

Watchers Part Two

By Mona Whitlock

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Chapter One

Casey stirred in her sleep. A baby was crying. She stirred again and sat up. Something inside her responded to the sound, which seemed ironic to her since she'd always said she did not want children. After her childhood, she decided to leave parenting to others who'd had better role models. There were enough screwed up kids in the world without her adding to the population.

The cry sounded again and she got up, pulled towards the noise. A deep swell of emotion stirred in her heart as she pushed open the door to the room beside hers. A white crib sat in the corner. Casey approached it and looked inside. A beautiful baby boy stared up at her. As soon as it saw her face it stopped crying and smiled a crooked smile, sucking its fist contently. Casey reached for the baby, her heart swelling with love.

"There, there," she cooed. His warm weight felt natural in her arms. She kissed his head and inhaled the clean, soft scent of his downy scalp. "Momma's here. Everything's going to be OK."

"No it isn't. Because this is a dream and he'll never be born." The evil words were more growled than spoken and Casey gasped, clutching her infant tightly to her as she turned towards the source of the sound. From a darkened corner she could make out to ice-colored eyes, narrowed and glowing.

Her own scream woke her up. She looked around frantically at her empty arms and then sighed with relief. A dream. It had just been a dream. And then another memory came back to her - the memory of being held in Gabriel's strong arms, of being overwhelmed by him as he thrust into her over and over and over, of the scripture he'd quoted - an enigmatic passage from the book of Genesis.

"The sons of God came down and mated with the daughters of men..."

Did angels sleep? Casey turned and looked at him. He was staring up at her, his hand on her back. He was rubbing her in a comforting fashion.

"Tell me about your nightmare," he said. "I think I already know, but tell me anyway..."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "It's time for you to give me some answers, Gabriel. Besides, if I am pregnant you can hardly punish me for disobeying you."

He sat up; even in bed he towered over her.

"I can still spank you, Cassandra," he said. "You are but newly with child and there are implements that can sting your bottom most severely that will not have the impact that my hand has. This child will not be hurt. Trust me."

“Oh really?” Casey slid from the bed and recounted her dream. She shuddered as she recalled the eyes in the corner, the growling threat against her child.

“Whatever it was, it told me this baby would never be born,” she said.

Gabriel stood now. “The attacks will be worse than ever now,” he said. “The dark host will seek to invade your mind. You must gird yourself. You must learn to shut them out.”

“You’re going to teach me this?” she asked.

He smiled gently. “I wish I could,” he replied. “But I am a warrior, Cassandra. I am a guardian, an elite protector. The one who teaches you wields armor of a different kind. He will test you and challenge you. He will be firm, but you must listen or else the Dark Ones will run you mad. I will protect you body and soul. But your mind...you will have to protect that and it will take special training to learn how.”

Casey hugged folded her arms. Tears filled her eyes. She felt afraid. She looked at Gabriel, so beautiful, so fierce.

“I didn’t ask for any of this,” she said. “Why, Gabriel? Why me?”

He smiled. “One of your ancestors asked the same question.”

Casey shook her head in confusion and mentally scrolled through the list of grandmothers, aunts and great aunts. They’d been an unremarkable lot - school teachers, secretaries, housewives. If something extraordinary had happened to them then surely she would have heard of it, especially given the gossips on either side of her family.

“But we’ve no time to discuss it right now.” He picked up her still unpacked bag and tossed it on the bed. “We have to move.”

“Move? Where? We just got here!” Casey hurried to follow Gabriel from the room.

“I need to get you to Philemon.”

“Philemon? Who...?” she began.

“I’ll explain on the way,” he said. “The dream means they know about the conception.”

Pregnant. It came back to Casey that she was carrying a child, although if she remembered her biology correctly it should be several days before the egg actually implanted. Conception wasn’t spontaneous, but Gabriel seemed so sure. Maybe things were different with angels. And she did feel different, more...significant somehow. And the baby in the dream had seemed so real.

Casey tried to tell herself to accept what was happening without feeling crazy. She could no longer deny her circumstances, no matter how unbelievable they seemed. She could not deny that Gabriel had shown up out of nowhere to protect her from dark forces, had appointed himself her guardian, chastised her when she disobeyed him and had now impregnated her as part of some divine prophecy.

Gabriel had donned his clothing - black t-shirt, black jeans, black overcoat. He turned to her, his face serious.

“Casey,” he said. “When we step outside this house, you’re going to come under attack. You should know that...”

“Attack...?” Casey could hear the panic in her own voice.

“Listen,” he continued, putting a forefinger to her lips to silence her. “They were strong enough to penetrate your dreams even though you’re in a warrior angel’s lair. They’re going to be strong enough when we step outside. I can protect you physically, but you are going to have to push yourself to shield your mind. You’ve not been trained, Casey. You’ll see things...”

Casey’s mind flashed back to the dream. It had been so real. She couldn’t imagine feeling that kind of fear again. She began to shake her head.

“No, Gabriel,” she said. “I can’t do this. Please...”

She tried to turn away but he grabbed her. “Casey, we’re going to the truck. NOW!”

He opened the door and thrust her out. The sky was dark. Clouds swirled above the house. The wind chimes on the porch clanged loudly. The leaves on the trees were being whipped by the wind, revealing their silvery undersides.

Casey caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Something was coming towards them - something black and unformed. She saw Gabriel move his arm and the flaming sword was suddenly in his hand. The nebulous mass tried to skirt around him. He hit it. The thing screamed and evaporated in a puff of acrid smoke.

Gabriel pulled her to him and turned to face a group of beings coming through the trees. He raised his sword. Casey grabbed his arm.

“What are you doing?” she cried. “They’re just kids!”

There were five of them. They ran towards the couple, laughing and giggling. One little boy looked to be about four. He had curly blonde hair.

“Hi!” he called. Gabriel pushed her back. Casey fought him, pulling at his massive arm.

“NO!” she cried, pulling with all her might, but suddenly she was propelled back as his wings split through the back of his jacket and emerged. They shielded Casey’s view and she heard the horrible hacking sound and the cries of children as they were mortally wounded. She sank to the ground and screamed. A moment later, Gabriel was at her side.

“Look,” he said, trying to remove her hands from her eyes.

“No!” she cried. “They were kids! You fucking monster!”

“Look!” It was a command and he pulled her hands down. Where the children had been standing were five bloodied and grotesque creatures with twisted faces and sharp, jagged teeth. The corpses began to bubble and dissolve.

Gabriel picked her up. “You did not see them in their true form,” he said. “You saw them as they wanted you to see them.”

She was shaking. She wanted to throw up but swallowed the bile that built in her throat. She was only vaguely aware of her angelic protector depositing her in the seat and locking the door. He moved in a flash to the other side and settled behind the steering wheel.

“Are we safe in here?” she asked, her voice quavering. Tears were running down her cheeks and Gabriel leaned over to smooth them away.

“We’re safer in here than we were outside, but you will still see or hear things. Try to block as much of it as you can. Keep your eyes closed when we get on the highway.” He started the engine and pulled out onto the road. Immediately, Casey screamed.

“STOP! There’s a truck!” But it evaporated as soon as it made contact with their vehicle.

“Things like what you just saw,” he said calmly.

Gabriel did not have to tell Casey more than once. She spent most of the trip with her eyes squeezed so tightly shut that her head began to hurt from the effort. When she began to hear noises, she covered her ears and repeated a litany along with Gabriel.

“It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real.”

By the time they arrived at their destination, she could hear the sounds of trains, tornadoes, rushing tsunami waves and the screams of humans and animals without screaming herself. But she could not bring herself to look for fear that the images would push her over the edge.

The truck guided to a stop and Gabriel cut the ignition. She heard him get out and a split second later he was at her side. He lifted her from the truck, cradling her as his wings

folded - shieldlike - around her. She could hear noises, but indistinct and faint, like static. She could hear angry grumbles, which sounded as if they were far off and muffled.

"It's safer here with Philemon," Gabriel said. She heard a door open.

"Is this her?" The voice was serene, melodious.

"It is," Gabriel said.

"Well done, soldier," the beautiful voice said.

Gabriel set Casey on her feet and opened his wings. She heard a soft hiss as they withdrew into his back and she found herself face-to-face with the most beautiful being she'd ever encountered.

Philemon was almost seven feet tall, taller even than Gabriel. His skin radiated a light that was soft but not glaring. His eyes were ice blue, his long, straight hair white as snow. His face was timeless.

He put his hand out and it hovered an inch from her face. "May I?" he asked. She nodded, strangely flattered and touched that he'd asked permission. Philemon laid his palm on her cheek.

"She's a mess," he said. "Her mind is fractured, battered. She and the babe need food."

He turned. "Bring her."

