."

"A while back, I heard you accompany a woman. She had a really pretty name, but for the life of me, I can't recall it. Her voice was amazing, but I thought you were spectacular."

"I'll be sure to tell Arietta you said that. She always claims that people come to see her, not me. Of course she's so caught up in her tycoon these days, she probably won't care."

"Tycoon?"

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Long story. Remind me to tell you about it sometime."

"I'm so sorry I told them about you."

"Don't worry about it. I would imagine that if someone tried to burn me at the stake when I was a kid, well, besides my mother, I'd probably tell them what they wanted to know too."

"Yeah, but that's no excuse."

"Come on, let's go into the living room. I feel like playing."

\* \* \*

Ryannon looked up when Gabriel returned to the living room carrying his trumpet case. He winced slightly as he sat down, his injuries obviously still bothering him. His back didn't look particularly worse, but he was certainly moving more stiffly than he had before his nap. She was relieved to see he'd put on a shirt. His bare skin was a bit much for her nerves to take.

"I brought my aromatherapy kit with me. I have a massage oil that should help with that soreness."

He gave her a grateful look. "Really? That would be terrific."

It only took her a moment to retrieve her special blend massage oil from her bedroom. When she returned to the living room, Gabriel had removed his shirt

again. She came up behind him on the sofa. His thick hair concealed the lump on the back of his head, but it only took a moment to find it. After pouring a small amount of the oil on her fingertips, she began a light scalp massage. The growl that erupted from his throat was so sensuous that Ryannon hesitated for a moment.

“Sorry, but that feels so good, and it smells great. What is it?”

“It’s a proprietary blend. I make it up to sell in my shop. The main ingredients are blue chamomile and lavender with some black pepper for pain relief.”

“Black pepper?” He sniffed the air. “Yeah. I can smell that. Amazing that flowers could feel so good.”

Ryannon smiled. She loved it when her services were appreciated. “You’re getting special treatment here. The blue chamomile is fifty bucks an ounce.”

“Fifty bucks an ounce? I’ve got some friends who are selling other stuff by the ounce. Obviously they need to diversify.”

Ryannon continued the massage, her fingers sliding from his scalp down to his neck. It didn’t take long before she felt the softening of the tense muscles there and moved down to his shoulders. At this point Gabriel was practically purring. She wondered if he knew his wings were moving almost like a dog wagging its tail. If she had a tail, she’d be wagging it too. The feel of his muscles flowing under that golden tan skin... Her imagination played a vivid reel of what that skin would look like pressed against hers. When she realized that she was touching him more for her pleasure than for his, she stepped away.

“I really need to wash my hands. This black pepper is deadly if you get it into your eyes.” She scurried down the hall as quickly as she could, ducking into the hall bathroom. The running water soothed her nerves somewhat. A few more minutes, and she would’ve been humping the man’s leg. This was hardly the time or the place, especially considering she was the reason he was in trouble to begin with.

\* \* \*

Gabriel let his head flop back on the sofa, fighting the instinct to follow her. Of course, his cock was so hard he doubted he could walk, let alone chase her. If she'd touched him one more time, just one more time, he would've come in his jeans. He closed his eyes, struggling to think of anything, anything but the feel of those strong, soft hands sliding so efficiently over his flesh. Poor thing. She was just trying to help, and all he could think about was burying himself so deep, she wouldn't know where she ended, and he began. He glanced at the closed bathroom door. She still hadn't come out, and there was a good possibility she'd spend the night in there.

Needing a distraction, he put his shirt back on and went into the bathroom to splash some water on his face in an effort to calm down. He knew he wouldn't survive any more contact with her tonight, no matter how accidental.

When he returned to the living room, Ryannon was seated on the couch flipping through the pages of a magazine. Her cat was curled up beside her, and something about the way those turquoise eyes stared at him made him uncomfortable. He walked over to his trumpet case and removed the instrument before taking a seat in the chair opposite the sofa. He began playing a few low notes to warm up his horn, grateful that his attackers hadn't hit him in the mouth. He couldn't afford to lose his lip. He continued to play softly, letting his mood carry him. Though he played with his eyes closed, he could feel Ryannon looking at him almost as intensely as he had felt her touch.

She waited until he paused before she asked a question. He liked that about her; she knew better than to interrupt him while he was playing. He'd briefly dated one girl who wouldn't shut up no matter what he did.

"Did you study music in school?"

"I've been studying my whole life, but I got a degree in music. I teach a little, and I play in a quartet. Amazing how well weddings and gigs like that pay."

"Wow, that's a lot of work."

“You seem pretty busy yourself. Reading fortunes. Selling aromatherapy. Not to mention the occasional warning to an apocalyptic trigger.” He moved his shoulders experimentally. “Your hands are amazing! The soreness is almost gone, and the headache *is* gone.”

“Actually, you’re my first one,” Ryannon said, drawing her knees up under her chin.

“Your first what?” Gabriel asked, trying not to be distracted by her evident flexibility. She probably did yoga.

“My first apocalyptic trigger.”

Well, that took his mind off the visual of those legs up on his shoulders. “Wait. You mean there are more people like me?”

“Of course. Why would you be the only one?”

“Gee. I don’t know. Maybe because I’ve never heard of such a thing. What I can’t figure out is why would God need any. I mean he *is* God. Presumably he could wipe us out with a crook of his finger.”

“Oh, he doesn’t need you. Well, at least not in the sense you mean. In the Bible, Gabriel is always the bringer of good news—the births of Jesus and John the Baptist. He’s not a destroyer.”

“So you mean I’m not the Antichrist after all?” Why was he disappointed?

“I told you,” Ryannon began in an aggravated tone.

“I know. There’s no such thing as an Antichrist. Despite my head injury, I do remember stuff. What I mean is, I really can’t bring on the Apocalypse?”

Ryannon shrugged with a casualness that surprised him. After all, they were talking about the end of the world. “I suppose you could,” she said as though contemplating a great puzzle, “but I don’t think he’d let you. At least not unless he wanted you to.”

“So you’re saying that God will end the world on his own terms.”

"Precisely. I tried to tell Hezekiah that, but he wouldn't listen. Said God told him that now is the time."

"Well, how do you know Hezekiah isn't telling the truth?"

"Because he's not in the right state of grace. God wouldn't use him. This is just a power play for his gullible followers."

Gabriel rubbed his eyes; this was turning into a real Rubik's Cube. "Well, if that's the case, why does he need me?"

Ryannon's upper lip curled in a way that looked almost obscene on such a beautiful face. "Hezekiah was always one to hedge his bets. He wants you so if it doesn't happen, he can blame it on you somehow. Maybe you got tainted by the witch."

"Holy shit. So he'll burn me at the stake too? Crazy motherfucker."

"You don't know the half of it." She shook her head as though to clear things she preferred not to think about. "Why don't you play some more? I was really enjoying you."

"I was just warming up, but your wish is my command."

Ryannon listened as Gabriel played random notes on his trumpet. His eyes closed, his fingers moving slowly over the valves. The notes slid over her skin like a caress, and she shivered in response. As though he sensed her arousal, Gabriel eyes slowly drifted open and met hers. He pulled the trumpet away from his lips and smiled.

"Any requests?" he asked with a lift of his brow.

"None that make any sense under these circumstances."

Gabriel's smile widened. "I'm thinking it won't make a difference one way or another."

His smile was so contagious, she couldn't help but smile in return. "That may be so, but it's only reasonable that one of us shows some sense. And on that note, no

pun intended, I'm going to bed." Always be wary of a sexy man with a horn, she told herself, though she feared such remonstrations were much too late.

Gabriel sighed good-naturedly and resumed playing. Ryannon could still hear the muted notes as she drifted off to sleep.



## Chapter Four

The next morning dawned bright with light pouring through her bedroom window, but Ryannon knew that wasn't what had wakened her from a sound slumber. The knock came again, and she sat up, then told Gabriel to come in. To her surprise he was carrying Geometry—a very agitated and annoyed-looking Geometry. Brave man.

Ryannon reached out for her cat, who came to her, but rather than sitting down, Geo began to pace restlessly, complaining loudly of some discontent she couldn't name.

"There's nothing like waking up to a cat walking on your head. How did she get in my room? I closed the door," Gabriel said.

Ryannon tried to ignore how impossibly sexy he looked wearing just his pajama bottoms. He wasn't extremely cut, but the dark skin of his torso, with its light feathering of dark hair, was tremendously appealing. Knowing that it wouldn't be long before he noticed her distraction and tried to do something about it, she forced herself to focus on her cat instead. "I'm not a witch, but Geometry, I'm not so sure about. She pretty much goes wherever she pleases. Closed doors aren't much of a barrier if she wants in."

"You'd think you might have shared that tidbit of information with me. What other witchy secrets are you keeping?"

Ryannon shrugged. "I didn't think she'd ever want into your room, so I didn't bother, but I should've known better. My bad. As for witchy secrets, I've pretty much told you everything I know, and some stuff I've never shared with a soul."

They watched the cat's agitated movements for several long moments. Gabriel frowned. "What's wrong with her? She's not sick, is she?"

Ryannon shook her head. "I've never known her to be sick. I think she's trying to tell us something." Then suddenly she knew. "Oh my God. They're coming."

Gabriel looked away from the cat. "What? Who's coming?"

Ryannon scrambled out of bed, not caring that she was only wearing an oversize T-shirt and panties. She grabbed the jeans she'd left draped over a chair the previous evening. "The Redeemers," she said, pulling the pants up over her legs.

"The Redeemers? How do they know where we are?"

"I have no idea, but we'd better hurry." After Ryannon finished fastening her jeans, she picked up the cat and placed her in the carrier. For once Geometry was cooperative, an even greater indicator of the danger they were in. By the time she'd grabbed her things and the cat's, Gabriel was back at the bedroom door. He tucked his handgun into the waistband of his jeans. Ryannon handed him her gun, as she didn't have a hand to spare.

Gabriel paused after he opened the front door, and it was a good thing he did, because they heard pounding footsteps charging up the stairs. Gabriel closed the door and engaged the deadbolt. They took a moment to slide a straight back chair under the knob as well. It wouldn't stop a determined intruder, but it might buy them a little time.

They went out the French doors that opened onto a small balcony. Though they were on the second floor, the building was backed by a sloping hill. They threw their bags over the balcony first. Afterward Gabriel leaped over, holding the shotgun in one hand. He landed in a dive roll and was apparently unharmed. He easily caught Geometry in her carrier when Ryannon tossed her over, and then she jumped as well. Her landing was not as graceful as his, and she took a moment to catch her breath. Gabriel was gathering their things.

"My goddamned horn had better not be hurt, or there'll be hell to pay," he muttered as he picked up the precious instrument.

Ryannon laughed in spite of herself.

\* \* \*

Getting back to their car had been surprisingly easy, but apparently some of the Redeemers had it staked out, because they'd only been on the road a few moments when they realized they were being followed.

"Get Pink on the phone," Gabriel said. "See if he knows somewhere we can go."

Ryannon frowned at him. "How do we know he—"

He cut her off. "Pink's a square cat. He wouldn't play me to the left like that. Call him."

She sighed, but she really didn't have any other plan, so she did as he asked. It only took a moment to reach Gabriel's friend. His directions were clear and concise.

"He said to take the 400 North toward Dahlonge, and he'll get in touch with us with further directions."

"Hardly seems like Pink territory. Does he have any idea how these people found us?"

"Yeah, apparently someone on his staff took a bribe. Wherever he's sending us now, nobody knows about but him."

Gabriel looked worriedly out his rearview mirror. "That is, *if* we make it to wherever the hell we're going. I can't shake these fuckers."

