

Watchers Book Three

By Mona Whitlock

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Chapter One

The emergency alerts were going out again – earthquakes, fires, volcanic eruptions, severe out-of-season hurricanes. The announcer said hospitals were filling up with patients afflicted with mysterious illnesses.

And it was just the third day of the apocalypse.

Casey was trying to sleep but was feeling too guilty to let herself drift off. It didn't seem fair that, while the world around her was falling apart, she was in a stone mansion on a feather bed under the protection of the most powerful archangel in God's army. But then she remembered she was carrying his child and that if things did not go as Gabriel planned, then her fate may ultimately be worse than anything anyone suffered outside the safe confines of her refuge.

She didn't let herself think on her encounter with the Dark One himself. She'd been so stupid to leave the country house where she'd been staying; she'd been misled by demons who form-shifted into Gabriel and Philemon and she'd believed it when she thought she'd heard Gabriel say he would kill her after their child was born. The demon had played on her worst fears. She'd fled and Philemon had been killed. She'd be dead herself if Gabriel had not arrived just in time.

Gabriel had waited until they were settled into the new dwelling, a sprawling structure in the mountains. Where these mountains were she did not know, but they were larger than any she had ever seen. When Gabriel had laid her down on the bed, he had admonished her to be more careful.

"I will not punish you for fleeing this time," he said. "You've been through enough. And besides, I am so grateful that you are safe that all I want to do is hold you, feel you against me.."

Casey was more than happy to be held and even happier when the holding turned to more. Each time Gabriel shunted aside the rules and made love to her, she felt special, adored and completely overwhelmed. His mission had been to impregnate and protect her until their child - who would grow to lead God's army of Nephilim - was born. But he loved her. He'd told her this and she believed him. And, when he pulled her to him with such irresistible authority, she was powerless to resist. He was huge, and strong. The muscles in his back, that covered his wings, rippled as he supported himself over her. His lean hips drove like pistons as his huge cock plumbed the depths of her, over and over and over. Casey cried out, her hands entwined in the bed sheets, her lean, tanned thighs wrapped around his waist. His kisses left a trail of electrical pulses down her neck. She yielded to him completely, never wanting it to end.

When it was finally over, he pulled her to him and shielded her with his wings. Casey lay in the curve of his body, feeling his pulsing member slowly soften and slip from her body. She ran her fingers across the feathers of the wings that tented them, marveling at their perfection. She felt happy, safe, cocooned and for a moment was able to forget the turmoil of the world outside.

But it was always there, and Gabriel was always watchful. He had retrieved Philemon's body; angels lived forever unless they were killed and his friend's life had ended brutally. Gabriel refused to give Casey details and she was not sure she wanted them. Now there were two new angels.

They were unlike Philemon, who was beautiful and serene. These angels were darker, larger and more menacing. Gabriel introduced them as Michael and Uriel. Uriel, the brighter of the two, nodded and offered a half smile. Michael only stared, his expression a mixture of curiosity and something else that made Casey nervous.

Casey sat up in bed and cast off the blankets. She walked to the window and looked out. All she could see were forests and mountains. But beyond them there was chaos, death, fear...

The radio was going off again, offering broadcasts in multiple languages, including English. A tsunami was heading across the Pacific and there were strange lights and rumblings in the sky that scientists could not explain. Planes sent to investigate disappeared. Air flight was grounded globally.

"You should be resting." Gabriel walked in and turned off the radio.

"I can't," she said. "I can't help but feel that this is somehow all my fault. All this pain, all this....death."

"It's not your fault," he said. "You're not the one fighting."

"No, but I sparked it," she said.

"It was sparked millennia before you came into existence. Now back to bed." Gabriel pulled the covers up over her and began to gently push her back.

"I don't want to go back to bed," she snapped. "I'm not tired, Gabriel. I'm anxious, and nervous, and sick of living like a prisoner. I can't sleep. It's as bad as it was before I met you." She paused, remembering that innocent time, when her only problem was a bad case of insomnia. Back then she'd thought of lack of sleep and the impact it had on her job and school performance.

"Refusing me is not an option for you, Cassandra," Gabriel said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "You should know that by now." He reached for her arms and before

she could even protest she was face down over his lap. Casey whimpered in fear and began to plead as he raised the hem of her nightgown, even though she knew entreaties for mercy were of no use.

Gabriel began to spank her, the stinging slaps targeting the undercurve of her bottom becoming progressively more forceful until her whimpers turned to cries, and then full-blown sobs. He seemed to know just how hard to spank her, using just enough intensity to push her right over her limits. He caused her pain without being excessively cruel.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" Casey cried, kicking her feet and writhing helplessly in the angel's powerful grip, as his hand continued its assault on her helpless backside. She could feel the heat and pain growing exponentially. Her voice was hoarse from cries and she was physically and mentally exhausted by the time he was finished.