Gabriel ushered her to follow and Casey got her first look at her surroundings. The house was large, the furnishings old and classic. A huge grandfather clock chimed. The floors were covered in worn but beautiful rugs. Casey glanced out the window and stopped. She blinked and looked again before grasping Gabriel's arm.

"Am I hallucinating?" she asked. "Because we were traveling for what? Three hours? We should still be in the south but this looks like..."

"...the English countryside?" he finished. "That's because it is."

She looked at him in wonder. "How?"

He put his arm around her. "Angelic vehicles are....different," he replied.

"I guess it was a good thing that I didn't look, huh?" she asked.

"A very good thing," he replied, although the clouds were particularly lovely today.

In the kitchen, a sturdy farm table held a feast that would have fed ten visitors. There was ham, baked apples, greens, Yorkshire pudding and a pitcher of ice-cold milk. Casey did not see a cook and did not ask how the dinner had come to be. She was suddenly famished.

“This looks wonderful,” she said, and was surprised to see Philemon open an oven above the hearth and pull out a breadboard bearing two piping hot loaves.

“Philemon loves to cook in his spare time,” Gabriel explained. Casey looked from one beautiful face to the other. “You’re kidding, right? Angels cook?”

“Well, not most of us,” said Philemon, but when we’re on assignment and things are quiet it’s nice to acquire some quaint human skill. He began to pile her plate with food and then handed it to her. Casey could tell by his expectant look that he was waiting for an assessment of his new skill.

Everything was delicious and she told him so. She was downing her second helping of baked apples when she looked up at the pair.

“You don’t eat,” she said.

“No,” Philemon replied.

“But you cook.”

“Yes.” He paused. “It was either this or making fireworks. They’re fascinating, but bound to draw attention. Food is beautiful. It smells good, is colorful...and humans seem to like it.”

“Yes.” She took another bite, pondering all of this, before looking at the angels again. “The baby,” she asked. “Will it eat?”

“Yes, Nephilim eat,” Gabriel said.

“Nephilim?” Casey asked.

“Our child. Half angel, half human.” Gabriel paused. “Half you, half me.” He said the words tenderly. Casey felt a shiver go up her spine.

“Why?” she asked. “You never told me.”

“It’s not yet revealed to me,” Gabriel replied. Casey looked at Philemon.

“Me either,” he seconded. “It just ‘is,’ little one, and now we must protect you and teach you ways of protecting yourself.”

“Then what?” she asked. “Can I go back home?”

The two angels shared a knowing glance. Casey did not like it.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “Don’t leave me out. I have every right to know. This is my body, my life.”

“You have every right to be curious,” Philemon said. “But your life has been dramatically changed. And it will continue to change.”

“And I have no say in it?”

The angels shook their heads.

“She’s willful, even after everything she’s been through,” Gabriel said to Philemon. “I’ve had to punish her several times.”

“Humans are like children,” Philemon observed. “Stubborn and short-sighted. They need correction or the threat of it since they lack self-preservation.”

“I’m not going to sit here and be insulted.” Casey’s cheeks were flaming from anger. Yes, Gabriel had saved her, but that didn’t give him the right to talk about her as if she weren’t even there. She got up.

“I want to be alone,” she said, crossing her arms defiantly.

“Not yet,” said Philemon. “Sit down. You’ve not finished your dinner. The baby needs food.”

“I’m not hungry anymore.”

“You are,” said Philemon. “You’re just being stubborn. Do as you’re told.”

But Casey held her ground.

Gabriel sighed and stood up. Her heart began to thud as he approached. She resisted the urge to run away.

“Remember, I’m pregnant,” she reminded him.

“Remember,” he said. “I can still correct you without hurting our child.” He took her arm. “In fact, I believe you need a lesson so that you will not be tempted to use this pregnancy as an excuse to disobey.”

Gabriel reached over and pulled a thin willow switch from the tall basket by the fire. He flicked it in the air and it hissed menacingly. He looked at Casey, his expression hard.

“No,” she said, but he ignored her and let her to the end of the table.

“Bend over,” he said. “There will only be ten, to teach you to respect the lash. After that you can sit down and resume dinner.”

Casey’s defiance melted away.

“I’m sorry,” she said, tears dancing at the end of her lashes. “I didn’t mean it. I’ll finish my dinner.” She tried to move back to her seat, but Gabriel took hold of her and shook his head.

“Bend over the table,” he said. “Bend over and present your bottom or I’ll strip you bare in front of Philemon and stripe you until you scream.”

He delivered the threat with the calm of someone who knows he is destined to win. The tears dropped from Casey’s heavy lashes and with a sob of humiliation she obeyed. The blue jeans she wore were worn but well-fitting. The sting of the switch, even through the denim, was excruciating. Casey dissolved in a hail of tears and begged for leniency. But Gabriel, true to his word, did not cease until he’d given her the full ten lashes.

He helped Casey to standing and wordlessly guided her back to the chair, where she obediently sat with tears running down her face. She was humiliated and could not look at either angel. The feelings of insecure frustration returned and she tried to avoid slipping into despair as she cleared her plate under Philemon’s watchful eye.

The two angels spoke of the trip, and she heard Gabriel recount some of what she’d been through at the house in Louisiana. Philemon nodded knowingly, as if none of the horrific images she’d seen came as a surprise.

“Yes, yes,” he murmured. “She’ll certainly need to start bright and early with her training. This can’t go on. It’s not good for her or for the baby she carries. She needs peace. Peace and strength.”

Casey silently wondered how she could find peace or strength with all her choices made for her. She wanted to ask, wanted to stand up and demand that they see things through her eyes, but she got the feeling that they saw her as insignificant. Her sadness deepened and she realized that it was because she’d let herself care for Gabriel on some level. She thought he cared about her, too, but she was clearly just part of whatever mission his higher-ups had sent him to do, which meant that impregnating her was just another day’s work.

She sniffed and stifled a fresh wave of tears that threatened to erupt.

“She’s emotionally taxed,” Philemon observed. “She needs some cheering up.” He smiled at her - a beautiful, serene smile. “I have just the thing.”

“What?” Casey asked.

“Cake for dessert,” he said almost cheerily. “It’s my favorite. Angel’s Food.”

Chapter Two

Casey slept alone. The dreams and visions that had plagued her the first night did not return. Gabriel told her it was because Philemon's power kept the Dark Host away.

"Can't we just stay here and be safe?" she asked.

He shook his head as he tucked her into bed. "No," he said. "We'll have to move again and when we do, Philemon will have you well-prepared to fight the minor minions."

"Minor minions?" she asked.

"Enough questions," he said. "You need to sleep. And I have things to do."

"What kind of things?"

"Enough questions," he repeated, and dropped his hand down to her belly as he kissed the top of her head. It was a paternal type of kiss one might give to a child. Casey felt a wave of frustration. He'd made such passionate love to her. He'd loved her as a woman; now he was back to treating her as a ward.

Casey watched him go. He was so tall he had to duck a little to get through the doorway. She lay in the dark, watching out the window as the clouds moved past the moon and wished Philemon could help her find a way to block from her mind the memory of her sexual encounter with Gabriel. Casey had never experienced anything like it; she'd felt utterly and completely overpowered, but not in a cruel way. It had been like being deliciously consumed from the inside out. Everywhere his hands, his mouth had touched had felt like resulted in instant, exquisite pleasure. And when he'd entered her, his largeness had given her the sensation of being completely filled. It had been ecstasy. The idea that he'd made love to her solely to impregnate her - and on orders, at that - left Casey feeling used. But it also left her feeling sad for reasons she couldn't explain. She reminded herself that she'd not asked for his intervention in her life. She'd not asked for his protection. She'd not asked for his touch. Now she was pregnant and under guard, presumably for her own safety. Or, she wondered, was it for the safety of the baby. Was she little more than an incubator?

Casey turned over and stared at the wall. She did not like the thoughts that were running through her head - thoughts of deep distrust and betrayal. But she could not stop them. She placed her hand on her belly. The rational part of her mind wanted to tell herself that just because Gabriel had said she was pregnant it did not mean she was. Most women didn't conceive so quickly; her mother had taken years to get pregnant. Couples often tried for months. But another part of her - the intuitive part - knew Gabriel spoke the truth. She would bear a child, but then what? It was supposed to be special. Would they even let her keep it?

She fell into a restless sleep. This time it was dreamless but when she woke she still felt weary and she knew it was because of her worries. She sat up and looked out the window. It was morning and a mist hung over the patchwork landscape of the English countryside. It was beautiful. Casey had always dreamed of traveling to Europe but worried she'd never make it. Now she was here, and for reasons she could never have imagined.

"Good morning!" Philemon entered carrying a tray. Belgian waffles covered in apricot preserves, thick slabs of maple-scented bacon, steaming scones, juice, milk - it was clear he'd gone all out. Again.