Ryannon turned to look back as well. Gabriel had the little four-cylinder engine of his ancient compact pegged to the max, but their pursuers were driving a much better car of a more recent vintage. The nondescript four-door sedan was still in hot pursuit and gaining on them. "Well, there's not much traffic. You can call down hellfire."

Gabriel glanced at her even as he jerked the wheel sharply to cut across two lanes of traffic to the far-left lane. "I can call down what?"

"Hellfire. You know, like Sodom and Gomorrah. You *are* an angel."

"And you didn't think to tell me this until now?"

“How was I to know that you would ever need it?” Ryannon said.

“Are you kidding me? Have you ever driven in this town? You need hellfire just to get through the Downtown Connector.”

Before Ryannon could come up with a suitable reply, Gabriel suddenly cut the wheel to the right in a dizzying maneuver that left her clinging to her seat. He narrowly missed being mowed down by an 18-wheeler as he took the next exit. Still driving as fast as the little car could go, he swerved off the exit ramp and turned sharply into the near-empty parking lot of a fast-food restaurant, but he didn’t cut the engine.

Resting his left arm on the steering wheel, he turned his upper body to face her. “Okay, so tell me how this hellfire thing works.”

“Like everything else. Focus on what it is you want and make it happen.”

“Thank God I didn’t know I could do this when I was younger.” Gabriel shook his head ruefully.

“It only works if it’s right. Otherwise you’ll get a big nasty,” she said.

“A big nasty? What’s that?”

“I have no idea, but usually big nasties are not something you’d want to experience again.”

Before he could ask more questions, the other car pulled into the lot behind them. Gabriel turned to the front of the vehicle again, both hands holding the steering wheel. Ryannon watched as he closed his eyes, and she could see his knuckles whiten as his grip tightened.

She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting—a fireball or something equally spectacular. Instead the incineration of the car and its contents was far more subtle. The tires went first—melting into the asphalt like a Fudgsicle on a hot summer’s day. Then the flame oozed over the rest of the vehicle. One moment it was whole and sleekly new, but gradually, like scorching toast, the car slowly blackened. The destruction moved from the front of the car, over the top, and to the trunk, until in a

matter of moments, it was a smoking hull of its former self. Fortunately the windows were blackened and crazed with cracks, so they couldn't see what had happened to the men inside, but Ryannon knew they hadn't survived.

Gabriel stared at the other car as though transfixed. Ryannon shook him. "We've got to get back on the highway. If someone sees us, they might think we had something to do with it."

Gabriel grabbed the gearshift. "Might have had something to do with it? I just killed two people."

"It wouldn't have worked if it wasn't right, Gabriel. Clearly he has a plan." She reached out to grab the hand that was on the gearshift. She raised her eyes to meet his, then leaned forward until they were forehead to forehead. "It's going to be okay. If you hadn't got them, they would have got us." Still seeing the trouble clouding his eyes, she pressed her lips against his. She felt the breath hiss between his teeth, and she pulled away before he could respond further.

He stared at her for a long moment before he shook his head. "Yeah right. Out of here." Without another word he put the small car into gear and started out of the parking lot.

Ryannon leaned back against her seat with a sigh. That kiss probably wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done, but he'd looked so devastated. Destroying the Redeemers didn't bother her one bit. She had no illusions about what would happen to them once Hezekiah got what he wanted, or more especially if he didn't get what he wanted. Though now she was seriously beginning to question exactly what that was. She closed her eyes. Damned if she'd try to figure out the serpentine workings of that man's mind without at least one cup of coffee. She made herself more comfortable in the bucket seat, and listening to Geometry softly purring at her feet, she drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

They had barely seated themselves at a table in the small roadside diner when Pink strode up to them. He quickly sat down, then glanced around the sparsely populated room before speaking.

“Sorry, guys, this is a major fuckup. I’d forgotten that one of my waiters knew about the apartment. I don’t usually have to worry about my people, but he was new. I don’t have to worry about him anymore.”

Ryannon glanced quickly at Gabriel, wondering if he’d caught the implications of what the other man had said. Apparently not. Gabriel looked exhausted. Most of his bruises had faded, but with the heavy beard stubble and bloodshot eyes, he looked as though he’d been on a weeklong bender. Bringing down hellfire must have totally wiped him out. His aura still glowed in bright golden shades, but he’d faded somewhat. She figured he had an hour, maybe two, before he completely crashed.

“Let me ask you something.” Pink was still talking, and Ryannon turned back to him. Despite the early hour, the man was wearing neatly pressed charcoal gray trousers and a rose-colored polo shirt. Somehow, despite his bulging biceps and menacing appearance, the color didn’t look incongruous on him.

“These guys that are after you—”

“The Redeemers?” Ryannon said.

“Yeah, the Redeemers. Sounds like a fucking motorcycle gang,” he muttered as he rubbed one hand across his bald head. “Do they have any weapons? You know, guns, explosives, stuff like that?”

Ryannon paused, wondering where this conversation was going. Unable to suss out the man’s motivations, she told the simple truth. “No. No. At least not when I was there.”

Pink didn’t reply. He just frowned heavily.

“What’s up, man?” Gabriel asked. “Obviously you know something.”

“I have it on good authority that these guys have an arsenal in their compound up in Rome.”

"What?" Ryannon said, shocked, though she wasn't sure why. Hezekiah was crazy enough to burn an eight-year-old as a witch. What was a stockpile of weaponry after that level of insanity?

Gabriel leaned back in his chair while his server poured coffee for them. He waited until she left before he resumed the conversation.

"Well, since for you *good authority* could be anyone from the president to the panhandlers who piss on Peachtree..."

Pink smirked at his friend. "Not quite the president, but close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades."

"But that makes no sense," Ryannon said. "Why would Hezekiah all of a sudden start keeping weapons? It's the one thing that's bound to bring the Feds down on him."

Their waitress returned to the table at that moment to take their orders. Ryannon realized she was hungry and ordered eggs and country ham as well as pancakes. Evidently both men were equally hungry as they ordered substantial breakfasts as well. After they ordered, Gabriel closed his eyes and rested his head back on his chair.

"Man, what the hell's wrong with you?" Pink asked. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"Not any more than I was when I last saw you. No, I'm just tired as hell. I haven't gotten much sleep lately. Where exactly are you sending us? I don't know how much more driving I can do."

Pink gave Ryannon a pointed look, and she nodded. She'd be driving the rest of the way to wherever they were going. She listened closely as he gave directions to a secluded cabin he owned in the north Georgia mountains.

\* \* \*

Fortunately Pink gave very good directions, and other than one missed turn, Ryannon had little trouble finding his cabin. By the time they arrived, Gabriel was nodding off in his seat, and she knew he was done for. She'd never seen anyone call

hellfire before, but could imagine that it would be draining. She wondered for a moment how long he would be incapacitated, but looking around the remote location, she concluded that it would take divine—or Satanic—intervention for Hezekiah to find them. Especially given that they'd switched vehicles with Pink. His sleek luxury SUV had made the trip into the mountains far more easily than Gabriel's relic of a vehicle would have.

Gabriel came awake when she pulled the car into the gravel driveway that led to the cabin. Without conversing, they opened the door and entered the cabin. It was small with an open floor plan consisting of a great room off a compact kitchen. There were two bedrooms: one with a pair of twin beds, and another with a queen-size bed. There was only one bathroom. Despite its size, the cabin was warm and appealing, especially since it had a fully stocked pantry and refrigerator. They quickly unpacked the car, and after she'd attended to Geometry's needs, Ryannon directed Gabriel to the larger bedroom.

"Why don't you go to bed before you fall down? Then you'd have to sleep on the floor since I doubt I could lift you."

Gabriel stretched and grimaced as he apparently tweaked sore muscles. He reached out a hand toward her. "Come with me."

Ryannon stared at him blankly. "What?"

"Come with me. You must be tired too from all that driving."

She shook her head. She was hardly worn out from a less than two-hour drive; then again, they had gotten up awfully early, and it was late evening now. She had certainly earned a rest, and the notion of sleeping with him was appealing.

"Don't worry. I'm too damned tired to get it up. You're in no danger from me."

And there was the question. Did she want to be in danger from him? Refusing to debate with herself any longer, Ryannon picked up her bag from where she'd left it on the floor, then took his proffered hand.

In the bedroom, Gabriel stripped down to his boxer briefs and immediately collapsed on the bed without saying another word. In what seemed like only a



matter of seconds, he had fallen into a deep, but not particularly restful, sleep. Ryannon placed her duffel bag on a chair that was positioned to the right of the bed. After changing into her pajamas, she walked down the hall to the bathroom to wash up and brush her teeth. When she returned to the bedroom, she discovered that Gabriel had turned over onto his back, but he was still shifting restlessly on the bed. She rifled through her duffel bag to get her aromatherapy kit. She hadn't brought the full complement with her and only had a few crystals, but maybe they would be sufficient to help him regain some energy. Fortunately she had a moonstone, which would help him cope with the chaos and uncertainty that had recently come into his life. She placed it on the bedside table near his head. She also had an essential oil blend that should also help with his feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted. After placing a few drops in her palm, she warmed the mixture in her hands, then rubbed it into his chest. After making sure he was still asleep, she walked around the bed and climbed in on the other side. Already she could tell from his breathing that he was sleeping more peacefully.

Gabriel came out of the stupor slowly, the veils of unconsciousness peeling away like the layers of an onion. Awareness came as his senses absorbed the fact that he was curved around Ryannon spoon-fashion, his front to her back. Her scent filled his nostrils, the warmth of her skin amplifying the natural womanly smell of her in a way he'd never experienced before. Her body fitted perfectly with his. He rubbed his cheek against hers; the silkiness of her skin left him craving more contact. Inhaling deeply, he gorged himself on the deliciousness that was pure Ryannon. So soothing, he could lie there holding her all day. Then she shifted against him, her round bottom cuddling his morning erection in a way that made his eyes cross. She sighed in her sleep, pressing closer against him, and Gabriel groaned out loud. It seemed like he'd wanted her forever. The timing couldn't be worse, and he knew he should get out of this bed immediately. Well, at least he could do the decent thing and move his hips away from hers before he came all over her ass. Even he knew that would be crass and probably unforgivable. But when he

tried, she shifted again, as though wanting the contact even in her sleep. He pressed back, grinding his cock against her soft flesh. He did it again, loving the feel of her around him.

Okay, so he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. He slid his cheek against hers again. God, it felt so good. There was no way in hell he'd be able to stop now. He had to have her. He slowly turned her in his arms until she faced him, then leaned down and took her mouth under his. He paused to look at her. With her hair braided for bed, he could see the delicate lines of her face, the baby-soft skin that was practically addictive. He felt her startle awake. She stared at him for a long moment, obviously surprised to find herself in his embrace. He thought for a moment she was going to pull away. Oh God no. Even so, he leaned down to kiss her again, and then she was there, her tongue embracing his, the silky slide of her flesh against his making his erection even harder, and he ground against her frantically. He couldn't think of anything but getting inside her before he exploded, but that thought instantly chilled his arousal. He'd been wanting this woman forever. Okay, a few days, but still, no way in hell was he going to rush this. He'd never felt this way about a woman in his life, and he intended to savor every second of it.

Ryannon awakened slowly, a sense of being watched disturbing her peaceful slumber. She looked up into Gabriel's somnolent brown eyes. He had been watching her while she slept, and when he smiled slowly at her, she smiled in return. It seemed only natural that he leaned down to graze his lips over hers as though they'd been waking up in the same bed for decades instead of for the first time. She closed her eyes and returned the caress with interest. It was almost like they were still in a dream state. A kiss, then a soft sigh. This coming together was inevitable; she'd known that from the first time she met him.