Gabriel gently pulled her up and into his lap.

"Sometimes I think you test me because you know you need this," he said, dropping a comforting kiss on the top of her head.

Gabriel's words made Casey angry, in part because he was right. She did need the release of tears and emotions only his discipline could bring. When he'd first spanked her she resented it, but now she accepted his authority. Was it a good thing for her to be so meek? She put the question to him.

"I'm not a child," she said. "But I find it easy to be almost reduced to one in your control. I'm not sure that's healthy, Gabriel."

"I walked the earth before the first of your kind took his first steps on the virgin soil of Earth," Gabriel said quietly. "I'm older than your mountains, your sky, your stars. In my eyes you are a child."

She shifted uncomfortably in his lap and looked up at him. "But I'm carrying your child," she said. "That should afford me more status than merely a charge. How can you be both my lover and my guardian?"

"We are many things to man. I can be more than one to you, Cassandra. You are an intelligent woman, but you are still a human. Your knowledge is limited, your perspective miniscule. You will make mistakes without guidance and you cannot afford to make mistakes. It is important that you obey me without question. I cannot deal with you as I would deal with one of my erring kind, or even as I would deal with a man. A child's punishment, more forcefully applied, is a good remedy for a woman's disobedience. It hurts, but just long enough to get the point across."

He kissed her on the lips. "I have no desire to hurt you more than that."

Gabriel stood, cradling her, and laid her gently back in the bed. Casey felt her eyes grow heavy, her limbs grow languid. She yawned and allowed herself to be tucked in. Outside the world was on fire, but at that moment she let herself shut the reality of global turmoil out and just bask in the presence of her angelic lover.

“Stay with me until I fall asleep?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“And one more thing?” Her tone was sheepish.

“What, little one?”

“The radio.” Casey shuddered. “I know bad things are happening. And it’s not that I want to be in denial. But do you think for a couple of days...”

“Of course.” Gabriel unplugged the radio, wrapped the cord around it and set it on the nightstand. “It shouldn’t have been in here...”

“No. I was glad to have it at first,” Casey quickly replied. “But it’s just so horrible.”

He sat down on the edge of the bed. His hand on her back was warm, comforting as he rubbed. The pain in her bottom and the steady rubbing of his hand felt strangely comforting together. He was her guide and protector and with him, at least, she was safe.

When Casey was asleep Gabriel rose, picked up the radio and walked from the room. For the moment he stood at the door, looking at the rise and fall of her ribcage. It was reassuring to Gabriel, to see the woman who carried his child resting comfortably. He wondered if she realized how important she was to mankind, to him. When he’d gone to her distant ancestor, Mary, he’d been his God’s top messenger. Mary had been so outwardly placid in her acceptance of his God’s will, but behind her eyes he’d seen doubt and anger. His God had never spoken to Mary directly; Gabriel was glad that the next child destined to save mankind was sired by him, an angel-messenger-turned warrior who would make his presence known to her. He wanted the mother of his child to know him.

He shut the door, thinking on all the other women who had fallen pregnant across the globe without realizing that their children had been sired by angels who’d form-shifted into the outer shells of their lovers and husbands, or posed as charming, seducing strangers. It had been his God’s command, and only Gabriel had challenged it when he found he was chosen to sire the human-angel hybrid, known as Nephilim, that would lead all these others in a final conflict against Satan.

Had he not been in his God’s favor for so long, Gabriel would have not survived the wrath that would have surely befallen him. But Gabriel, along with Michael, shared an elite, favored status. Gabriel had even been told by his God that he admired the

bravery it took to speak up, and at his side Gabriel had felt Michael flinch. Michael was a fierce, terrible warrior - the strongest of their kind. And yet for all his strength he had not told his God what he had told Gabriel, which was that he hated the plan to breed an army of Nephilim.

“It cheapens our race,” Michael had fumed. “Why would you, Gabriel - an archangel - want to muddy your seed by breeding with God’s pets?”

“They are more than pets, Michael,” Gabriel said. “They are his chosen creation. For good or ill, our lot is to obey. If that means overseeing the Nephilim then so be it.”

When Michael had scoffed, Gabriel turned to him angrily. “You criticize me for taking a human to breed on God’s command. But tell me, Michael, would you have refused? You, who cannot even muster the courage to tell Jehovah you think his plan is wrong?”