"Wow," she said, this looks great. It occurred to her that she had no morning sickness but that her appetite was growing exponentially. She could hardly wait to dig into the huge plate of food and ate everything she'd been offered.

"I've prepared the bath for you and a fresh change of clothes," Philemon said. "As soon as you're changed your lessons will begin."

"Thank you," Casey said. "Where's Gabriel?"

"He had things to do," Philemon said. "After your bath you can meet me in the library."

Casey frowned at having her question dismissed. "What kind of work?"

"We'll be starting with basic stuff.." he began.

"No," Casey interrupted. "I mean what kind of work is Gabriel off doing?"

"Nothing of human concern," Casey said. "Now get up for your bath."

"No."

The angel, who'd picked up her tray and had started to leave the room, turned back to her. He put the tray down and for the first time since she'd seen him, Philemon's otherwise placid expression changed.

"Cassandra," he said. "Gabriel has made it clear that I am to instruct you. And he told me to remind you that should I be required to summon him to deal with you then the consequences will be...harsh."

Casey's heart quickened in her chest, but she held her ground.

"He can beat me all he wants, but it won't change the fact that I have a right to know at least some of what is going on. He's supposed to be my guardian, my protector, the father of my..." Her hand went to her belly. She looked up at Philemon, her eyes filling with tears. "Don't I at least have a right to know where he is?"

Philemon walked over and gently took her hand in his.

“Some would say you have no rights,” he said. “I disagree. I know you did not ask to be a vessel.” He smiled gently. “You’re feistier than your ancestor. She accepted so easily.”

It was the second allusion to a relative, the second hint that she’d not been the first to go through such an ordeal.

“Gabriel mentioned something about someone in my family who’d gone through something like this,” she said excitedly.

Philemon grew quiet and suddenly seemed uncomfortable. “What did he tell you?”

“Nothing,” she said. “He just said something like you just said.”

“Child...” Philemon took her head between his hand and kissed her on the forehead. “Things will be revealed to you. I am sure of it.” He looked into her eyes. “But there is a time for everything, and doing things out of order can bring grave consequences. I know this does not seem like an adequate excuse, but you need to trust me, trust Gabriel. Will you do that?”

She sighed. “I will if you’ll tell me where Gabriel is.”

“I should not,” he said firmly. “But I will. Gabriel has gone to secure forces so that when it is time for you to move we will have reinforcements.”

“When are we moving?”

“That has not yet been revealed,” he replied. “And it will not be until you are ready. Come. We have work to do.”

He turned and Casey knew the conversation was over so she followed. She’d been pleasantly surprised to have gotten what information she had from Philemon. She hoped he was being honest. Did angels lie? She tried to remember her Bible and couldn’t think of an incident where they did, except for Lucifer. The Father of Lies. That’s what the Bible had called him. But who’d written the Bible? God. And from Casey’s standpoint she wasn’t sure she could even trust Him at this point. The thought made her more anxious. Was that blasphemous? Maybe God would hear her doubts and take away the burden he’d placed on her - give it to someone more worthy, more Christian.

“Damn. God damn.” She tested the swears mentally. The walls did not melt away and ahead of her, Philemon did not even flinch. He did not seem to hear. If someone was listening to her thoughts, they weren’t reporting it via some psychic angel connection. They would not let her off that easily, which meant she had no choice but to follow orders.

Philemon opened a door off the living room and ushered her in. Casey gasped as soon as she was inside. Where as the rest of the house looked like a English country manor, this room was something else entirely. It looked like part wizard's lair and part ancient library. A long, heavy table held huge books. Some were open to reveal letters that glowed like flames on the page. Peculiar instruments sat on shelves. A free-floating model of the universe was suspended in mid-air in the corner of the room. Casey was drawn to it. She blinked rapidly to assure herself what she was seeing was real.

"It can't be," she said quietly as she drew closer. A bright, tiny sun spun slowly as the planets rotated around it. The Milky Way was clearly visible, and above it something different. Layers of space in colors she'd never seen and couldn't reply were above the Milky Way.

"You are here," Philemon said, pointing at the tiny and perfect replica of earth. This is your sun...and up here - far, far from what any man can even comprehend - are the seven layers of Heaven. The throne is here." He pointed to the top level. "So is paradise."

Casey stared. "Where is hell?"

"Don't I wish we knew..." Philemon watched Casey stare at the model. "If we did, we'd have stormed it and destroyed it already."

She looked at him. "It's not in the center of the earth?"

"No, all earth belongs to God," said Philemon. "So hell could not be there."

"Then how do you know it's as it's described?" she asked. "Lake of fire, gnashing of teeth, etcetera."

Philemon turned away and waved his hand dismissively. "Those are...exaggerations," he said. "But you didn't hear it from me. When God says He is a jealous God, he is not exaggerating. The things he will do to scare you mortals from following Lucifer."

The admission seemed stunning to Casey, but she realized that he was only telling her because even if it shook her faith, the path she was on would not change. She was a pawn. Perhaps so were Philemon and Gabriel.

"Aren't you afraid of saying these things?" she asked.

"No," said Philemon, starting to go through some books. "As one of the last, great teachers I'm too valuable to be cast out. And you're too weak to matter, child. Even if I sat you down and told you the truth as I know it, you could not walk away."

So it was true.

Casey crossed her arms. “Then what is my incentive to go along with the plan?”

“For your own protection,” Philemon said. “The alternative is so much more horrible. I’ve seen what my God can do. Even at his worst he’s not as cruel as the alternative.”

He held out his hand. “Come, sit down.” Philemon gestured to a chair on the other side of the library table and Casey obediently complied. As she did, he turned a heavy book he’d opened and slid it towards her. The flame-like script danced on the page. It was like nothing she’d ever recognized; the characters weren’t Arabic. They didn’t even look like the runes one of her Wiccan friends had used to inscribe some of her tools.

“What is this?” she asked. “Elvish?” She laughed at her own joke but when Philemon didn’t crack a smile, hers faded.

“It’s written in the tongue of my kind,” he said. “You cannot read or speak it without the gift. Once you can, the words on this page will afford you protection against the attack of the host, protection few mortals have shared.”

The hair stood up on the back of Casey’s neck as she looked at the script. It was intricate, beautiful, but it looked complex. Her heart sank. She’d barely squeaked through third year Spanish and had forgotten half of what she’d learned.

“How will I ever understand this?” she asked.

“Close your eyes,” was Philemon’s response. Casey started to ask why but instead just complied. She felt Philemon’s huge hand on her shoulder, felt a surge of static and warmth flow through her body.

“Look now,” he said.

She opened her eyes and gasped. She was looking at the same words but could now read them. They made sense to her and she felt as if her brain would explode from the influx of sudden and complex knowledge. Her fingers traced the flaming words as her eyes read them.

“It says if I speak these incantations then my mind will be girded with the armor of God.” She laughed as she read and looked at Philemon in wonder. Then her smile faded. “Wait a minute, though. What if I don’t have faith? I’m not a religious person, and even after all this I can’t say if I believe completely...”

Philemon gave her a sympathetic look. “In battle, belief in a cause or a king can make a warrior braver, but it makes his weapon no stronger within itself. These words are just a weapon; you do not have to believe you wield them.”

“Is that what I am? A warrior?” Casey looked at her hand, so small against the book. “I’m a scared pregnant woman. You don’t see a lot of those on the battlefield.”

"I beg to differ," Philemon said kindly. "There is no greater warrior than a woman standing in defense of her child. Little one, if you've only known what I've seen of your kind - famine, pestilence, war. It is the mothers who have the greatest motivation to fight, for it is their love that is most like His."

Casey tried to comprehend what he was saying, tried to get her mind around the fact that she was in the company of a being that was immortal. What had he seen? She thought back through all the wars she'd read about in school. There had been so many. And other tragedies - plagues, natural disasters. She put her hand on her belly and tried to imagine the helpless little baby that was growing there. Should she love it already? She did not and that both disappointed and relieved her. To love it would make her even more vulnerable, she thought. She did not voice this concern to Philemon, who seemed so convinced that it would make her stronger.

"The Dark Host will assault you as soon as they sense you are away from my protection. Even now they circle this house, sit perched in the woods, waiting." Philemon was pacing back and forth now, lecturing as he walked. "They will take any form to frighten you, say anything to incite terror, doubt and despair. Look at the first incantation on the page. Don't read it aloud; read it silently, Cassandra. You only speak the words when they are needed. When you do, speak them forcefully. No matter how afraid you are, speak them forcefully. You cannot falter or waver or whisper. Do you understand?"

Casey nodded, unnerved by the urgent tone of Philemon's voice.

He turned his back to her. "Stupid, naïve fool," he growled.

Casey stared in shock. "What did you say?"