He reached up to caress her neck as she pressed closer to kiss him again. Her tongue slid against his aggressively, and she felt his groan of response rumble up through his bare chest. Then he removed his hand from her neck and slid his

fingers down over her chest to her breasts. He traced the edge of her pajama top as she watched avidly, longing to feel his flesh against hers. He repeated the motion, this time sliding his finger inside the top, but just barely, insinuating himself into the space between her skin and the soft cotton shirt. Her breasts were exquisitely sensitive and erotically charged. He dipped his fingers farther under her top like an explorer learning her body by touch alone. His eyes never left hers, adding to the intensity of her pleasure. His nail brushed the circumference of her areola, and her nipples pebbled in response. He grasped the edge of her shirt and slid it aside to expose her breast in a slow tease, though she wasn't sure if he was teasing her or himself. As the fabric scraped her sensitized nipple, she gasped in response. Ryannon looked down as he unbuttoned her pajama top and then slowly pushed the shirt apart. She was fully exposed now, but he never took his eyes from hers. She closed her eyes as his head came down, and his tongue touched her nipple.

His breath heated her sensitive flesh, and then his tongue was circling it in slow, wet loops. Ryannon arched on the bed as the wetness of her arousal pooled between her legs. He sucked firmly on her areola. He seemed to have an uncanny sense of just where and how to touch her, as if he could read her mind or already knew all her secrets—a strange kind of physical intimacy that spoke directly to her body and cared nothing what her mind thought. The way he lingered at her breasts—sucking, licking, teasing, catching her nipples in his teeth, he seemed to know instinctively how sensitive her breasts were and exactly how she liked them treated, just how to squeeze, just where to touch. He knew just when to punctuate the cloying sweetness of a tongue teasing her nipple with the sharp spear of his teeth. One nipple, then the other—the slow circles, the fluttering tongue, the long, lurid licks, and finally pulling her nipple into his mouth and biting and sucking it. She could no longer think. She could only feel the force of his desperate, animal sounds of pleasure. His urgent, kneading hand. As he teased one breast with his mouth, he pinched and rolled the other nipple with his hand, smearing his saliva around the areola, dragging his nails over the fleshy dome until she was covered with goose bumps and quivering with need. When she thought she couldn't stand

the stimulation to her nipples anymore, he began to kiss and lick her breasts from armpit to sternum, planting soft bites on the tender undersides or rubbing his rough, unshaven face on the upper slopes, luxuriating in the softness of her skin.

She raised her head. The stimulation of her breasts was becoming more than she could bear. Her nipples were stiff and aching, full and swollen from his ardent attention. He began to sensually caress her bare stomach, dragging his fingers over the sensitive flesh and making the muscles clench. He slid his hands down over her hips, then slipped his fingers under the elastic waistband of her pajama bottoms. He pushed the pants over her hips until her thin panties were revealed.

“Look at you,” he said reverently, looking down at her silk-covered pubic mound.

Ryannon couldn’t help but look down. Her legs were slightly parted, and the swollen lips of her pussy were evident. Dampness had collected on her thighs, and she watched as he reached down and collected some of the moisture on his fingers. Then he raised them to his mouth, and while watching her, he licked each finger in turn.

“God, baby, you taste good,” he said.

She could only squirm in response, wanting his hands back against her as soon as possible. Then he began to graze teasingly over the bare skin of her thighs and her panty-covered mound, caressing her, tickling her, coaxing her into greater arousal, as if he had all the time in the world. The feel of his fingers on her mound, the ease with which he touched her, and the casual way his hand toyed at the juncture between fabric and flesh made her throb with desire. She raised her hips in response to his questing fingers, begging him to finger-fuck her, but he took his time. One stroke. Then another. A brief diversion to suck strongly on a nipple. Then a taste of her copious juices. Fortunately for her, he wasn’t as unaffected as his placid features would indicate. She could feel the heated urgency of his cock, covered only by the thin fabric of his boxer briefs, pressing against her thigh. Its hardness so hot that it felt as though it would penetrate her flesh, despite the fabric

barriers. By now she was throbbing with need, but he seemed to be in no hurry to carry this to the inevitable conclusion. He played with her belly and hips, slid his fingers under the waistband of her panties and reached down, teasing her, playing with her pubic hair, taunting her until her pussy needed his touch, until she wanted to feel his hand there against her empty hunger. She closed her eyes in frustration and finally, finally, he pressed the moist crotch of her panties up against her sensitive flesh, and Ryannon bit her lip to stifle a cry of fulfillment. Her body arched and quivered in response.

Despite his obvious experience, he explored her like a timid boy, learning what drew the best response from her. Making her body arch and her legs spread in supplication. Begging. Pleading for more and more. A soft massage of her labia, a teasing finger sliding up and down her slit or probing into her opening, gliding in circles over her clit or pressing firmly and rhythmically against it, or occasionally taking her entire pussy in his hand and squeezing in an act of domination that touched something deep and primitive inside her and made her want to give her all to him. He was clever and perceptive, masterful and patient, and soon she felt a delicious tightening of sexual tension that left her desperate for more. His hands knew her pussy intimately now, as well as she knew it herself.

Then suddenly, as though someone had flipped an erotic switch, playtime was over. The hands that had been teasing and explorative became groping and greedy. She looked up into eyes that had darkened with need. He took her mouth with a carnality that could only be called mating. Again and again their mouths joined together. Their hands moved in tandem, now no longer seeking but demanding fulfillment. His tawny skin stretched tautly over long, lean muscles, and she stroked it over and over. She smoothed her hand over his flanks, pushing his underwear aside to seek her treasure, but when she wrapped a hand around his cock, he suddenly groaned against her throat and slammed her body back onto the bed. Lost in a sensual daze, she felt him strip her pajama bottoms and panties off in one motion. He spread her legs, and then he was there. Big. Hard. Desperate. As much as she wanted him deep inside she had to ask, "Condom?"

He grabbed one of her hands, and she felt his latex-sheathed cock. Damn, when had he done that?

“I’ve been around, but I never bareback,” he said.

“I use the ring, but I don’t bareback either.”

Then all conversation ceased as he was back between her legs, pushing urgently for entrance. Though she’d never been more ready for a cock in her life, she still gasped from the impact of his size. He stopped immediately, gazing down at her in concern. “Are you okay? Do you want to stop?”

“No. No,” she said, raising her head up to kiss him again. “Just give me a minute.” Fortunately it didn’t take long to adjust, and she caught him by surprise when she flexed her hips, taking him all the way to the hilt.

“God.” He gasped, then it was as though his body had taken over from his mind. He crashed into her repeatedly. All she could do was hold on, taking as much of him as she could while her entire body throbbed in uncontrollable pleasure. He pushed her legs apart as far as they would go, lifting her hips off the bed and exposing her to his relentless assault. She could feel his heavy balls slam against her ass. His sweat dripped down from his forehead, enveloping her totally in the aroma of his potent masculinity. Then he started a slow grind, pressing his pubic bone against her clit. Again and again she caught her breath as her orgasm inched closer and closer, taking her up in its grip, then suddenly flinging her into a vortex of ecstasy. She buried her face in the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent as wave after wave took her. Just as she thought she couldn’t take any more, another orgasm took her, and she sank her teeth into his shoulder. He cried out and slammed into her once more while his body went rigid. Then she could feel his cum jetting against the latex barrier of the condom. She gripped him tighter, their bodies straining together desperately in their completion. Finally they collapsed, exhausted from their release.

## Chapter Five

A hike through the woods surrounding their cabin was the perfect way to work through the awkwardness she'd felt following their first lovemaking. Gabriel had been his usual irreverent self, though there was a warmth between them now that hadn't been present before. When he'd suggested a walk, she'd been happy to join in. Now they stood on a low ridge overlooking the cabin and the valley below. It was still fairly early in the day, and mist was lingering in the low-lying areas. It was early fall, but at this elevation, some of the more precocious trees had started to put on their annual color show.

They stood looking down at the valley, not talking, just taking in the beauty that surrounded them. Gabriel wrapped an arm casually around her waist.

"It's amazing to think there's this much beauty so close to the city, and so many crazies running around." Ryannon sighed.

"Couldn't appreciate the beauty without the crazy and even the ugly."

"I'm just so afraid of Hezekiah. You don't know what he's capable of."

"I've got a pretty good idea," Gabriel said ruefully, touching his still-livid black eye. He pulled her into his embrace, then rubbed his face against the top of her head where she'd confined her hair into four loose French braids. Gabriel had watched the process that morning, stunned that she could restrain all her hair so neatly.

"Don't worry, baby. I won't let anything happen to you," he murmured against her braids.

Ryannon snuggled in closer, sliding her arms under the flannel-lined denim jacket he wore. "It's not me he wants. He's coming for you."

“Well, I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time. I got you and me.”

They continued their walk, eventually coming to a small stream. Gabriel poured some coffee from the thermos into cups he had in his backpack, and they sat down on the mossy ground to enjoy the piquant beverage. The silence was broken only by the soft murmuring of the stream wending its way down to the river below.

“So how does it feel?” Gabriel asked.

For a moment Ryannon could only stare at him, horrified that he was asking about their new sexual relationship. She so did not want to have *that* discussion right now. Possibly not ever. “What?” she asked, primarily to buy time.

He tilted his head more in her direction. “How does it feel? You know to be, well, different. The auras, and all that stuff.”

Ryannon took a gulp of her coffee, burning her tongue in the process but not really minding. She wasn’t crazy about discussing her talent, but it beat the hell out of talking about what had earlier that morning.

“I really don’t know. I mean, I’ve always been this way. So I don’t know anything different. Besides, I don’t make a habit of telling people I’m a knower, so I’ve never been harassed all that much.”

“You told me.”

“I didn’t have a choice. After all, I’m the one who put the Redeemers on your tail in the first place,” she said.

Gabriel nodded as though to concede the point. “It’s freaky, you know? Really weird. The wings are pretty cool,” he said. For a moment he simply stared into space. After a few beats of silence, his wings appeared, glowing majestically in the soft morning light.

Ryannon laughed. “You really like those, don’t you?”

“What’s not to like? Like I said, it’s way cool. Can you imagine what a chick magnet these would be?”



She watched as he visibly caught himself. Apparently he'd just realized who he was talking to.

"That probably wasn't the smartest thing to say right now. Was it?"

"That would be no," she said through pursed lips. Even though she knew she had no claim on this man, and he was free to pick up as many women as his big old wings could carry, it still stung a bit, and she'd be damned if she'd deny it.

"Listen, I'm no diplomat, and despite my mother's best efforts, I've never learned to govern my tongue. When we get out of here—"

Ryannon raised her head. "Please, Gabriel. I know what you are. No promises you know you can't keep. I don't need that right now. Let's just keep it light. It's only reasonable that we would end up in bed together. It's just an adrenaline high and lust. Fun, but not something to make promises over. Let's not muck things up, okay?" Ryannon said, proud of the philosophically casual tone she'd taken. No way in hell would she be another notch on his wing. If anyone would be notching anything, it would be her.

Gabriel retracted his wings. She'd said most people wouldn't be able to see them, and they were in a pretty remote location. Still, it made sense to be careful. Like before, he felt somewhat bereft when they were gone. When he got home, he was determined to wear them out at least some of the time. He seriously doubted that anyone he knew was in the right state of grace to see them. Then again, who would've thought he could be a freaking angel. Apparently there was no way to tell. He leaned back on one elbow, still holding his coffee cup in his other hand. He watched Ryannon as she continued to sip her coffee. He was more than a bit disturbed about what she'd said about their relationship. Of all people, he should be able to appreciate a purely sexual relationship. Goodness knows he'd spent most of his adulthood avoiding commitment of any kind. But looking at her, all he could think was *mine*. He couldn't fail to see the irony. For the first time in his life, he wanted something more, and the lady in question was so not interested.

“Yeah, the wings don’t bother me so much. It’s this other freaky shit,” he said, having decided to resume their previous conversation. “Those guys in that car...”