This had earned Gabriel an angry glare from Michael, but Gabriel was just as angry. Michael was just as beloved by their God; he could have told Jehovah about his misgivings. He could have made all the arguments that he’d made to Gabriel. That humans were too weak and flawed. That even an infusion of angel strain could not lift them up to the level of angelic warrior. That God should try harder to gain back the loyalty of the increasing number of angels that fled to fight for Lucifer, or to become fugitive elementals who refused to show loyalty to either side.

If Michael had just told their God, then perhaps he would have been assigned somewhere else. Gabriel did not like having the temperamental and brooding Michael in such close proximity to Casey. He still recalled the look in the huge warrior’s face when he’d walked in bearing the exhausted and barely conscious mother of his child.

“Philemon died for this?” he’d asked, his expression dark and harsh.

“Philemon died for the cause,” Gabriel had said, and had moved past Michael to take Casey up the stairs to the bed. He cursed his current circumstances as he did so. Philemon had been a close friend of Michael, who rarely got close to any other angel. The two spent many hours talking philosophy, or poring over the vast books in the teacher’s library. Philemon had an encyclopedic knowledge of war strategies; he could recite almost every maneuver of angelic battalions in any given conflict with demonic forces. The two of them would often pass time running various scenarios by one another.

Gabriel wondered if Philemon shared Michael’s disdain for the Nephilim plan. If he did, he did not show it. And was sure the teacher had known of Michael’s distaste, but like Gabriel he’d never said anything to their God. A level of loyalty existed, even among angels. Deep down, no one really liked the boss, even if they served him to the death with a loyalty unmatched by anything else in Jehovah’s creation. Their God was all-powerful, but also arrogant and harsh. There was a duality to Him; he’d sent his son to redeem

humanity, and yet he seemed to look forward to the conflict that would cause so many pain and death.

“He’s bored,” Philemon had once said. “Bored and a bit petty, I’m afraid.”

“You could serve other gods,” Gabriel had said.

Philemon had shot him a distressed look. “You are fortunate that he can only listen to the hearts of men, Gabriel. Or that he trusts you enough not to eavesdrop. Favorite or not, he’d kill you for such blasphemous thoughts.”

But Gabriel wasn’t so sure that Philemon hadn’t had the same thoughts. Jehovah wasn’t the only god, hence the jealousy. But he was the most prominent and the idea of humans loving another drove him to distraction. All the angels knew their God could see his creation slipping away to follow others, and Gabriel suspected that there was more to the Nephilim plan than just a mere army. He suspected that the Nephilim - part loyal angel spirit and part human - would replace mankind as God’s chosen creation. The apocalypse would wipe out so many humans. Those who were left would fade naturally. And God would have a higher-minded following.

But Gabriel knew there were risks. The simple faith of humans kept so many of them bound to his God. Well, that and fear. The angels were so much smarter; it was already proven that they, too, could fall away. In fact, it was because they saw God through a prism of practicality rather than childlike faith that this was possible. Gabriel suspected that it was a matter of time before God would eventually lose his following, not because he did not love it, but because he tried too hard to force it to love Him in return.

And yet here he was, loyal in spite of what he knew. And he knew he was loyal for the same reason that Michael was loyal. This was all they knew, all they had ever known and they were in too deep to throw their lot in with another god, or to go off on their own. They were warriors, and warriors always followed their king into battle.

Gabriel was seized by a sudden need to check on Casey. He felt increasingly protective of her, and despite what Michael said, he found her beautiful and fascinating. Humans were so frail, so easily broken. He was moved by how hard she tried to comprehend, to obey. He could feel the force of her spirit when he held her but knew she was unaware of how much strength she actually possessed for a mortal.

Gabriel opened the door to the bedroom. She was still sleeping peacefully, her body curled into a self-protective c-shape. He loved how she slept curled up like that. He loved to hold her, to pull her against him. She was small and warm and smelled like sunshine. He could understand why the rogue angels were attracted to them when the first Nephilim were bred against God’s command.

It had been forbidden to couple with humans, but some of the angels had not been able to resist the small, soft creations just ripe for the picking. Angels were not within

themselves sexual beings, but the primal nature of humans awakened something in them and they went into them. The results were what the Bible recounted as “giants in the land.” Those giants disappeared, whisked away by an angry God who at that time had enough angels in his command to dispense with those who displeased him. The breeding stopped, but the stories spread among the angels, and some began to resent being denied access to such pleasures, especially when their God allowed so many to die early or painful deaths on a whim.