His back was to her. "You heard me. Ignorant bitch. Filthy whore. Worthless cunt..."

Casey had never been called such names, not even in what few heated arguments she'd had in her life. She felt as if she'd been punched in the stomach and fear gripped her, and then exploded when Philemon turned and disappeared momentarily in a cloud of black smoke. When it faded, a monstrosity stood where he'd been. The creature was black, winged, its mouth too wide for its twisted face. Saliva dripped from double rows of obsidian teeth. Its red eyes were crescent shaped, evil and seething with hatred directed completely at her. It spread its leathery wings and they shivered as he stomped towards her on heavy, clawed feet.

Casey scrambled from the chair, falling backwards as she did. She was too numb with fear to get up but scurried backwards, hyperventilating. The creature's long arm reached for her, its fetid breath filled the air around her.

"I'm going to rip that worthless bastard from your womb!" it hissed. A gnarled, clawed hand reached for her.

The words. She had to speak the words.

“*Elohim bartruche sanctorum!*” she said, but she squeaked the words and the creature lurched forward and roared just inches from her face. His breath was so hot that she could not breath for a moment and could feel her skin redden from the heat.

“He’s going to kill me!” Casey said, and then screamed as his hand moved towards her belly.

“NO!” she cried, and kicked the creature in the chest with more force than she thought had. As she did she felt a flutter deep in her pelvis. *No, it’s too early*, she thought, but her hand went protectively too her belly and she yelled the incantation at the creature, which was coming at her again.

“ELOHIM BARTUCHE SANCTORUM!” she cried.

There was a flash of white smoke. The creature was hidden. The smoke suddenly pulled inward on itself and where it had been stood Philemon.

He began to clap slowly.

“Well done,” he said. “Well done.”

Casey lay gasping on the floor, staring up at the angel.

“Why...?” she began. “I thought you were one of the good ones!”

“I am,” he said, stepping forward and offering her a hand. She refused.

“If you’re good then how the fuck did you turn into *that*?” she asked.

“Any angel can turn bad. Even the Dark Host started out as things of light and beauty. If I change I am strong enough to turn back. I’m strong enough to make the choice they did not make.” He smiled. “Come, take my hand.”

“No,” Casey said. She got up on her own power, her legs shaky. She felt as if she were going to throw up. She was furious with Philemon for testing her as he had done. “You say you want to protect me and my child and then you scare me half to death with some....parlor trick? Screw this, Philemon! And screw you!”

She turned, tears streaming down her face and headed for the door. She looked back for a split second to see if he was following her and slammed into something as she did. Casey would have lost her footing if she’d not been grabbed. The touch was familiar, and she felt a new kind of fear when she looked up into the disapproving eyes of Gabriel.

Chapter Three

Gabriel ushered Casey back in against her will. Her heart thudded in her chest. She'd just cursed Philemon. She'd also kicked him in the chest, but that was when she thought he was some sort of demon. Would that count as impertinence? Would Gabriel punish her for that, too?

"Let go of me," she said, shaking free of Gabriel's grasp. She knew he'd let her shake himself free; if he'd not wanted her to she'd still be in his clutches. That angered her even more.

"You'll not walk out of your lessons, Cassandra. At least not without consequences." His tone was silky but firm.

"Consequences?" she fumed. "You want to talk about consequences? What about me hurting myself falling out of my chair? What about the baby? Do you have any idea what he just did to me?" Casey was pointing at Philemon, looking at him nervously as if he may change again at any moment.

"He's trying to prepare you," Gabriel said, "although if I were going to formshift I'd go with something less terrifying than a full-fledged sentinel."

"Who's the teacher here, Gabriel? You or me?" Philemon sounded piqued.

"Neither if you don't stop treating me like I'm nothing more than a walking incubator," Casey said, moving to stand between the two angels who were glaring at each other. She sighed and put her hands to her temple.

"Look," she said. "I've said this before but I'll say it again. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask to carry this child or to be targeted or protected or anything else. But I'm stuck with the situation. I get that, OK?" She sniffed back tears and resisted the urge to cry. "But I'm not an idiot even if you think all humans are. I'm capable of learning without being scared half out of my mind. And I want to know what to expect and what's expected of me. I'm tired of cryptic answers and pats on the head. How the hell can I be a mother if you treat me like an infant!"

Gabriel moved to put his arms around her. He was warm and strong. Casey felt an urge to cling to that sense of safety, but moved away.

"Gabriel, please," she said.

"We can't treat you as a peer," Gabriel said. "But I can communicate more if you would like that."

"Yes," she said, crossing her arms. "I would like that."

“Sit down, Cassandra,” Gabriel said, nodding towards the library table. Casey felt weary as she obeyed.

“I will not tell you that you are in an enviable position,” he began. “You are not. I cannot tell you why you were chosen. I cannot tell you why I was chosen to plant my seed in you. I can only tell you what I know, which is that our son will be born in the spring. He will be exceptional and he will lead an army of his kind in the last battle for earth.”

“An army of his kind?”

“Gabriel...” Philemon’s voice was nervous. “To reveal this..”

“...is a risk I’m willing to take,” Gabriel said, glancing at his angelic companion. “Cassandra is not just any bearer...”

Philemon shook his head with disapproval but said nothing else as Gabriel continued.

“You are not the only one, but you are the most important one,” Gabriel said. “There are many other women in your place across the planet at this very moment. They think the child they carry is that of their husband or boyfriend on one-night stand. They do not connect their pregnancy with that erotic dream they had last month.”

“So they were all impregnated by angels and they’ll bear these...hybrids?” Casey asked.

“Nephilim is the correct term,” Gabriel said. “These children will grow and will by all outward appearances seem normal except for their unusual intelligence and athletic skill. Only when the children reach their thirteenth year will they realize their purpose.”

“And our son?”

“His powers will manifest immediately.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I am not just an ordinary angel. I’m an archangel.”

“So why me?” asked Casey. “I’m an ordinary woman.”

“No,” he corrected. “No you are not. But here I cannot go further. At the right time and place it will be revealed why you were chosen, but for the moment that information must be kept hidden.”

Casey blinked back tears of frustration. “I have a right to know.”

“But I do not have permission to tell you,” Gabriel said. “I already have told you too much. And I only do so because you are special.”

“At least I get the truth,” Casey said. “It’s wrong what is happening to these women. It’s not fair to them or their husbands to trick them like that.”

Gabriel stroked her face. “Cassandra. The greater good..”

“No!” she said, standing. “The greater good does not excuse having sex with women without their consent and making a man think he is a father when he is not.”

“The children will look like the fathers...” Gabriel said, and for the first time, Casey noted, he had the decency to at least sound defensive.

“But that’s just another lie!” she retorted. “What kind of God forces a human woman to bear a child just to take it away from her? What kind of woman can bear that?”

“I can think of one,” Gabriel said casually. “Mary, the mother of our lord. She was exceedingly brave in her submission.”

Casey scoffed. “Yeah, and look what it got her? She’s consigned to eternity as a statue that only gets remembered when she cries blood or shows up as the face in a ham sandwich that gets auctioned off on eBay.”

“She was much more than that,” Gabriel said. “If you knew....”

“I don’t want to know,” Casey said with disgust. “What I want is a break. I’m tired and...” Her stomach growled. Loudly. “And hungry.”

“That I can fix,” Philemon said, and left the room.

“I just want to be alone,” Casey said to Gabriel. “I know I need to learn but I can’t deal with all of this at once. If you know anything about humans you know that we can’t always process everything at once. So much of this needs sorting out, Gabriel.”

“I can understand why this is overwhelming you,” he said. “Retire to your room for lunch and a nap and then afterwards perhaps we can resume if you feel like it. If not, then rest but know that tomorrow your lessons with Philemon will resume.”

“And you?” she asked. “Where will you be?”

“Watching,” he said. “Always watching. Always protecting you from danger. And I’ll be planning, too.”

Watching and planning. As Casey ate a dinner of tender pulled pork on a bed of polenta, Swiss chard and enjoyed chocolate cake in caramel sauce for desert, she looked out over

the English countryside. It was a cloudy day, which she knew wasn't unusual for England. Everything looked deceptively peaceful. She tried to square the sheep placidly grazing on the hillside with some looming battle for the earth they fed upon.

She yawned, suddenly feeling very languid. It seemed ironic how sleepy she was of late, and how well she slept when she recalled that it was her insomnia that had gotten her into this situation in the first place. When she had no worries, she could not get to sleep. Now that she faced problems she never knew could exist, she slept like a rock.

Casey stood, stretched and made her way to the bed. It was large, with the most comfortable mattress she'd ever known. It was like sleeping on a cloud. She lay down and started to think about Gabriel. As if summoned, he appeared.