“I told you, Gabe, if it wasn’t right, he wouldn’t have let it happen,” she said softly. Then suddenly her demeanor brightened as she said cheerfully, “As a matter of fact, I don’t think you’ll be able to use your wings to pick up women either.”

“So I can only use my powers for good?” Damn, what was the point of having powers if he couldn’t use them as he saw fit? “Speaking of powers, what else can I do? Is there a manual out there that can tell me all this?”

Ryannon pursed her lips as if in deep thought, causing him to groan inwardly. *Down boy. You just had her a few hours ago. What the hell’s the matter with you?* God, he was in bad shape. He could happily spend the rest of his life in bed with this woman.

“Keep in mind that you’re my first angel.”

“Oh really?” He couldn’t resist leering at her.

“You know what I mean, perv. I’ve seen angels before, but you’re the first one I’ve ever met. I know some other winged creatures—”

“Other winged creatures?” Gabriel’s mouth dropped open. How many other freaky people were there out there?

Ryannon shrugged. “Mostly fae, but there are others as well.”

“Fae? Fairies? You mean like Grimm?”

Ryannon nodded. “Yeah, but a whole lot grimmer. I don’t think there are all that many. At least, not that I’ve seen.”

“Damn. So what can I do? It’s so weird to be almost thirty years old and discover I have all these powers I know nothing about.”

“Well, that seems to be the way it goes with these things anyway. I gradually learned as I matured, and some talents don’t come until you’re older anyway. I think you can do telepathy, but it might be one of those things you have to work on.”

“Work on?” Gabriel asked.

"Some things are like that. Reading auras just came to me. But understanding the way I knew stuff—well, that took a minute or two. It's almost like someone just uploads information into my brain. It took me a long time to learn to trust it. I don't know of any other talents, though you might have them. Like I said, you're my first angel."

Gabriel nodded and drained his cup, then placed it on the ground before leaning back on both elbows. He tilted his head back and stared up at the milky blue sky. He still didn't know what to make of all this. Now he realized that despite the wings, somewhere deep inside he hadn't really believed Ryannon's story. Until those guys in the car—he couldn't doubt that one. He glanced over at her. She was sitting with her chin on her knees, sipping her coffee and staring into space. Something about her posture was just...melancholy. Okay, enough deep stuff.

He smiled at her as he said, "Come here."

She gave him a salacious look as she responded just as he'd expected. "If you want what I've got, you can come to me."

"I don't think you should feel that way. I've got candy."

She snorted derisively. "I've heard that one before." But she still scooted over to sit closer to him.

"Kiss me."

"Nuh-uh." She shook her head, looking all of twelve years old. "Candy first."

"Ah c'mon. What's a little kiss?" Gabriel said.

She shook her head again, then suddenly sprang to her feet and took off running toward the woods that surrounded the small clearing. For a moment Gabriel was too caught up in laughter to follow. Finally he jumped to his feet and ran after her.

Ryannon was surprisingly fast. Had she not been laughing so hard, he would've had a helluva time catching her. Finally he grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off her feet. Still running as fast as he could, he carried her to the

large pin oak a couple dozen yards ahead. Reaching the tree, he lifted her up and placed her on a low branch. At this point, they were both gasping with laughter.

“Hey, you’d better hold on to that branch,” he said. “I’d hate for you to fall and hurt yourself.”

“I’m not that high off the ground,” she said, but did grasp the branch more firmly.

“Good point,” he said, moving between her parted legs. “In fact, you’re in exactly the right position for what I have in mind.” His face was positioned directly at her crotch, and he was finally going to get a chance to do something he’d wanted to do since he first laid eyes on her. He reached under her peacock blue sweater to grasp the waistband of the leggings she wore. Ryannon suddenly stopped laughing and grabbed his hands.

“Don’t you dare, Gabriel Wynne. We’re in a very public place.”

“Ah c’mon, baby. There’s nobody around for miles. Besides, no one can see us through the leaves of the tree.” The draping habit of the pin oak formed a 360-degree curtain around them. It had been a warm fall, and the tree had only shed a few leaves. The rest shimmered their coppery hues in the slight breeze like a Druid cathedral. “C’mon, baby,” he said in his most persuasive voice. “It’ll be good, I promise.” He could tell from the considering look in her eyes that she was tempted. He knew he had her when she withdrew her hands. He slipped her leggings and panties down to her ankles and looked down ruefully at the heavy boots she wore. Not wanting to take time to remove them—hell, she might change her mind—he simply pushed her knees apart to expose her feminine beauty. The glistening pink flesh of her pussy was accentuated by the crisp black curls that surrounded it. He pressed his face against her, luxuriating in the feel of her against his skin. He inhaled her sweet pungent scent. Not wanting the bark to abrade her tender skin he palmed her ass with both hands. This served to tilt her pelvis up, exposing her to him like a sensuous buffet.

Using just the tip of his tongue, he licked her delicately from the bottom of her opening to the top, stopping just short of her clit, which peeked out from her pubic bush, just begging for his attention. But he resisted the temptation. Instead he continued to lick her up and down. Her juices now covered him from nose to chin, and he couldn't get enough. He used the flat of his tongue, knowing that the abrasive texture would drive her wild. And it did. She was grinding her pussy into his face, her thighs clamped tightly around his head. Now he gave her what she'd been asking for. He took her clit between his puckered lips and sucked gently. She was mewling under him, tremors racking her body as though she had a fever. She grabbed his head, her fingers tangling in his hair, apparently forgetting that she was more than five feet off the ground. The only thing keeping her in the tree at this point was his hold on her ass. He sucked harder, driven almost out of his mind by the need to feel her come. He slipped one hand from under her ass and quickly parted her pussy lips even farther. He slid one finger, then another deep into her. In and out. Again and again while he sucked on her clit as strongly as he dared. And that was it. She came apart under his hands, her juices flowing in a continuous stream. He licked her eagerly, wanting to absorb as much of her essence as possible. Then she went limp against him. He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her out of the tree and into his arms. There he held her until her heart rate calmed down.

Then he turned her to face the tree. He had his cock out and the condom on so quickly, he was surprised he didn't have windburn. She was more than ready for him, and before he knew it, he was balls-deep in one stroke. She ground her hips against him with an eager whimper, and he lost all control. He held her against the tree as he drove his cock into her so hard, he lifted her off her feet. He knew he was going too fast, too hard, but the scent of her arousal filled him with desperate need, and he couldn't stop, couldn't slow down, couldn't even think. Each time he drove into her, she cried out, asking for more, begging him to go deeper, until with a final thrust he could go no more. His back arched as though it would snap in two, and then his seed was pouring into the latex with a force he'd never experienced. He

collapsed against her. For now, movement of any kind was impossible, and they just leaned against the tree. Before long, he realized she was shivering in the light breeze, so he turned her around and helped her rearrange her clothing. She looked up at him, and her dazed expression was irresistible. He leaned down to give her a soft kiss, then just held her in his embrace. Seriously, he could stay like this for the rest of his life: just him, Ryannon, and the trees.

\* \* \*

Ryannon looked out into the living room where Gabriel was puttering about. Since they'd returned from their hike, he'd restlessly explored every inch of the tiny cabin. Ryannon had washed up and raided the pantry to prepare lunch. She'd found a container of potato-leek soup in the freezer and was making ham and Swiss panini to go with it. She'd just turned her attention back to the sandwiches when she heard Gabriel exclaim with delight.

"Look what we have here," he said, rolling what looked like an amplifier out of the closet. "Who would've thought Pink would have a karaoke machine? Thank God. I was going crazy without anything to play."

"Don't you have your trumpet?"

"Yeah, but I'm in the mood for the guitar or piano," he said, tinkering with the knobs on the machine.

"Why didn't you bring your guitar?"

"It's too big and more delicate than my horn. It's so frustrating. I started taking music lessons when I was three, and I haven't gone a day without playing since."

"Your folks must have been proud to have such a musical prodigy," she said.

He snorted derisively. "I think they just wanted me out of the house."

"Gee, I can't imagine why they'd want that," she said with as much sarcasm as she could muster.

He looked up at her. "Do you sing?"

"Not so anyone with ears would want to hear," she said as she lifted the heavy cast-iron lid she'd been using to weigh down the sandwiches to find that they were grilled to perfection.

He walked over to the island that flanked the kitchen and stood watching as she plated the sandwiches.

"You have a lovely speaking voice. That huskiness is mad sexy. I don't believe you can't sing."

No one had ever told her *that* before. "Trust me, I can't."

"Just give it a try," he said, holding the microphone out to her. "I'm a trained voice coach, you know. I bet I can help."

"Nope. I'm beyond help."

"Remember, I've got candy."

Ryannon backed away from him. "I doubt I'd survive more candy."

They both laughed at that. Then she handed him a plate. "Besides, lunch is ready."

It didn't take long to finish their meal, and after Gabriel tidied up the kitchen, he went right back to the karaoke machine. The man was obsessed with music. It was like living with a renegade branch of the von Trapp family. Ryannon sat down on the sofa and played with Geometry a bit. It didn't take the cat long to tire of chasing her toy, and now she was curled up on the windowsill enjoying the warm sunlight streaming through the window.

Before long, Gabriel began crooning "Maybe I'm Amazed" in a clear tenor that literally curled her toes. What was it with this guy? He got to her. He really got to her. Usually she avoided players like him. Amazing what adrenaline could do; apparently it had caused her to totally lose her fucking mind. Or at least her sense of self-preservation. He continued singing, never breaking eye contact with her, and despite her best intentions, the sincerity of McCartney's words pierced directly into her soul. Then, before she even thought of what she was doing, she joined in,

singing along with more enthusiasm than talent. His cheeky grin was all the reward she needed, though she hadn't sung in public since her high school choir instructor suggested she take art instead. They passed the rest of the afternoon that way; laughter and song obliterated any thought of the Redeemers—at least for now.



## Chapter Six

The next couple of weeks passed in much the same way. They spent as much time as possible watching the seasons change in the mountains. There were other cabins in the area, but as near as they could tell, the homes were unoccupied. They checked in with Pink from time to time, but he hadn't had any news for them thus far. They only saw people on the one occasion when they ventured into town for fresh supplies. Of course, Ryannon was disappointed. Her life was at a standstill until this was over. She had a business to run and couldn't remain closed off indefinitely. On the other hand, she hadn't had a vacation in years. Being a small business owner meant long days with very few breaks. Also, she was woman enough to acknowledge that she was having the time of her life with a man she could easily fall in love with.

She looked up at the sky from her supine position on the hammock. She and Gabriel spent nearly every evening cuddled up in the hammock, stargazing.

Sometimes they'd have long discussions—like the night he asked her about growing up with the Redeemers. He'd been surprised when she told him that despite everything, she still had some warm memories about the place.

"It wasn't all bad. There were lots of kids there, so I had plenty of playmates. Being an only child I really missed that when we moved to Atlanta," she said.

"Was it really strict, lots of long dresses and beatings? Were girls forced to marry old men?"

"No. No. Nothing like that. I mean the women did dress differently. It was sort of a bohemian, hippy thing. Lots of long dresses and handmade clothes, but not like Puritans or anything." She laughed when he looked pointedly at the long sweater

and vest she wore over jeans that had been patched repeatedly. “Yeah, I guess there are some things you just can’t get away from. Oh, and no beatings at all, at least not when I was there. The Redeemers were about love and didn’t believe in corporal punishment,” she said.

“What about marriage and dating? You hear about these cults with girls marrying before they’ve even reached puberty.”

“I don’t think so. My parents married young, but he wasn’t older than her or anything. They became Redeemers in college, and nobody made them get married.”

“It sounds pretty cool, almost like where I grew up.”

“Really? I thought you grew up on a farm.”