At some point, Gabriel suspected, their God decided that he would have to trump his angelic hoards. He, too, would go into a woman, and that offspring would make the Nephilim a footnote in history. Mary was the chosen woman, and Christ the result. God’s son was, at least, kinder than his father. The angels liked him because he stayed out of politics.

But Jehovah’s thirst to outthink his creations, and those he obsessively worried would steal them, was all-encompassing. And now, having sired a son by a human woman Himself, God had decided that he would sanction a select group of his loyal angels to have their way with human woman. The chosen ones were gleeful; only Michael realized the gravity of this plan. Only he - one of the strongest of the angels - was weak enough to fall in love.

Chapter Two

The droning of the radio woke her up the next morning. At first Casey thought she was dreaming; Gabriel had taken it away, hadn't he? She sat up, putting her fingers to her temples as she tried to block out the horrible things she was hearing.

The broadcaster's voice sounded thin, tired and frantic. An asteroid had hit the previous night off the east coast of the United States. The entire northeast was evacuating; Manhattan and parts of New York City were underwater. FEMA had maxed out almost all its resources and was assessing the multiple disasters based on how many homeless and injured people it could realistically serve. Looting in hurricane-ravaged towns had turned into a full-scale meltdown of desperate and hungry people. Police forces had abandoned coastal cities. Lawlessness rained.

"More breaking news..." The announcer paused. "This just in. There's been a major earthquake in Rome. I repeat, a major earthquake in Rome. Early reports say the Vatican has been reduced to rubble. No word on the condition of the Pope, bishops or thousands of pilgrims who had gathered to pray for an end to the disaster."

Casey got out of bed and walked over to the radio, shutting it off. She felt queasy and wasn't sure if it was from the pregnancy or the disturbing news. She wondered where her friends in New Orleans were. The hurricane that had just hit there was stronger than Katrina. Had they made it out in time?

There was a bathroom off the bedroom. Casey showered and changed into a pair of blue jeans and a tank top. Her jeans were a bit tighter across the midsection than they had been, but still comfortable. Casey turned to the side and looked in the mirror. Was there the beginning of a bump? She dropped her shirt, not wanting to think about bringing new life into this chaotic world.

Outside the bathroom the radio was on again. Casey felt a sudden sense of nervousness. The bedroom door was slightly ajar. She was sure it had been shut when she went to take her bath.

The announcer's voice was still droning. "... said the global economic meltdown..."

Casey unplugged the radio from the wall and picked it up. Peeking her head outside the door she looked both left and right. She didn't see anyone. The mansion was much larger than the manor house. She'd already gotten lost in it twice. Here she'd cooked her own meals, and while she missed Philemon's food she was relieved to feel that she was doing something for herself.

In the kitchen, she set the radio on the sideboard and went to make some breakfast. The heavy antique furniture was mixed with state-of-the-art appliances. A huge

side-by-side refrigerator was well-stocked with all sorts of fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh dairy products, meat and juices.

“How in the world are they getting this stuff?” she asked aloud, for the mansion was as isolated as any place she’d ever imagined.

“Do you doubt that the Lord will provide?” Casey turned, startled, to see Michael standing behind her. He was larger than Gabriel, and exuded power. He was shirtless, and the muscles of his chest looked as if they’d been chiseled by a sculptor. His hair was short, spiky and blonde. His eyes were intense, unfriendly.

“I’ve never pretended to be a person of faith,” Casey said quietly, pulling ham, eggs and berries from the fridge.

“At least you’re honest,” Michael said, and paused. “That’s probably as good a thing as one can say about you and your kind.”

Casey stared at him. “We’ve not met,” she said quietly, hoping that if she introduced herself to the strange angel it would quell his obvious hostility. She stepped forward, heart pounding, and offered her hand. “I’m Casey.”

He did not take her hand, but only looked at it with disdain. “I know who you are. You’re the one who carries Gabriel’s seed in her unworthy belly.”

Casey reddened and turned away, deciding that, since this angel obviously hated her for reasons she couldn’t fathom, there was no need to engage him further. She was hoping he would leave, but he did not.

“My name’s Michael,” he said after a moment. “Philemon may have mentioned me. We were friends.”

She stopped slicing the bacon and looked up. “Is that what this is about? You blame me for Philemon’s death?”

He said nothing, only glared.

“I was tricked,” she said. “But I should have known better.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice tight. “Yes, you should have.”

A second silence hung between them. Casey tried to pretend he wasn’t in the room. She reached up for a copper pan on the pot rack and placed the bacon on the side before cracking two eggs on the other.

“Lots of bad stuff going on in the world, Cassandra,” he said smoothly. “Fires, earthquakes, famine. Your little stunt was the catalyst for more than just Philemon’s death. I suppose it’s hard to listen to the radio with a clear conscience.”