"It's good to see you looking more relaxed," he said. Gabriel approached the bed, looking handsome as ever. His glossy hair framed his beautiful face. He sat down on the edge of the bed. She could feel power in his nearness.

"Did I answer all of your questions in there?" he asked.

Casey didn't answer for a moment. When she did, she replied with one word. "Almost."

"You've caught me in an agreeable mood," he said. "If you have anything else you should ask it now."

"I'm afraid to," Casey replied.

"Don't fear, Cassandra. I won't get angry."

"It's not your reaction I'm afraid of," she said. "It's the answer."

She sat up and brought her knees to her chest. It was something Casey had done since childhood when she felt frightened.

"Here goes," she said. She forced herself to look into Gabriel's eyes. "Do you care for me? I mean, I know you do, but I want to know what kind of caring. I was never one of those little girls who harbored romantic fantasies about the man I'd eventually have kids with, but if I had been then I never could have come up with anything this crazy. But here I am, single and pregnant and the night we conceived this child ..." Her hand went to her belly as she spoke "...I felt something between us. And now, well, I know it was just something you were commanded to do."

"No." His hand reached for the wrist above the hand she had on her stomach. "Do not think our union meant nothing to me, Cassandra."

"How could it?" she asked. "You've never told me you loved me. And afterwards you said it was some sort of 'plan' or fulfillment of prophecy." She began to cry in spite of

herself. "When he's here, how do I know you won't take him away from me and abandon me? It will be easy if you really don't care."

Casey was shaking now; the sobs descending on her like a blanket. Gabriel reached for her and pulled her into his lap.

"Philemon says I say too much," he said. "He is right, but he is wrong. I say too much, but the others say too little. I would correct that now." Gabriel's mouth found hers. His lips flooded her with ecstasy even though the kiss he planted there was demanding and bruising.

"It was no mere mission for me," he said when their lips had parted. "What you felt, I felt, too. When I received the revelation that we should couple, I only thought of fulfilling my duty. But when I was touching you, and you were underneath me..."

Gabriel laid her back against the pillows. His mouth found hers again and his hand dropped to her belly and then lower until it had slid beneath her skirt and he was penetrating her with one and then two of his long fingers.

Casey moaned and writhed beneath his touch. Her arms wound around Gabriel's neck and began to unbutton his shirt before pushing it down and over his shoulders. Her fingers traced the ridges in the archangel's back that hid his wings. She needed to touch them to remember that they were real, to remind herself of what he was. Gabriel was no mortal. He was an angel. No, he was more than an angel; he was an archangel. He was powerful and immortal and he was also the father of her child. She had fear the conception of that child would be the last time she would feel his touch, but now he was touching her again.

"This was not foretold," he said. But he did not stop kissing her, feeling her body and when Casey opened her legs to him and he slid inside her, she cried out with such pleasure-pain that Gabriel was forced to swallow the cry with his kiss. He drove into her fiercely, and Casey wrapped her legs around her, feeling his strong muscles between her thighs. Her hands moved up and down his back; the skin was smooth. She moved her palms upward until they were on the ridges again and felt the angel thrust hard and shudder. Her hands were flung aside as the wings burst from his back and mantled the both of them. The late afternoon light shone through the feathers; they were bathed in the light of the silvery tent.

"I love you," he said.

Casey's heart lifted and sang as she never thought it could. The angel was looking down at her and then he smiled; his expression was beautiful and almost innocent in its joyfulness.

"I do!" he repeated. "I love you. I never thought I could love another; I never thought I would have time! But I love you, Cassandra!" He kissed her. "And I love our child!"

Tears of happiness were streaming down her cheeks as she joined in the laughter. "I love you, too," she said. "I was so afraid..."

He put a finger to her lips. "I will stay by your side, Cassandra. I will stay by your side always, and by the side of our child. Do not fear that I will abandon you or him. I will not become some figure in a book or statue in a church that you will have to point to. I will be as real to him as I am to you."

Her arms were around his neck. She reached up and touched his wings. The bones were hard, like steel, but the feathers were so soft. They glowed. He glowed. She looked at her skin. She was glowing. He was still inside her and they were bathed in light. Holy light.

"Will you get in trouble for this?" she asked. Casey did not want to destroy the mood, but was worried. If Gabriel had been commanded to impregnate her and nothing more, then what would be the consequences? He worked for God; she surmised that going up against the boss might not be a good thing.

"He commanded us to love," she said. "How can he not understand?"

But Casey wasn't so sure. She thought about all the other women carrying angelic babies. Gabriel's god had misled them. One day he would take their children off to battle. Was that the kind of God who would understand what she feared was their forbidden love? She didn't want to think about it at that moment. Gabriel's wings were withdrawing into his back with a soft whoosh. He rolled onto his side and took her into his arms. He kissed her gently. Casey felt herself falling into a languid sleep, more protected and loved than she ever thought she could feel.

Outside, the stronger of the Dark Host used their powers to peer through the walls, into the room and into the very heart of the couple. The demon Gaap's face broke into a smile. He and his companions had been studying Casey for a long time. When direct attack had not allowed them to wrest her from the angels' grasp, they'd decided to observe from a distance and look for some weakness they could exploit, something they could use against her.

Gaap took to the air, his leathery wings beating wildly. He rose and rose, spiraling through storm clouds that parted at his command. Gaap flew higher and higher until he was atop the clouds, looking down. He peered, using his hidden sight to look for one of the openings in the sky. It glowed red, a portal that only revealed itself to those who could enter it. Folding his wings back, he dove. Gaap was always one for dramatic entrances. He felt the heat on his face as he burst through the tunnels, twisting and turning at incredible speeds. When he came to a stop he landed as gracefully as a cat, and in full bow before the Master's throne.

"I trust you bring news, Gaap," the voice above him said.

Gaap did not dare look up. It was enough that He had even been addressed by name.

“I do, My Lord,” he said. “I have found out how to get the Second Mary from her savior.”

Chapter Four

Gabriel held the sword out at arm's length, studying the blade for signs of blemish. Even after countless millennia, it still looked as perfect as the day it had been forged. How many dark hearts had it pierced? A million? Ten million? How many wing sinews had it severed as it brought down escaping demons? How many heads had it separated from bodies? The flash of this sword was the last thing some of the Dark Host had seen before being rendered into a shower of dust.

He turned the blade, examining it in different angles of light. Polishing the sword was a daily ritual for him; on this day it seemed even more significant because Gabriel knew that one day his son would wield the weapon. He would see to it.

"You're getting too attached."

Gabriel looked up and frowned at Philemon. "You read too much into things, Philemon," he said. "You always have. But your eyes can deceive me."

"What about my ears, Gabriel? Do you think I am deaf that I did not hear her cries of passion? We know Cassandra is special, but not that special."

Gabriel picked up the scabbard leaning against the chair and sheathed the sword. There were things he wanted to say to Philemon at that moment. Many things. But he only said one of them.

"It is not your concern." He stood and buckled the sword at his side. He could feel it humming through the scabbard. It wanted to be released, swung, engaged. "I'm going on a perimeter sweep."

"Gabriel," Philemon tried again. "It is not meant for us, companionship of this kind. Especially not with humans. She is a mortal, this woman. Her life is a blip. Think on it! The fullness of her years is a blink of an eye to us, and most of them will be spent in physical decline. We have many abilities, but giving life is not one of them. Do you really want to watch her fade away and die? Do you want to watch her grief as she slips away?"

"Humans know that mortality is part of their lot. They have accepted it. They see one another die. It is the price they pay for not having to continue on long past bearing."

Philemon considered this. Like most angels, they envied humans their finite lifespans and joked that humanity only sought immortality because they were too unevolved to understand the harsh bonds of an eternal existence.

"She would expect to die before me," Gabriel said. "I would have no other choice but to let her go. But for that blip in time, we would have happiness."

“And what of The Plan?” Philemon pressed. “Unless you’ve gotten a revelation to the contrary, this was not part of it.”

“Perhaps it is,” Gabriel said. “The coupling came as a surprise to me. I did not know when I was chosen as her Watcher that I would be the one to father her child. Is it so wrong to hope that the love I feel for her was also meant to be?”

“Without direct permission, yes!” Philemon stood and strode over to Gabriel. He was inches from the archangel’s face. “You must confess your love for this mortal. And if you’ve made promises to her...” Philemon’s eyes searched Gabriel’s face. “Have you, friend? Have you made promises to her?”

Gabriel brushed past him. “I’m going to sweep the perimeter,” he said.

It was cool outside. A mist was already laying heavy on the surrounding meadows. Gabriel unsheathed his sword. It glowed brilliant blue and yellow and green and then other colors beyond the spectrum of the human eye. He swung it in an arc. The sword sung. It seemed happy. Gabriel hoped that if there were Dark Host about, they were taking note of his weapon’s might.