“Yeah, but I was surrounded by cousins. We were always together, and everybody shared. There was always somebody to play with. We went to church a lot, but we had a lot of fun and family too. Especially in the summer when school was out.”

Ryannon nodded. “That does sound like the Redeemers.”

He put a foot down on the floor and began rocking the hammock slowly. “What do you think went wrong?”

“I don’t know. It sounds like Hezekiah’s gone crazy. I remember a long time ago my dad said that there were people in the Redeemers who wanted to overthrow him, but that Hezekiah was cunning and that he’d always come up with a way to get around them. I guess announcing a date is one of the ways he plans to do it.”

“Yeah, I can see that. People are bound to perk up and be more loyal if they think the end is imminent. Still doesn’t explain the guns, though.”

Ryannon sighed. “I know. Hezekiah was always against guns. Said they did nothing but draw trouble.”

“So what did your folks do when they finally got away from the guy?”

“Believe it or not, they’re still trying to save the world. Only now they’re saving lives and not souls.”

"Well, that's pretty cryptic."

"Oh I don't mean to be. They're hydrologists. They go around the world drilling wells in emerging countries. They're convinced that the next world war will be fought over clean water." She shrugged. "They're probably right. I guess in their own way, they're working to head off Armageddon while Hezekiah's doing all he can to bring it on. Kind of ironic when you think about it."

Gabriel shook his head. "Not that ironic. Your folks sound like people who just want to do good and got caught up with the crazy for a minute. Fortunately, they had enough sense to get out."

"Yeah. I've often wondered what would've happened if Hezekiah hadn't tried to burn me at the stake. Would we still be with the Redeemers?"

"I doubt it. There probably would've been something else. I'm thinking your folks were already ripe to bolt. I'll bet there were lots of people there who would've sacrificed their kids if he told them to."

Ryannon shuddered, then snuggled closer to him. "You're probably right. It's a scary thought. Let's change the subject. I'm starting to get spooked."

"Baby, if you're just now starting to get spooked, you've got much bigger 'nads than I do," he said with a chuckle. "Okay, I wanted to ask you about something else anyway."

"What?"

"You said you didn't know any other angels, but do you know anyone who knows more about it? I just feel like a total loser knowing nothing about something like this."

"Yeah, I can imagine that it would be confusing. I have a few friends who could probably help you."

Reflecting back on that conversation, Ryannon hoped she'd be able to keep her promise. At this rate, she wasn't sure they'd ever be able to leave. She just couldn't understand what the heck Hezekiah was up to. According to Pink he'd definitely

bought weapons—illegally and from an ATF informant to boot. The question was why? If the man was convinced that the world would end in little more than a week, what were the guns for? Obviously he didn't believe his own press. She cuddled closer to Gabriel, relaxing as she inhaled his musky scent. She dozed for a bit. Then she startled awake so suddenly that she was convinced for a moment that it was all a dream. She *knew*. This was no dream. It was almost impossible to breathe, so she sat up abruptly, almost overturning the hammock as the realization struck her like a hammer blow. She *knew*. Of course, nothing else made sense. Gabriel sat up as well, putting his feet down to stabilize the hammock before it dumped them onto the wood floor.

"Baby, what the hell—"

"Oh my God. I can't believe I didn't think of it before," Ryannon struggled to say as she gasped for air.

"Think of what?" Gabriel gave her a puzzled look.

"Hezekiah. I know what he's up to."

Gabriel ran a hand through his deliciously rumpled hair. Fortunately, all the bruising on his face had faded, revealing his full masculine glory. As if he needed help in that department. "Good. Are you planning to share with the rest of the class?"

"Waco. He wants a Waco. He wants to be the next Koresh."

"What?"

"That's the only reasonable explanation. Why else would he do the one thing that's guaranteed to draw government attention? The man's been flying under the radar for decades. *Now* he decides to stockpile illegal weapons? Hezekiah is too cunning for that. If he wanted to buy weapons, he wouldn't buy them from an informant. It would be done legally and aboveboard. Besides, he's got a hundred people in that compound. Why wouldn't he send one of them to buy guns if he wanted them?"

"Wait. Wait a minute. You're scared to death of this cat—with good reason. But maybe you're seeing him as something he's not. Maybe he's not as smart as you're thinking. Maybe he's even crazier than when you were there before."

"No. No. I know, Gabe. I *know*."

"Holy shit," he said softly as comprehension dawned. He jumped up then, dumping her onto the floor on her butt. "Sorry, baby," he said as he reached down to help her up. "We've got to call Pink."

Ryannon rose to her feet and followed him back into the house. "Pink? What can he do?"

"I don't think he can do anything, but I suspect some of his friends would want to know this," he said.

Ryannon watched as he retrieved his cell phone from the kitchen island, pausing as a thought occurred to her. "Wait," she said, reaching out to grab the hand that held the phone. "What exactly are you planning to tell him?"

Gabriel gave her a puzzled frown. "What do you mean? I'm going to tell him what you told me. That Hezekiah plans to Waco himself and his followers out of this world."

"But how are we going to tell him I know? How would I have come by this information? He knows we've been stuck up here for weeks."

"I don't think it's a big deal. I mean he knows about your shop and the crystals and all that witchy stuff. Being psychic isn't that big a deal these days. They even have TV shows."

"I'm not psychic," Ryannon said automatically as she considered what he'd just said. It made sense, and she moved her hand away from his. After giving her a long look, he leaned down to place a tender but searing kiss on her lips.

"It'll be okay, babe. Remember, I got you."

Ryannon nodded, and he made the call. From listening to his side of the conversation, she figured out that Pink didn't want to come to the cabin for fear of

being followed, so they planned to meet him at the same coffee shop where they'd met before.

Gabriel closed the phone. "Time for bed, sweets. Pink wants to meet us pretty early tomorrow." She took his hand as they walked into the bedroom.

Their lovemaking that night was tender and slow, as if their bodies knew that their time of sweet isolation was at an end, but the future was still starkly uncertain. She made her way down his body, almost Brailleing him as though to record every centimeter of him in her memory. His skin was so musky and warm, she wanted to absorb him in every pore. The salty tang under her tongue was irresistible, and she licked his flesh repeatedly. She followed the dark hair that covered his torso until she reached his throbbing cock.

Ryannon loved giving fellatio. The power of it. The taste and the sensations. She wanted to test her lover. Bring him to the brink, then push him over the edge. She began by touching him, lifting his heavy balls in one hand while slowly licking his shaft from base to tip. His groaned response was all the encouragement she needed. She traced the thick veining that ran all along the surface, using the flat of her tongue for maximum coverage. Again and again she followed it, inhaling his intoxicating scent while moaning against his sensitive flesh, knowing that the vibration would heighten his pleasure. He cried out again and again under her ministrations.

"Damn it, Ry, for God's sake suck it. Please."

But she didn't. She continued the teasing until he was practically screaming in frustration, then took his cock in her mouth and deep throated him in one stroke, rewarding him for his almost inhuman endurance. He did scream then as he arched his back until only his shoulders and heels touched the bed. She took him as deep as she could again and again, loving the feel of him and the power of bringing him to this point. With one finger she began to probe his anus. When he responded with a guttural groan, she slipped the finger in up to the second knuckle. Now she established a rhythm with her mouth and her finger working in tandem. From the

tightening of his body, she knew his orgasm was only seconds away, and she pressed her finger against his prostate while taking his cock so deeply into her mouth that her nose was buried in his pubic bush. Gabriel was babbling incoherently now, but she didn't need words as his salty cum jetted into her mouth. She swallowed it, aroused almost beyond bearing by his potent masculinity. She was so turned on that she slipped two fingers between her legs and began to frantically frig her clit. Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes as she focused on her pleasure. Using her other hand, she began to finger-fuck herself as she continued flicking her clit. Before long, she could feel her impending orgasm as it vibrated out from her clit through her body. She opened her eyes to see Gabriel watching her with fixed fascination, his eyes burning with renewed desire as he followed her movements. Seeing the blatant lust in his eyes was enough to send her over the edge, and she fell back on the bed as her orgasm exploded over her.

"Look at you," he said reverently, looking down at her naked body. "You're the hottest piece of ass I've ever had. You know that?"

Ryannon gasped, sure that she should be insulted, but somehow she wasn't. His blatant, unvarnished words were full of veneration, not disdain, and made her feel so desired and wanted that there was no room for embarrassment. All she could think about was fucking him again as soon as possible. Apparently she really was a hot piece of ass. "Back at you, buddy. Back at you," she said.

\* \* \*

Pink was waiting in his truck when they pulled into the parking lot of the coffee shop the next morning. Rather than entering the restaurant, they simply climbed into the extended cab of his truck with Ryannon sitting between the two men.

She told Pink about her revelations from the previous evening. To her surprise he accepted her insights without question. He stared at the windshield for what seemed to be a long time before he rubbed a hand over his bald head.

“Well now, isn’t this a cluster fuck,” he said in a soft tone that belied the grim look on his face.

“What do you mean?” Gabriel asked before Ryannon could.

“I have it on good authority that the ATF plans to serve a search warrant on that compound.” He glanced down at the high-tech watch he wore on his right wrist. “Right about now.”

“Oh no,” Ryannon said as a wave of sickness rose in her throat. Could they get there in time to stop them? And how on earth would they do it?

“We’ve got to get to Rome,” Gabriel said, wrapping a comforting arm around her shoulder.

“What do you think you can do?” Pink asked. “These guys aren’t stupid. They know how to handle these kind of situations.”

“You don’t understand. He *wants* them to kill him and all those people,” Ryannon said urgently. “They might not understand what they’re dealing with.”

“I understand, and my guess is they do too. It’s not like this is their first messianic nut job. What do you think you can do?”

Gabriel spoke up. “You know Ryannon has talents. We don’t really know what we can do, but we have to try. With any luck, by the time we get there, this cat will have surrendered, and this will all be over.”

Ryannon nodded, but she knew better.

Pink exhaled heavily, then without a word, he simply started the engine and reversed out of the parking space.

\* \* \*

The drive to Rome wasn’t a long one, probably less than two hours. Unfortunately, there was no interstate between the two locations, and to Ryannon the time seemed to telescope so that those two hours were endless. The rolling hills and glorious scenery—fall was presenting itself in magnificent Technicolor—triggered no more notice than if the entire landscape were battleship gray.



As they approached the compound, Pink pulled over on the shoulder of the highway to make a few phone calls. It took him a while to find the location of the ATF agents. Eventually he pulled into the parking lot of a small rural church that the agents were using as a command center. They quickly climbed out of the truck as soon as Pink parked. Several men in ATF jackets were standing together talking as they sipped from large coffee cups. Ryannon watched as they immediately recognized Pink and walked over to join them.

Pink introduced them to the agents, who gave them the skeptical look patented by law enforcement personnel everywhere.

"I know you guys are wondering what we're doing here," Pink said. All three men gave him a "no shit" look. "See, here's the thing, I think they can help you with your situation," he said, gesturing toward Ryannon and Gabriel.

"And what do you know about our current situation?" asked the only agent large enough to stand eye to eye with Pink, who didn't answer. The staring contest went on for several long seconds when one of the other agents, whose aura was such a brilliant shade of blue that Ryannon immediately trusted him, cleared his throat.

"Hell, it's not like we've got a helluva lot going on. We tried to serve the warrant, and they shot at us. Now we're trying to decide whether to call for backup or wait until we catch Morris away from the compound."

Ryannon frowned. She'd forgotten Hezekiah's last name. Nobody ever used it. "I suppose you know there are a hundred or so people in there. Including children."

"Of course we know that," snapped the first agent, whose muddy colors indicated more brawn than brain. Ryannon deliberately turned back to the blue agent. "If we can get them out without anyone getting hurt, will you let us try it?"