His eyes searched the hedges, the trees, the low walls for signs of shifting, shadowy shapes and other unearthly things that slunk and slithered in the dark. It seemed odd to him that their presence not only did not feel thick on this night, but non-existent. Had they given up? That was unlikely. The Prince of Darkness never gave up. Like the god Gabriel served, he never would. Gabriel and the other angels knew that was why their god would never share power. In Lucifer he saw his own greed. Both wanted the same thing: total domination, complete adoration, absolute victory.

He turned to head back to the house. The sky overhead was dark. Tomorrow it would storm again. He hoped it would cool the air when it did.

Gabriel stopped suddenly. A shadow moved by the latticework by the front door. He felt a surge of anger at himself. Had he really walked right past a minor demon? With a cry he raised the sword and spread his wings. He glowed and his appearance became as terrible as that of the Dark Host, only he shone bright as day. He heard a scream, but this was no demon. He reeled back, holding the sword with all his might, for over the millennia, the weapon had learned to fall of its own accord upon a target once raised. It was all he could do to stop it this time. It came down at an arc and hit the latticework. The frame collapsed and Gabriel had just enough time to pull Casey out of its path. She was ashen and shaky.

He gave her a shake of his own. “What are you doing outside?”

“I-I saw you!” she said in a small voice. “I’d woken up and you were gone and I looked out and saw you. I didn’t see anything else. I was just going to go to the door, but it was so cool out. I was just going to step outside....I’m sorry!”

But Gabriel was ignoring her as he pulled her back in the house. He sheathed his sword. The scabbard took up the entire length of the table where he laid it. He turned his attention back to Casey.

“What were you told, Cassandra?”

His tone frightened her; she’d heard that tone before. Her hand instinctively moved to cover her bottom.

“Gabriel?” she said, her tone pleading.

“Answer me,” he said. “What were you told?”

“To stay indoors,” she replied. “But..”

He listened to no more. Instead he reached down and pulled one of the switches from the basket by the fireplace. Casey’s eyes widened and she began to whimper in protest as he pushed her over the table. She was wearing just her nightgown and she felt the cool air on her bottom as he raised it.

“No, please!” she cried when she realized that Gabriel was going to spank her on the bare bum. But she could not escape him as he pressed her lower back down onto the table and targeted her vulnerable backside with the switch.

The sting of it was unbearable. Even without using much force, the angel’s blows were far more punishing than those of a mortal man. Casey felt the line of fire burn across the expanse of her bottom with the first blow. She howled in pain. The second lash of the switch caught her right across the lower buttocks, just above the thighs. She pitched forward and backwards, seeking relief, but was unable to move more than an inch.

Again the switch rose and fell. The table beneath her face was quickly wet with tears. Her hair was sodden where it lay in the salty puddle. She was begging, pleading, but to no avail. Line after line of pain marked her bottom. It was unbearable. She promised never to leave the house again, promised to be obedient, promised to be a good girl - such a good girl.

Her bottom was a scalding, throbbing landscape of lines by the time Gabriel decided Casey had gotten the message he’d set out to deliver. Tossing the switch back into the basket, he picked her up and bore her effortlessly back up the stairs and to the room. She writhed and sobbed when he placed her on the bed.

“Do not go outside again, Cassandra,” he said. “My love does not absolve you from consequences. In fact, it will have the opposite effect of making me more protective, and more stern.”

She could not speak, but only nodded. As badly as her bottom hurt, she understood why he'd dealt so harshly with her. He could have killed her with the sword; he had every right to be upset at her carelessness. Casey buried her face in the pillow and sobbed, but she did not protest or argue.

She ached to feel his arms around her for comfort, but was denied that. She did not know how long she cried, but by the time she went to sleep her throat was almost as sore as her bottom and she had no more tears to shed.

When Casey awoke, her bottom was still sore. Philemon came in. If he knew about the punishment she'd received, he said nothing as he ran her a warm bath. He did include a healing salve among her toiletries that she had not seen before. Casey turned before the mirror and winced at what she saw. There were myriad red welts. She massaged some of the cream onto the fiery lines and was pleasantly surprised when the ache subsided almost immediately. She was pleased to be able to sit in the bath without pain.

Casey slipped into her favorite summer skirt - plain pink cotton - and a white tank top. She turned in front of the mirror, observing her profile. Her belly was still flat. She thought back to the fluttering she'd felt. Was that just her imagination?

Downstairs, Philemon had made pancakes. They were topped with summer berries and a chocolate-hazelnut sauce. Pork sausage was served on the side. Milk and fresh squeezed orange juice rounded out the meal. Casey's appetite was strong again. She heaped her plate full and had seconds on the waffles.

"The baby's going to be born with a sweet tooth," Philemon observed. Casey allowed herself a smile.

"Where's Gabriel," she asked.

"I do not know."

She looked at Philemon skeptically.

"Really," he reiterated. "I don't know. He was gone before breakfast. But I am not his keeper, and you have more work to do."

She stood. "Are you going to formshift on me today?"

Philemon looked sheepish. "No," he said. "In retrospect that was a bit much." He paused. "I...apologize." The words sounded forced. Casey could not help but smile.

The book was open when she entered the study. Casey was drawn to the pages with their dancing flame script. She touched one of the letters and a little tongue of flame adhered to the end of her fingertip. She studied it, mesmerized.

“Enough playing,” he said, and she flicked it back on the page with a look of disappointment.

“Do you remember the incantation?” he asked.

“*Elohim bartruche sanctorum*,” she repeated with pride.

“Very good,” he said. “That incantation is for banishing entities. It sends them all the way back to their Master.”

“Kind of like going back to square one?” Casey said.

The game reference was lost on Philemon, who continued as if she’d not spoken. “The other type of attacks are less obvious. They come not from outside you, but from within. The Dark Host will search your mind and seek your greatest desires and fears. He will use your sin nature as a trap to capture you.”

“Sin nature?” Casey asked.

“All humans are born sinners,” the angel said.

Casey could not help but scowl. She’d heard this logic before - that man was intrinsically flawed from the moment of birth and destined to take the path of sin. It seemed a dim view for a god to take of a beloved creation.

“Excessive feelings of pride, anger, fear, suspicion of God and his motives....these are all signs that the Dark One is working at you from within.”

“Hold on,” Casey said. “So questioning God - questioning what’s happening to me - is a sin? Being afraid is a sin?”

“It indicates a lack of faith.” Philemon said simply. “You are not perfect; you will have doubts. But if they make you excessively defiant or self-destructive, if they are unlike your normal reactions then you may be the influence of the Dark Host.

Casey sighed. It wasn’t even eight o’clock and her head was starting to hurt. Excessive doubt, fear or defiance was a sign of demonic influence? How could she know the difference? She asked Philemon.

“You’ll know,” he said, sliding the book towards her.

There were a number of new enchantments on the page. He ordered her to read them and the short history that accompanied each one. There was an incantation that an angel had given specifically to Daniel after he’d been thrown in the lion’s den. Another was given to Elijah. The Bible had referred to this as the world of knowledge. Philemon told Casey

that this incantation was the most powerful, since the prophet Elijah had done battle with Baal.

The incantations were longer. Casey worked most of the morning on mentally reciting them. After a lunch of roast chicken, asparagus and saffron rice Philemon asked if she'd like an example of how she may be tested.

Casey felt her heart quicken with fear. Philemon's last test had been too much. Her hand went to her belly and he sensed her hesitation.

"I will not go too far this time," he said gently.

She nodded.

"Think on your baby," he said. "Think on what kind of mother you want to be."

Casey closed her eyes and thought. She wanted to be the kind of mother that her mother had never been. Warm, affectionate, caring and above all an advocate for her child. She would put her child first always. Or could she? Would she be able to? So often parents unconsciously raised their children the way they had been raised, even without meaning to. It was why cycles repeated themselves in families the way they did. Why should she be any different? The baby's father may be an angel, but she was still a mortal, and one from a dysfunctional home at that.

"I'll screw up just like my mother did," she thought with despair. "I'll screw up and Gabriel will come and take my baby away because he'll realize I was never fit to bear it. He'll tell the baby I died."

Tears came to her eyes and her heart sunk.

"See how easy it was for me to do?" Philemon asked.

She looked at him surprised, and understood but she could not shake the doubts that swirled in her mind.

"Speak the incantation, in here," Philemon said, tapping his temple.

Casey tried to focus although the doubts were growing louder. "YOU'LL NEVER BE A GOOD MOTHER!" her mind cried, but she thought the incantation over and over until it drowned out the fear.

"A lie cannot stand against the power of God's words," said Philemon. "If your fears are unfounded and of demonic influence, these incantations will blow them away like so much dust."