The agent frowned at her. "Who are you?"

Ryannon took a deep breath. "I used to live here when I was a kid. I know Hezekiah, and I think I know how to get him to let those people go."

He looked at her, then at Gabriel, then back at her again, his piercing gray eyes missing nothing. She sensed that he was taking their measure, probably trying

to decide if they were crazy or not. “You’re not thinking about doing anything stupid like going in there, are you?”

Ryannon shook her head firmly. “I can assure you, sir, nothing on earth could make me go back into that building.”

The man continued to stare. Ryannon couldn’t help but be glad the man wasn’t interrogating her. He wasn’t very big, less than six feet tall with a wiry frame that would never carry much weight, but he was a born leader and clearly in charge of this operation. Then he nodded. “Okay, y’all can follow me back over there, but you’re going to stay in the tree line. You won’t be out of rifle range, but I’m hoping they won’t even know we’re there.”

Ryannon and Gabriel walked beside the agent while Pink followed. The other two agents remained at the church. It wasn’t until they walked around to the back of the church that Ryannon realized that the building sat on a little rise above the compound. There was a grove of pine trees between the two buildings, and once they descended the hill, the compound was no longer visible. From this level, no one in the compound would be able to see the church either. After walking for ten minutes or so, they were close enough to see the building, but still far enough away that they couldn’t be seen, or at least she hoped so. Ryannon wiped a hand over her face as memories of her life with the Redeemers flooded her. Though everything about the place was markedly different from what she’d known as a child, it was impossible to change the sense of foreboding that emanated from the place. It had quadrupled in size, and someone had put up white siding on what used to be cinder block buildings. A large parking lot filled with cars flanked the back of the building, whereas the front was attractively landscaped with a green lawn, dogwood trees, and azaleas. Even so, the buildings squatted in the clearing like a malevolent microbe, contaminating the natural beauty that surrounded it.

Ryannon plucked at Gabriel’s sleeve and drew him away from their companions.

"Oh, so now you're going to tell me how we're going to get those people out of there?" he asked.

"Remember I told you that you might be telepathic?"

Gabriel nodded. "I think you can tell Hezekiah to come out, and he will."

"What? Why would he do that?"

"He'll think you're God. He claims to hear God all the time, but I think it's just wishful thinking. But you can make him think he's hearing God. He's sure to obey if you tell him to surrender."

"So, let me get this straight. You want me to play Jedi mind tricks on old boy." Ryannon nodded. "How do you even know I can do this?"

Ryannon shrugged. "I don't, but we have to try."

\* \* \*

Gabriel tilted his head back to look up at the dappled light that streamed through the tree canopy. He focused on what he wanted to say to Hezekiah, and just like that, he felt his consciousness touch the other man's. He instinctively backed away, shutting down the connection as quickly as he could. The darkness and rank evil that slithered out of the leader was not something he wanted to encounter ever again. But there were a hundred people in there that didn't have a clue that this man was deliberately leading them to their death. Much as he'd like to think otherwise, he knew he could never live with himself if he didn't at least try to get them out. He rubbed his palms over his thighs to rid them of their dampness before he tried again. He focused, trying to make his "voice" as God-like as possible. It was a bit of struggle because he couldn't even imagine what God would sound like. His thoughts were scattered until he remembered the movie *Bruce Almighty*. Morgan Freeman. Perfect. He repeated the same message twice, then three times. He knew from the way power surged through him that it had worked. His message had been received, but the thought of opening his mind up to the other man again to hear his response was out of the question.

As he felt the power drain out of him, Gabriel struggled for a moment to remain upright. The exhaustion wasn't as bad as when he called hellfire. Maybe telepathy didn't require as much energy as slaughter, or perhaps he was just getting used to it. Either way, he wasn't about to pass out yet—but it wouldn't be long. He looked down as Ryannon wrapped an arm around his waist. He wasn't sure if it was for comfort or physical support, but he'd take whatever she offered. He leaned against her, grateful for thoughtfulness. "It's done. I told him to do it. I don't know if he will."

Ryannon stared up at him with a questioning look on her face. He suspected she knew that he should have heard Hezekiah's response. Too damned bad. That man's mind was the scariest place he'd ever been. No way was he going there again. He still felt kind of sick from the single contact.

Pink and the ATF agent still stood a bit away from them, watching the compound. From time to time Pink would glance over at them, but no one asked them any questions. The agent had a pair of binoculars, but apparently there was no movement in the building. They stood there in the woods for so long, Gabriel was more or less convinced that his efforts had come to naught. He was about to suggest that they leave when the agent started gesturing toward them.

"Sonofabitch," he said. "They're coming out."

Gabriel strained to see as people started coming out the back door of the main building. At first there was only one or two, then large groups of people started streaming out of its white confines. The agent was on his walkie-talkie with the other two agents, and before long Gabriel could hear them rustling through the underbrush as they rushed to join them.

"I don't see Hezekiah," Ryannon said. The people were still coming out of the building. There were more of them now, and they all seemed to be rushing as they climbed into cars and trucks and sped away.

"I think that was the last of them," she said. "Still no Hezekiah."

"Do you think he's dead in there?" Gabriel asked.

"Did you tell him to kill himself?"

"Of course not. I told him to turn himself in."

Ryannon nodded. "Then that's what he'll do."

They stood watching long enough for the agents to become impatient. He was relieved when Ryannon spoke up.

"There he is now."

Gabriel watched as a tall, lanky man in a blue button-down shirt and well-pressed chinos walked out of the building. He was surprised by how normal the man looked. More like a middle manager on casual Friday than the messianic leader of a doomsday cult. Even from this distance, he could see the confused look on the man's face as the ATF agents approached. As ordered, the man knelt on the ground, then stretched out prone in the grass. The three agents trotted across the lawn. Ryannon and Gabriel waited until they had Hezekiah restrained before they came out of the trees.

Hezekiah was sitting on the ground, meek and subdued, with his hands cuffed behind his back. When he saw Ryannon, he totally lost it.

"You!" he screamed, struggling to break away from the agents. Gabriel grabbed Ryannon's arm and pushed her behind him. "I should've known. One of your witch-born tricks. I can't believe I was deceived by your diabolical chicanery. Dear God Jehovah, I thought he had come to me at last." Hezekiah slumped down as though the anger had suddenly drained out of him. "I thought it was him. I should've been the one. I was the firstborn, the anointed one. He stole my birthright for a mess of pottage," he mumbled. Then he looked up at Ryannon again with renewed energy. "But how did you know? How did you know when I never told a soul? Did you look into my mind as well? See my thoughts? Even when you were a child, I had no protection from you. Witch-born, that's what you are. Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. He's punishing me for not killing you when I had the chance." Then he shuddered, and Ryannon saw his chest rise as he took a deep breath. "How did you know? How did you do it? You never told me you were a telepath."

Ryannon frowned as it took her a moment to realize that he thought she was the one who had used telepathy on him. “Knew what?”

“About Matthew, my brother. How did you know that I killed him?” he said flatly.

Ryannon struggled to keep her mouth from falling open in shock. Even the ATF agents looked surprised by what the man had said. She looked at Gabriel, who had grabbed her arms to keep her from moving from behind his back. He shook his head surreptitiously, so she knew that he didn’t know what the other man was talking about either.

“I’m not telepathic. Why did you kill your brother?”

“Then who—” He turned to look at Gabriel.

“Yeah, I played Jedi mind tricks on you, but I don’t know jack about your brother.”

Ryannon repeated herself. “Hezekiah, why did you kill your brother?”

“I had to kill him.” He spoke as though explaining the simplest of concepts to a child or one who was simple-minded. “I was the firstborn, the anointed one. God spoke to him, but it should have been me. Everyone was so blinded by his light that they couldn’t see him as he truly was. He even deceived God. I knew if I got rid of him, I would gain his gift.”

Ryannon took a deep breath. She wasn’t sure why she was so stunned by the man’s revelations. She’d always suspected that Hezekiah had blood on his hands, but to kill his own brother? She realized that she had missed something he had said.

“But if you didn’t know about Matthew, then that means that after all these years of praying, fasting, and sacrifice, he finally spoke to me?”

“Legend has it that he moves in mysterious ways,” Gabriel said in a dry tone matched only by his droll expression. Ryannon looked at him and couldn’t believe it when she saw his wings glowing in the bright sunlight.

Hezekiah was still speaking as he turned to look at Gabriel. His piercing scream echoed through the still of the morning. Despite the handcuffs restraining him, he pulled as far away from Gabriel as he could. Gabriel moved Ryannon even farther away as the man started babbling incoherently. The ATF agents grabbed and tried to subdue him, but it was impossible. He was screaming as though being tortured by the hounds of hell. She heard one of the agents say something about "mental evaluation." Then the leader ordered an agent to go retrieve one of their vehicles. They had Hezekiah pinned to the ground now, holding him there with a knee pressed firmly in the center of his back. The rants had ceased, but the man still writhed there, moaning so piteously that he sounded like a wounded animal.

The end was almost anticlimactic. The third agent returned with their car, and they called for backup to process the crime scene, then loaded Hezekiah into their vehicle. The lead agent walked back over to them. Sometime during the chaos, Gabriel had retracted his wings.

"So are you two going to tell me what you did? And why does he call you a witch?" he asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "We tried some things, but I don't think they worked."

The agent rubbed his chin, then nodded. "I guess that's as good an answer as any." He gave Gabriel a piercing look. "Did I see what I thought I saw?"

Gabriel pursed his lips and managed to look confused. "I don't know. What do you think you saw?"

The man opened his mouth as though to speak, but shook his head instead, apparently having thought better of it. "Never mind. Never mind, it's not important. Anyway, thanks for your help, and remember, none of this ever happened." He walked back over to his vehicle and got in. Pink walked over to the car and began talking to the agents who were apparently waiting for their backup to arrive.

Ryannon turned to press her face into Gabriel's chest. They stood there just holding one another, then Ryannon pulled her upper body away to look up at him.

"What on earth possessed you to do that?"

“Do what?” he said with that same dead fish look he’d used on the ATF agent.

She sucked her teeth in annoyance. “You know damned well what. Why did you show your wings? Do you want the world to think you’re crazy? You do know they will lock your silly ass up?”

“If that agent is anything to go by, they won’t think I’m crazy; they’ll think they’re crazy. After all, they’re the ones who are seeing things. Besides, I didn’t think Hezekiah would be able to see them. I’m pretty sure he’s not in any state of grace of any kind. What’s that all about?”

Ryannon shook her head. She’d wondered about that herself. “I have no idea. Maybe we really do need an angel manual of some sort. I can’t believe Hezekiah’s locked up. I’ve been scared for a long time.”

“He’s going away for a long time, baby. Thank God,” Gabriel said. “With any luck that crazy cat will never see the light of day again.”

“But if God spoke to him...” She broke off, unable to complete the thought.

“Mysterious ways, baby, mysterious ways. After all, he made me an angel.”

Ryannon looked up as several more cars entered the parking lot. As the people began exiting the vehicles, she could see their ATF jackets. Pink nodded in their direction, then rejoined Ryannon and Gabriel. They trekked back up the hill to Pink’s truck and climbed in without a word.

Pink shook his head. “I don’t know what the hell went on here, and I don’t want to know either.”

Gabriel leaned his head back against the soft leather upholstery. Exhaustion was coming on fast now. He wouldn’t be able to stay awake much longer. “Good enough, old man. Good enough.”



## Chapter Seven

Ryannon looked up when Gabriel walked into the living room. He still looked a little tired, but certainly better than he had when she'd put him to bed five hours ago. Now it was nearly midnight.

"Wow, that was some adventure, wasn't it? I am sorry, though, that I got you involved in it." Ryannon struggled to maintain a light tone. By this time tomorrow, he'd be out of her life, and there was no point in letting him know how miserable she was at the thought.