Philemon tested her again and again. It was not easy. Some of the doubts and fears he planted in her mind made her weep. Philemon made her doubt God's love, her ability to endure childbirth or the health of her baby. She had awful mental images of blood and despair pop into her mind. Some were difficult to overcome, even with the incantations. He gave her feelings of pride, during which Casey told herself she had been chosen because she was above all women, above all humanity and therefore did not need the angels' protection or God. As a naturally humble person, Casey felt these thoughts alien and defeated them easily.

They moved on to incantations that would reveal a demon's true form. Philemon reminded her that the beautiful Lucius would have terrified her in his full aspect.

"But so would we," he pointed out.

"So what I see when I look at you is not what you look like for real?" she asked.

"With angels we are just larger and brighter. We would fully overwhelm you by size and presence. The Host would leave you speechless with fright."

"But wouldn't that make an incantation to reveal dangerous?" she asked.

"It's better to be frightened of what you know than trusting of what you don't," Philemon said. He went about the room, randomly transforming objects into other objects using his angelic power. Casey used the incantation and the illusion melted away every time. Then Philemon began to change his own form. He became a child, a kitten, a lamb, a beggar. Casey was fascinated and worked hard throughout the day.

By late afternoon she felt like her mind was an overtired muscle. She began to yawn and had a hard time concentrating. Philemon took pity and brought her a cup of tea.

It had turned unseasonably chilly overnight and a fire was crackling in the study. Casey wanted to be warm and cozy but she also longed to walk outdoors in the sun. She'd lost much of her New Orleans summer tan and felt pale and wan. She asked Philemon if she could go out. To her surprise, he seemed to consider it.

"Gabriel said there was no activity last night," he observed. "Unusual. Perhaps they've pulled back. Still, it would be better to wait until he returns."

"When will that be?" Casey asked.

"I don't know," Philemon replied.

Casey frowned and then brightened. "You could go with me," she said.

"I'm no warrior, Cassandra," Philemon said. "I'm a scholar."

“You’re an angel,” she countered. “That makes you stronger than they are.”

He smiled.

“I’ll put my head out and see if it still seems safe. If I get any dangerous vibes at all, then we’ll have to wait. If it seems safe then I see no reason that you can’t take a stroll about the yard, under my watchful eye, of course.”

Casey brightened. She was excited to feel the cool air and sun on her face. Philemon passed the window and had gone out of sight. She was eager for him to return. She was eager for Gabriel to return, too, so she could tell him all the things she was learning.

Casey heard voices. One was Philemon’s and the other, she realized, was Gabriel’s. She started to head towards the door but then stopped, remembering the painful punishment he’d administered the day before when she’d gone outside without express permission. She went back to the window. Gabriel was standing by the corner of the house, his back to her. He was talking to Philemon. She heard her name spoken.

“It’s all going to plan,” Gabriel was saying. “She’ll be a lamb to slaughter. Once she has the child, I’ll lead her to a quiet place and snap her neck. And we’ll be done with her. Just keep doing what you’re doing, Philemon. Continue the parlor tricks. Turn yourself into things and make her think that the silly words in the book are real incantations.”

Philemon nodded and laughed. “Humans are naïve, aren’t they?” he said. “I will play my part, Gabriel, if you continue to play yours.” He paused, leaning into the other angel. “Speaking of parts, let us settle the matter of our bet. I predicted it would take no less than ten minutes to seduce that little wanton again. You said no less than five. Tell me? Who won?”

Gabriel’s laughter rang through the garden. “Who do you think? She had her legs open before my shirt was off. I spread my wings at the end as a nice touch. The girl is smitten. I must say I will miss her charms after I have killed her, but it’s not like there aren’t more stupid human women who like to lie with angels. May they all be as trusting...”

Casey did not wait to hear more. Her head was reeling. Strangling a sob, she ran through the house to the side door opposite where the angels were standing. It was cool and all she had for cover was a sweater, but she did not want to risk going back upstairs to retrieve something thicker. She ran from the house, looking back to make sure she wasn’t followed. She did not know where she was going; she only knew she had to get away.

Chapter Five

Casey's feet were sore. She'd only had thin-soled flats for footwear and the sticks and rocks in the wooded area that ran parallel to the lane made it difficult to walk. She wanted to cry, but felt too numb.

She'd trusted them. She'd let herself love Gabriel and had believed him when he told her he felt the same way. Now she wondered how she could have been so incredibly stupid. Her fears had been right all along; she was expendable. It seemed especially cruel that Philemon had actually told her the truth when he planted the doubt in her mind during the exercise earlier that day. Were he and Gabriel laughing about that together now?

How stupid she must have looked reciting the incantations. How naïve she must have been to think that her weak human will and some magical words could make things happen as they had in the library. She wasn't sure how Philemon had made her think she was reading an angelic language. He was clearly a creature with a lot of tricks up his sleeve.

Casey's self-pity turned to anger, at God and at the angels. The further she walked, the angrier she got. Who were they to tell her she could not take care of a child? Who were they to put her in this position to start with? Her stomach growled. She was getting hungry. And she was cold, too. She heard a rushing in the trees above her but it was only the wind. If Philemon and Gabriel hadn't yet discovered she was gone, they would soon enough. She could not get very far on foot, but all around was nothing but open farmland.

She came out of the woods long enough to lean by a stone wall and look up and down a country lane. It was a white ribbon curling through the green hills and was abandoned except for two distant lights. Headlights. A farm truck was coming her way. As it got closer she could see it was carrying sheep. They stomped and bleated in the back. As the truck approached it went past and then stopped and backed up.

An old woman looked out. Her face was round and rosy; she was wearing a loud colored kerchief on her head.

"I thoughts I saw a lass," she said. "But I thoughts me eyes was playing tricks on me, I did. What's a slip of a thing like you doing out here in the middle of the country?"

"I...I had a fight with my boyfriend," Casey liked. "I need a ride to town."

"To town you say?" The old woman looked up the road. "It's a far piece and petrol is expensive."

Casey felt desperate. "I don't have any money. But I have this..." She reached behind her neck to unclasp the necklace she was wearing. It was a cross that had belonged to her grandmother. She held it out. The woman eyed it and then laughed.

“No, keep your baubles. What kind of person would I be if I didn’t help a neighbor in need? Climb in. I need but deliver these sheep to a field up the road and I’ll get you to the Rose and Thorn. That’s a little inn almost to town. They’ll put you up until you can sort things out with your man.”

Casey sighed with relief and ran to the other side of the truck. The old woman could barely fit behind the wheel. Her coat was thick and her Wellington boots were caked with mud. The truck lurched as she put it in gear.

“American?” the old woman asked.

Casey nodded.

“And you came out here with a beau?”

“Sort of,” Casey said. “But he wasn’t who I thought he was.”

The old woman cackled. “They never are, sweetie. Sweet as tarts at the start but once they’ve had their way with you they cast you aside like an empty sweets wrapper.

She looked over at Casey and smiled a gap-toothed smile of sympathy.

“There, there,” she said kindly and patted Casey’s hand. The woman’s hand was warm. In fact, the truck felt warm. Casey asked if she could roll down the window.

“Of course, dearie” she said.

“How far to the inn?” Casey asked.

“Three, four kilometers,” the old woman said. “I’ll help you with the first night’s fee. You look awfully tired. Are you sick?”

Casey looked down at her lap. “I’m...expecting.”

“Oh dear,” the old woman said. “That complicates matters for you, doesn’t it.”

“You have no idea,” Casey said.

“Who’s the father?” the old woman asked. “I might know him. I know almost all the locals.”

“I don’t think he’s from around here,” Casey replied hastily.

The truck’s left front wheel dipped into a pothole. The engine sputtered. The old woman sighed, cursed under her breath and then apologized for cursing as she guided the groaning truck over to the side of the lane.

“Temperamental old piece of junk,” she fumed. “Sit tight, lovey. I need to make sure that tire didn’t get damaged. And the engine is sounding off now. Might have shaken something loose.”

Casey sighed and put her head back on the cracked vinyl headrest. She hoped the old woman would not be long. She was tired and wanted a hot bath. After that she would do the only thing she knew to do; she’d call Lou in the United States and let her know what was happening. Lou was the only person who would believe her besides Mama June. Then she’d call her parents and beg them to send her money to get home. If she told them she was pregnant, perhaps they’d take pity. She wasn’t entirely convinced they would, but she knew she had to take the chance. And once back in America, where would she go? Gabriel would not give up his search for the child, and if he found her would kill her as soon as it was born. She’d have to move from place to place, find someone who could help shield her, a holy man or something.

It was silent outside the truck. Casey looked in the rear view mirror. She did not see the old woman. She got a bad feeling. If Gabriel or Philemon were out there, it would be no problem for either of them to cut her down. She opened the door slowly. She could see the old woman now. She was behind the truck, looking into the bed.