"Hey." He smiled down at her where she sat with Geometry covering her legs. "It wasn't all bad. I've been through worse, and I can't complain about the fringe benefits."

Ryannon laughed as he sat down on the couch beside her. "Well, either way, I guess we'll go home tomorrow, and you never have to see me and my witchy ways again."

"But what if I want to? See you, I mean. You know what they say, once you've gone witch you've got that itch."

Ryannon groaned. "That's terrible."

"Hey, I'm a professional musician. People pay top dollar to hear me."

"They wouldn't if they heard that crap," she said.

"Can I help it if I've got broomstick fever?"

"Stop. Stop. Oh please stop."

Gabriel shook his head mournfully. "You weren't saying that last night. I feel so used."

“Yeah right.” She snorted.

“Seriously. Am I going to see you again?”

Ryannon shook her head. “Sorry, I don’t do the group thing.”

Gabriel reached over to stroke the top of Geometry’s head. The cat nudged his hand, demanding more. “Hey, neither do I—any more. Way too much work. You’re it for me. Guaranteed monogamy.”

Ryannon placed her hand on top of his on the cat’s head. “That sounds like a promise, and you know what I said about promises.”

“That only applied to promises I know I can’t keep. I won’t have any problem keeping this one. I’ve never been in love with anyone before, and I’ve never made any promises either.”

Ryannon took a deep breath. “Gabriel, you’re not in love with me. That’s just adrenaline and lust.”

“I know adrenaline, and I definitely know lust. And this ain’t it. This is love. You should know, because you love me too.”

“What?”

“Why are you fighting me when you love me, and you know I love you too? Why do you have to make things so complicated?”

“I’m making things complicated?” Ryannon gasped in indignation. “You’re the one who—”

“Who what? Told you I loved you and would be faithful. What more do you want? A ring?” He leaned back on the couch to reach into his pocket.

Ryannon grabbed his hand. “Don’t you dare!”

Apparently having had enough of the bickering back and forth, Geometry jumped off her lap. Landing delicately on the floor, she turned and gave them both a baleful glare, her turquoise eyes glittering with spite. Then she spit at them, turned her back, and stalked away with all the insulted dignity only a feline could muster.

After a long moment, they both burst into laughter at the cat’s nasty attitude.

"Well, she does have a point," said Gabriel.

Ryannon shook her head. What the hell was she fighting for? If he was lying, it couldn't hurt more than walking away without even trying would. She knew she'd always wonder what might have been. She gave Gabriel her most brilliant smile and was rewarded with a kiss so passionate, it curled her toes.

"All right, I accept your promise, Gabriel Wynne. And you're right, I love you too." He gave her a smug smile. "Just remember, I have witchy ways, and I won't hesitate to use them."

"I'm counting on it, baby. I'm counting on it."

"By the way, what do you have in your pocket?"

He gave her a sheepish grin, then showed her what he had in his hand. Her laughter couldn't be contained, and she doubled over helplessly. After a moment he joined her, and they both laughed until tears rolled down their cheeks. It was a soda can ring.

\* \* \*

Ryannon sat up, startled as the hammering on her front door awakened her from a sound slumber. For a moment she panicked. Could it be the Redeemers? Then she remembered that Hezekiah was in jail, and sighed with relief. The knocking came again, and Gabriel rolled over.

"What the hell?" he said, sitting up.

"Someone's at the door," Ryannon said, throwing back the antique quilt that covered them. After slipping on a robe over her pajamas, she started walking toward her bedroom door.

Gabriel jumped out of the bed. "Wait a minute, baby. You can't just go running to the door in the middle of the night."

Ryannon turned to look at the clock on her bedside table, then rolled her eyes at him. "It's nine o'clock in the morning."

He fastened his jeans, then pulled a T-shirt over his head. "Like I said, the middle of the night." He had played the previous evening, and they'd been out until nearly three in the morning.

"What are you doing?" she asked as he removed a handgun from the drawer in the bedside table and tucked it in the back of his jeans.

"The Redeemers got the drop on me once. I don't plan to give them a second chance."

The knocking came again, so Ryannon just threw up a hand in disgust and walked out of the bedroom with him hard on her heels. When she looked through the peephole, she was tempted to ignore her visitors. What in the world were her parents doing here? They weren't due back for months. Obviously they knew she dated and had relationships, but this was the first time they'd been in her home when she had an overnight guest. She sighed heavily and opened the door.

"Good morning, Mama, Dad. What are you two doing back in town?"

Ryannon had always thought of herself as a miniature replica of her mother. They were both petite with identical features. If her mother colored her closely cropped Caesar, many would probably mistake them for sisters. Her father wasn't a particularly large man. Though he kept his wiry frame fit with lots of exercise and physical activity, he was less than a foot taller than her mother. Like her mother, he looked significantly younger than his age.

Her mother gave her a pointed look. "What did you expect when we've been trying to reach you for days?"

"Are you going to invite us in?" her father asked.

"Of course." She backed out of the doorway to let them in, then closed the door and leaned against it. "Mama, Dad, this is my boyfriend Gabriel. Gabriel, this is my mother, Paula, and my father, Dave."

They shook hands; then the four of them stood awkwardly in the foyer for several moments.

"Uh, have y'all had any breakfast? I picked up some bagels from Einstein Brothers yesterday, and I can put on some coffee," Ryannon said.

They all followed her into her tiny kitchen, where she started the coffee while Gabriel put bagels in the toaster oven. Her parents seated themselves at the small table that sat at one end of the galley kitchen.

"So, I thought you guys were going to be in Namibia for three more months," Ryannon said.

"That was before we tried to call you several times and couldn't reach you," her father said.

"Well, you know how tough communications can be from the Continent. Plus, there *is* a major time difference." She was tempted to stick out her tongue at Gabriel's pitying look. Okay, so she never was good at this type of thing. She didn't want to tell her parents about the Redeemers if she could help it.

"Never was a problem before. Besides, none of your friends knew where you were either," her mother said.

"What gives, Ryannon? Why couldn't we reach you for weeks? Then we come back to find you with this young man who's carrying a gun," her father said.

Ryannon gave Gabriel her meanest look. Why did he have to keep that damned gun? She looked at her father again. How had he known Gabe had a gun?

"What? You think we're idiots? We may have devoted our lives to missionary work, but we know a gun when we see one. Remember, most of the countries we've been to were full of people carrying guns and committing all manner of violent acts. That's one of the reasons they need us," her father said.

Her mother spoke up. "Mamie Ryannon Brooks, where have you been? What have you been up to?"

Oh dear God, not the dreaded three-naming. Behind her mother's back, she could see Gabriel mouthing her first name over and over again. She couldn't blame him; she'd always hated her first name, and her mother had to be really ticked to

use it, though from her calm, almost placid expression, anyone who didn't know her wouldn't have a clue. Of course, that was when she was at her most deadly. Ryannon considered going with the "I'm grown, and that's none of your business" tack, but that had never worked before, and was unlikely to work now. Her parents typically didn't get involved in her life this way, but she could tell that they were sincerely worried. There was no way to get rid of them without telling the truth. Not for the first time in her life, she wished she were a better liar. The coffee had finished brewing, so she bought some time by pouring it into cups. She then walked over to the refrigerator to retrieve the cream, which she placed on the table next to the sugar bowl. Her father was more than passingly fond of both. Gabriel maintained his station at the toaster oven and raised an inquiring brow when she walked past. Clearly he knew that she was trying to get out of talking to her parents, but didn't know of any way to help.

"Fine," she said, slumping down into one of the chairs at the table, "I didn't want to tell you because you guys go into a really disturbing guilt trip every time he's mentioned—"

Her mother sucked in a deep breath. "Hezekiah! I knew he was involved somehow. I could feel it." Though her gifts weren't nearly as strong as her daughter's, Paula Brooks was definitely gifted with certain insights from time to time. Ryannon had often wondered if fear of her abilities was what had driven her to cling so strongly to religion when she was younger.

"Like that. Look, you've got to promise not to freak out if I tell you. He's in jail—"

"In jail?" her father said.

Knowing there was no way out of it, Ryannon recounted the tale of the past few weeks. By the time she finished, the four of them were seated at her small kitchen table, and her mother was leaning against her father, sobbing her way through a stack of tissues.

"Mama, I told you. I'm fine. They never did anything but threaten me," she said, handing her mother yet another tissue.

"This is all my fault. I could've gotten you killed. I insisted that we join the Redeemers. How will I ever forgive myself?" her mother wailed.

Her father patted her mother's shoulder. "I agreed with you. It was a different organization at the time. Hezekiah wasn't crazy then."

Ryannon didn't tell them that from what she could see, Hezekiah had always been crazy. She hadn't seen any point in telling them about him murdering his brother. They already felt guilty enough. "Besides, you two were only twenty years old at the time. I don't hold you responsible. It's stupid to blame yourself for what the bad guys do."

Her mother's tears eventually dried up, but Ryannon could tell she was still upset. So was her father, but he did a better job of concealing it.

Ryannon began clearing the table, putting away the mostly uneaten bagels. She kept a brisk tone as she bustled around the kitchen. "So when are you guys going back to Namibia?"

"Not for a while yet," her father said, giving her a considering look. "We need to do some fund-raising and work in the organization. There are some funding issues that have come up locally that we need to resolve before we can leave again."

That was odd. Her parents had worked for years to raise money for the trip to Namibia. They'd never mentioned money issues before. She shrugged. They were with a nonprofit. Money was *always* an issue. Oh well, it would be good to have them around. Though she knew eventually they would be off to some other part of the world, she'd be lying if she denied taking comfort in their presence.

"Well, you two had a late night, and I'm sure you'd like to go back to bed," her mother said, rising from the table. "Anything we can do to help? You've had a tough couple of weeks. You might want to talk to a counselor." Ryannon shook her head. "All right then. We'll be off."

After her parents left, Ryannon returned to the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee, only to find Gabriel leaning against the counter, drinking the last cup. One look at her stormy face, and he poured half the contents of his cup into hers.

"Well, that went well," she said.

Gabriel stretched. "As well as could be expected, considering your old man was giving me the death-ray stare the whole time."

"Oh, he was not," Ryannon said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Trust. Given half a chance he would've been kicking my ass."

"That's nonsense. My dad isn't the type. He doesn't have a violent bone in his body. I've never had a spanking in my life."

"I'd like to rectify that," Gabriel said with a smirk.

Ryannon punched his shoulder. Seriously, did the man think of anything but sex?

"Trust me, baby," he said. "All fathers are that type, and I've got the buckshot in my ass to prove it."

"Someone shot you? Good grief, Gabriel, I'm amazed you ever lived to reach adulthood."

"According to my mother, I haven't. What can I say? I was fifteen, she was seventeen, and her folks were supposed to be out of town. Now tell me what red-blooded American male would turn that down?"

"You idiot. You could've been killed."

He shook his head. "What do you think bedroom windows are for? Of course had I known I had superpowers at the time..."

"I told you, you can only use your gifts for good. I doubt this particular situation would qualify."

"What a waste," he said.

Ryannon shook her head. Honestly, if half the tales this man told were true, he was going to wear out his wings long before the Second Coming.



"Anyway, I'm hitting the shower. I've got classes this afternoon."

Ryannon took another sip of her coffee. "Okay."

He paused in the doorway and gave her a knowing look over his shoulder. "Want to join me? I'll show you my buckshot scars."

Ryannon put her mug down on the counter before she followed him. After all, who could resist seeing buckshot scars?

\* \* \*

"Oh, baby, I want to see you so bad."

Ryannon took the phone away from her ear and laid her head back on her pillow, staring up at the ceiling. What was it about the man's voice that sent all her erogenous zones into orbit even when he was making a 3:00 a.m. booty call?