“Poor dears,” she was saying. “Poor little lambs.” Casey glanced into the bed of the truck and screamed.

The sheep were ripped to shreds, their lifeless eyes staring off into the distance. Blood ran out in streams and pooled on the ground. Casey backed away, her heart pounding.

“Sorry, dear,” the old woman said. “Sometimes I like to stop for a snack.”

Casey looked up then to see that the woman’s face had transformed into a grotesque mask. Hunks of sheep flesh were lodged in the jagged teeth of her awful, blood-stained face.

In a second, the face transformed back to normal and the old woman began to walk towards her.

“What’s wrong, lass? Don’t you eat lamb?”

The last incantation she’d used that day sprang to her mind, but so did doubt. They would not work; they’d all been a lie. But still she could feel the words burning in her mind, begging to be spoken. She spoke them and the façade of the old woman melted away to reveal a leering, twisted demon. Its wings were covered in spikes. It was naked, its huge penis hanging down its bony knees. It came towards her on raptor-like feet, reaching as it did for the sword at its side. Casey fell to the ground and rolled under the truck. She came out the other side, sprang to her feet and began to run. She heard a rush of wings and the air above her was like a wave of blistering heat.

A man appeared to her in the road. Then he changed. It was Gabriel.

She stopped dead in her tracks.

“Stupid, naïve fool,” he said. “We’re all one in the same, don’t you know?”

But Casey shook her head. She was terrified but relieved. She’d been wrong. And she knew she’d been wrong because the incantations had worked, which meant that it had not been Philemon she’d seen in the garden when she’d fled. It had been someone pretending to be Philemon. And she knew that this was not Gabriel, just as the being she’d seen in the garden had not been Gabriel. But she also knew she had to think fast.

They were masters of deceit; perhaps it was time to beat them at their own game.

“I should have known,” she said, looking at the demon pretending to be Gabriel. “I should have known that you were nothing but a lie! How can anything so sweet really be true?”

“It can’t,” said the fake Gabriel. “But aren’t you the same? You’re so sweet, so vulnerable and yet here you are thinking you can carry this child to term and take care of it when we both know that you cannot. Come with me; I’ll take care of you until the baby is here. I’ll let you live until then. I might even fuck you the way you like it, Cassandra. You know how you like it, hard until you’re crying with pleasure and writhing like a whore.”

“That is how I like it,” Casey said. The demon was drawing closer now. It was hard to believe he was not Gabriel, which made what Casey had to do all the more difficult.

“ELOHIM BARTUCHE SANCTORUM!” She mustered all the belief and faith she had left as she said the words and the demon disappeared in a blaze of smoke. A dark spot was burned into the road; the air smelled of sulfur.

Casey knew now that she was in trouble. She’d erred by leaving the farm and had to get back. She knew that Gabriel would punish her severely for what she’d done but she did not care. She deserved it. Hopping into the truck, she punched the clutch and turned the key. The engine protested and chugged weakly.

“Come on!” she said. She turned again.

“Please, God!”

This time when she turned the key the engine started. There was little room to turn around but Casey managed it. Then she was heading back towards the manor. But as she rounded the corner she was forced to slam on breaks. A herd of cows stood in the road in front of her car and she was almost to a full stop before she remembered that there were

no cows in this part of the country, only sheep. She recited the incantation for changing form and the cows melted into leaves; she sped over them.

“He’s going to beat you,” her inner voice said. “He’s going to lash you until you bleed for what you’ve done. He won’t care how much you cry or scream; Gabriel never does. He gets off on your pain. But so do you.”

“No!” She shook her head to clear them of the thoughts.

“You like the way he treats you. You like the way he takes away your choice and your free will. You were born to this. You were born to be a weak, simpering, obedient vessel..”

The voice in her head now was not hers. It was a male voice, a silky voice. And then she realized it was coming from the seat next to her. She screamed and slammed on breaks.

The Devil was as beautiful as everyone said he was. He had long, thick hair and dark, beautiful eyes. He was dressed in a tuxedo, which would have made anyone else in a grubby farm truck look ridiculous. Casey stared at him, mesmerized. The engine of the truck ticked quietly. Casey knew the engine was off even though she had not turned the key.

“Are you going to tell me it’s not true? Do you not like his power, his control?”

“Let me go,” Casey said, trying to keep the fear from her voice. The incantations sprung to her mind, but she knew they’d be about as useful against Lucifer as a pop gun against a fully-trained Marine.

“No,” he said. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. You’re even feistier than she was. It’s hard to believe you are actually of the same lineage. She was so meek....”

“Who?” Casey asked.

The devil laughed. “Why, Mary!” he said. “Or did they not tell you why you were chosen? It’s because you are a direct descendent of her line, Cassandra.”

Casey shook her head. “You’re lying. Mary was a virgin.”

“Well, she was until your God got to her. After that she married Joseph. Holy seconds. Mary and Joseph went on to have children. You just don’t read about them in the Bible. Your god keeps terrible records. And he has such a selective memory. Tsk. Tsk. I should write my own book. A tell-all...to set the record straight.”

He smiled and continued. “There’s a war coming, pretty Cassandra. If I allow your child to come into the world he will represent a very significant threat. You may not be aware, but there are fewer and fewer angels working for your god. More and more now work for

me. Your god has never played fair so he has decided to populate his army with Nephilim. They are less willful than angels but they will need a strong leader to marshal them. That Nephilim grows in your belly. But not much longer.”

Casey shrank back and tried to open the door. It would not budge.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, reaching for her. She cried out as he pulled her to him. His mouth was against her ear; his breath smelled like smoke and cinnamon. He placed a hand on her back and rubbed and Casey was horrified to feel intense pleasure from his touch.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said. “The baby will be gone before you know it. Unless.....”

She looked at him, terrified. “Unless what?”

He brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

“Unless you give your soul to me. You’ve never given it to Christ, I assume?”

She thought back to her childhood. They’d not been churchgoing people. She could not remember making a commitment that she really felt, even though preachers had pressured her at a couple of revivals her parents had attended.

“No,” she said.

“Well then give your soul to me and the child will live! You can bear him and you can even raise him under my watch and my protection. When the time comes he can still lead your god’s little army of bastards, but just in the direction I want them to go.”

Casey shook her head. “No,” she said.

The devil raised an elegant eyebrow. “No? You would let your child die?”

Casey tried to find words, but all she could do was cry and clutch her belly. She was confused. Why had Gabriel not told her that she was a descendent of Mary? Had she really been picked because they thought she was just a weak vessel? Who was telling her the truth?

“Time’s almost up, Daughter of Mary,” the Devil said. He was reaching for her again and the last thing she remembered before the flash was opening her mouth for a scream that never came. A blinding light filled the cab of the truck and then there was the sound of metal rending. Casey found herself airborne and then falling, but slowly, as if she was being placed down on the ground by the wind itself. She looked up to see towering figures above her. They were blazing white and red and they were battling. Even though the light was blinding, she knew that one of them was Gabriel. She recognized the color of his sword. He was being joined by others coming from the heavens in a stream of

light. She felt the ground underneath her quake from the force of the battle. She covered her head and peeked up from under her arm as she lay there in a ball to protect the baby. The red demon angels were being driven back by sheer numbers now. They screamed unearthly screams. Lightning split the air. She heard trees in the forest crash to the ground. From somewhere she heard a train approaching, but realize it was no train. A twister was forming, dark and ominous, on the horizon. But the mouth of the funnel did not touch the ground. Instead, it snaked towards the fight until the red angels fled to it one by one. They disappeared into the vortex, which then disappeared itself.

The white angels shot into the sky in a blaze of light. They looked like shooting stars across the darkening sky.

And then there was Gabriel. She knew it was him; she did not have to ask. He was girded for battle in an armor she'd never seen before. It flashed with brilliant, indescribable colors. His sword was in his hand. It was covered in thick blood. He walked over, planted it into the ground beside Casey and knelt down.

"Did he hurt you?"

Casey shook her head. "He didn't hurt the baby either."

"I'm more concerned about you," Gabriel said.

She blinked back tears of gratitude. She needed no incantation to know he spoke the truth.

"I'm sorry," she said miserably. "They tricked me. I thought I saw you and Philemon but it was not..." She paused and looked at Gabriel. "Philemon?"

Gabriel shook his head gravely. Casey began to cry as she recalled her teacher's words. "*I am no warrior*," he had said.

There will be a war now," Gabriel said, looking up at the sky. "It is what the Dark Host wanted, to start the war before the Nephilim were here. We will have to hold them off on our own until our child is of age to lead God's army to victory."

"Are you still so sure?" Casey asked as Gabriel lifted her up.

"I am," he replied, and then bore her home on angels' wings.

The END

(Book Three Coming Soon)