"Gabe, you know I can't."

"But it's been weeks since I've seen you." His voice grew rougher, triggering an even stronger response along her sensitive nerve endings.

"I've got early appointments..."

"Yeah, with that crazy chick..."

"She's not crazy, and she needs my help. She's struggling with grief issues. Her aura is really cloudy right now, and I've had to do a lot of crystal work. You know how much that takes out of me. Last time I let you come over, we overslept, and I missed my appointment with her entirely. She *is* a paying client, you know."

"I made it worth your while." Ryannon didn't say anything, because he *had* made it worth her while, but his ego was already big enough in that area. "Baby, I can only take so many cold showers."

"How do you think I feel? I've practically worn my fingerprints off."

His groan echoed over the phone. "I so didn't need that visual. So what are you wearing?"

"I'm not having phone sex with you either. It only makes things worse."

"Fine, when are you next free?"

“How about tomorrow night?” Ryannon asked. She waited as he apparently clicked through his BlackBerry.

“Nope, I’ve got a gig, but I can come over...”

“That won’t work. I’ve still got early clients,” Ryannon said, flipping through her calendar. She kept the electronic devices in her apartment to a minimum.

“How about the next night? That’s Saturday,” he asked, and she could tell he was gritting his teeth.

“Okay. Okay. That’ll work. I’ll have to close a little early, but I could meet you at the club,” she said, knowing that he had a standing gig at Pink’s on Saturday nights.

“Good.” She heard his yawn over the phone. “I’d better pack it in. I’ve got students tomorrow. Dream about me.”

“I will,” she promised and closed the phone.

\* \* \*

“Damn! Damn! Damn!” Ryannon muttered as the bottle of essential oil crashed to the floor. She glared at the ringing phone that had disturbed her work, tempted not to answer it. She sighed and flipped it open. As the strong aroma of sage rose from the broken bottle, she swore again. That was her last bottle, and it seemed that everybody in Atlanta was in dire need of sage these days. Seriously, how much evil could one town need protection from?

“Baby.” Damn, it was Gabe, and he sounded flustered. Gabe was never flustered.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” she asked, responding to the urgency in his voice.

“No. Actually in a way it’s good news. I’ve got an A&R guy who wants to have a meeting. Arietta finally got a hookup for me.”

“Honey, that’s great news. So why do you sound so upset?”

“He wants to have a dinner meeting *tonight* after the show.”

“What’s wrong with that?” she started to ask before she remembered their date for the evening. She bit back a groan of disappointment. This was too great an opportunity for Gabriel to miss, even if she was so horny, she was ready to beg the Redeemers to start chasing them again just so they could get some time alone. “You know you’ve got to go to that meeting. We’ll get together soon, maybe sometime next week.”

“You know I love the hell out of you, don’t you?”

“Of course you do.”

“And when I do get my hands on you again, I’m going to fuck you cross-eyed.”

Ryannon choked off a bark of laughter. “You do have a way with words, don’t you?” she said, but she wasn’t sure he heard her. She could hear someone talking in the background and Gabriel’s muffled response.

“Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll call you as soon as I can.” And with that the connection died.

Ryannon stood at her worktable, staring down at the mess the broken bottle had made. Then she sighed and picked up the phone again to call her supplier. She’d promised that blend to a customer by close of business, and it wasn’t like she had anything better to do.

\* \* \*

Ryannon rolled over in the bed and threw her pillow in frustration. Dammit, another erotic dream about Gabriel, like that’s what her over-heightened libido needed. What with one thing or another, it was nearly a week later, and she still hadn’t managed to see him again.

“What’s wrong, baby, having trouble sleeping?”

She gasped, reaching for her table lamp and almost knocking it over in her haste. The sudden illumination showed Gabriel clothed in nothing but his wings, standing at the side of her bed. What the hell was he doing here? She knew she’d locked her door.

He answered the question before she could even ask it. “Remember that guy you introduced me to so that I could learn about angel stuff?”

“Yeah.” She’d hooked him up with Walter right after they’d returned from the mountains.

“Surprise,” he said, splaying his hands like a dancer in *A Chorus Line*.

“You have no idea how ridiculous that looks.”

“Because I’m naked?”

“*Especially* because you’re naked. Gabe, why are you naked, and how did you get into my house?” Ryannon struggled to work up some indignation, but it was almost impossible. One, because she was so happy to see him, and two because he looked so damned good naked. Even in the dim light emitted by her table lamp, the contours of his body were positively sinful. Besides, how was a girl supposed to focus when his gorgeous erection was standing up just begging for her attention?

“I teleported into your house. It’s a trick Walter taught me. I’m not very good at it yet.”

“Well, does it strip off your clothes, or what?”

“Of course not. That would be ridiculous. Nobody wants naked angels all over the place. No, I’m naked because I don’t intend for either of us to wear clothing for the next twenty-four hours.”

“But, Gabriel...”

“I don’t care what you have planned for today or the next day or the next five hundred days,” he said, sinking down on the bed beside her. “I don’t care if I have to mine this whole fucking block, we’re not leaving this bed. And after that we’ve got to do something. I refuse to synchronize my BlackBerry with your calendar every time I want to see my woman.”

Ryannon sighed against his lips. Really, she should protest his throwback behavior. She tilted her head back to give him greater access. Later. She’d chew his ass out later. Maybe.

## Epilogue

### *Six Months Later*

Ryannon stood in the doorway of the living room, looking at Gabriel who was totally engrossed in playing the piano. And what a piano it was. The huge white baby grand dominated the room. When she first saw it, she couldn't help but laugh. Was he in touch with his inner Liberace or what? Then he told her it was a gift from his friend, Arietta, and the sound was so perfect he couldn't give it up. Having met Arietta, she understood the gift—the singer enjoyed pulling his chain as much as Ryannon did. He should look absolutely absurd sitting behind the monstrosity, especially with his wings out, but somehow it fitted him. Typical. From the notepad he was scribbling on, she could tell he was composing, and normally she wouldn't bother him, but right now she was so furious she would've interrupted a jam session with Wynton Marsalis. She deliberately dropped her shopping bags on the floor with a crash. Gabriel looked over his shoulder at her, then, apparently thinking she needed help with the bags, he rose from the piano bench and grabbed them. Ryannon followed him into the kitchen, and they began putting the groceries away.

"I had lunch with Mama today," Ryannon said.

"Oh really? And how is the lovely Paula doing?"

"Paula is great, but I was hoping you could explain where she got the notion that we're getting married."

Gabriel reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of juice. After offering it to her, he poured himself a large glass, then leaned against the counter to face her.

“That would probably be from me.”

“Yeah. That’s what she said. But I didn’t see how that could be, seeing as how you haven’t asked me to marry you.”

“Actually, that’s not true. I asked you to marry me before we moved in together.”

“And I was supposed to take you seriously? That was what, two months after we met,” she said.

“Give or take.” He shrugged.

Ryannon just rolled her eyes at him. Living with Gabriel was a daily adventure. They’d tried to date once they returned to Atlanta, but it quickly became obvious that their schedules simply wouldn’t accommodate casual dating. Gabriel worked seven days a week, and her routine wasn’t much better. She was on call for many of her clients, and worked six days a week. Living together seemed to be the only, if unorthodox, solution if they ever wanted to see one another. It hadn’t taken long to find a suitable apartment in Little Five Points, and somehow combining his stockpile of electronics with her array of crystals and soft textiles simply worked. And their relationship had gelled in much the same way—most of the time.

He’d mentioned marriage, but she hadn’t taken him seriously. Okay, she had taken him seriously; after all, who would suggest such a thing? But she’d chosen to ignore it. They fit together perfectly—well, except the piano, which wouldn’t fit anywhere outside of Graceland. Things were great; why muck them up?

“Okay, Gabe, why did you tell my mama that we’re getting married?”

“Didn’t tell your mom. I told your dad.”

Ryannon deliberately walked over to the refrigerator and removed the pitcher of iced tea. She took her time preparing a tall glass, knowing that if she said anything right now, she’d start screaming and never stop. Finally, when she was sure she had her voice under control, she continued the conversation.

“Could you explain why you told my dad that we’re getting married?”

Gabriel shrugged. "He came to see me at the club last week. Apparently he has an issue with his daughter living in sin. And let me tell you, for a soft-spoken dude, that old boy can really get his point across when he wants to."

Ryannon choked on her tea. "He said that? Living in sin?" Gabriel nodded. "Who am I, Hester Prynne? That hypocrite. I know for a fact that he and Mama were practically in the delivery room before they got around to getting married."

Gabriel pursed his lips. "Yeah, I think he mentioned something about that. I would imagine it's different when it's your daughter living in sin."

"For God's sake, would you stop saying that? It couldn't be more Neanderthal if it had hair all over it."

"Probably more Cro-Magnon. The Neanderthal were more advanced than scientists initially thought," he replied blandly.

She took a big gulp of her tea. Seriously, this man was going to drive her to murder. "Either way, just because my dad went all Old Testament over this didn't mean you had to go there with him."

"Why wouldn't I? I wanted to marry you months ago."

"Well, for one thing, it's customary to ask the bride."

"I did."

"For God's sake, Gabe."

"What? What are you going to say now? I've kept my word. I've kept my promise. I haven't so much as looked at another woman since we met."

"It's only been six months," Ryannon said.

"Clearly you don't know me too well," came the dry retort.

That was the problem; she knew him all too well. Gabriel loved her. She hadn't doubted it since the first time he said it. Crazy as he was, he didn't make a habit of saying stuff he didn't mean. Putting him off was silly and stupid. "You're right, but involving my parents was sneaky and underhanded."

"I didn't involve your parents. Though, in the interest of full disclosure, I have to admit I would have, if the thought had occurred to me."

"That's dirty."

"And? Have you ever known me to play any other way? Bottom line is your dad confronted me and demanded something I wanted anyway. What was I supposed to do, turn him down?"

"Fine, but next time you make a major decision involving me, it would help if you told me about it."

"No problem. So is that a yes?"

"You still haven't asked me," she said.

"Touché." He dropped to both knees on the tile floor. "Ryannon Brooks, will you do me the honor of becoming my lawfully wedded wife?"

She had to smile. Leave it to Gabriel to go over the top. He looked so fabulous, kneeling there with his wings draped around him. She couldn't believe he was all hers.

"Yes, Gabe. I'll marry you," she said. Then she leaned down for a kiss. He quickly rose to his feet and removed a small velvet pouch from his pocket and handed the contents to her. The huge moonstone glowed with a silvery gleam that was complemented by its intricately carved platinum setting. She slipped it on her finger, where it took up most of the space between her second and third knuckle.

He grinned when he saw it on her hand. "Quite a step up from my first ring, eh?"

Little did he know she had stashed that little bit of metal in her treasure box. "I love them both. Moonstone is special to me."

"I know. See, I do pay attention when you talk that witchy stuff." Then he took her in his arms for another kiss. Just when she thought the kiss would end in a bit of afternoon delight, he broke it off.



“Good grief, we have a wedding to plan. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get good musicians?”

Ryannon shook her head and took his hand. “Not now, buddy. I’ve got other plans.”

“Oh, are you going to take advantage of me?”

“To the best of my ability. Besides, I’ve got candy,” she said, leading the way to the bedroom.

THE END

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## Roslyn Hardy Holcomb

Roslyn Hardy Holcomb was born in North Alabama and has had a disparate career and varied interests. Her lifelong devotion to needle arts led to a stint on the editorial staff of Oxmoor House, the publishing division of Southern Progress, Inc. Regular volunteer work and a passion for child welfare inspired her to leave that field to pursue an advanced degree and a career in social service. Shortly after her son was born, she decided to become a stay-at-home mother and pursue a writing career fulltime.