Casey felt a chill run through her. She looked up from the stove where she’d just prepared to light the flame under the pot.

“It was you who put the radio back in my room last night, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not soft like Gabriel,” Michael said. “I don’t believe in coddling your kind. So often I’ve heard, ‘Oh, they’re only human,’ but you’re just as capable of causing hurt and chaos as we are. If you were mine, I’d tie you to the bed and blast that radio in your ear 24/7.”

He approached her as he spoke. Casey found herself backing away.

“...I’d make you listen to every report and after each one I’d remind you that you were responsible for ever dead baby, every grieving mother, every bloating, festering corpse that...”

Casey didn’t realize she’d struck Michael until she’d actually done it. The crack of her hand against his hard cheek resounded throughout the room and the next thing she knew she was airborne. He had her by her upper arms; his mighty wings had spring from his back so quickly that she’d barely realized it until he had pinned her in the corner just inches from the ceiling. She screamed in fear, kicking her legs in a vain quest for a foothold that was not there. She looked down to see one of her Keds drop to the floor.

“MICHAEL! LET HER GO!!!”

“Gabriel!” Her voice was full of tears and relief. For a moment, Michael did not respond, but just stared at her. Casey’s heart pounded. He was so strong, so....angry.

“Please,” she whispered to him. “Please just let me go.”

“I should,” he whispered back. “I should drop you and if God really did care about any of us you’d miscarry that bastard you carry. And all the other women carrying angelic seed would see their fruit wither in the womb. But unlike you selfish mortals, I *think* my actions through.”

Michael glided back down to the floor and Casey’s touchdown was gentle. She ran to Gabriel, who held her in his arms.

“What happened?” he asked, but when Casey started to answer, she realized that he was not addressing her, but Michael.

“Your human needs to remember her place in the scheme of things, Gabriel. She dared to strike me, and in your absence I felt it necessary to discipline her.”

Casey felt heat rush to her face. “He all but accused me of getting Philemon killed!”

Michael ignored her. “I’m afraid she shows one face to you and another to others,” he went on. “She’s arrogant, Gabriel. She thinks carrying your seed makes her special. She lacks the humble gratitude of the handmaids of old.”

“He’s lying!” Casey said, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. She wanted to sound strong and certain but her voice was shaking now. “He’s came in my room when I was asleep last night, Gabriel! He put the radio back. It was on when I woke up this morning.”

“You dare to call me the liar when it is you who are false?” Michael said. “Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. See, the radio is over there where Gabriel left it.” He shook his head. “You see, Gabriel, this is the problem I have with spilling our seed into these creatures. They’re by nature flawed, deceitful. Only here a day and this one already thinks she can do whatever she pleases without consequences. But we both know the consequences for any human who strikes one of us, don’t we, Gabriel.”

Gabriel’s eyes were fixed on Michael, whose look was hard and challenging. When Gabriel cast his eyes on Casey, they were not sympathetic, but impassive.

“You struck him.” It was more of a statement than a question. Casey wanted to lie as Michael had lied. But she would be better than that, she decided. She would be better than an angel. She would be honest.

“I did,” she replied.

“You know what I have to do, then?”

Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over. She nodded. It did not matter what Michael had done. He was an archangel. Casey could have remained silent. She could have left the room, or tried. She could have done anything other than raise her hand to God’s Own Warrior. But she’d let her temper get the best of her and now she would have to pay the price.

“Upstairs,” Gabriel said, but Michael put his arm out, barring the way. “I was affronted. I should punish her.”

This time Gabriel stood his ground. “She is mine, Michael. No one touches Cassandra but me.”

Michael smirked. “As you wish, but I should witness it. I was affronted.”

“Very well,” Gabriel nodded.

“No...” Casey began to squirm in his grasp. Philemon had witnessed her being punished, but Philemon was largely neutral and had been kind to her afterwards. He’d not caused Casey’s punishment, nor reveled in seeing Gabriel carry it out. Michael was different. He’d goaded her most cruelly, and then lied to Gabriel without repercussions.

Gabriel was restraining her now as he reached for a wooden spoon on the counter. Casey gave a little cry of fright and began to plead. “Don’t..don’t...don’t...” But as usual Gabriel was businesslike in his administration of discipline. He pushed her over the low counter in the kitchen and peeled her jeans down to mid-thigh. Casey squeezed her eyes shut tight, not wanting to see Michael where he stood off to the side getting a full view of her panty-clad bottom. He’d told Gabriel she was arrogant, above her station. Casey was sure seeing her punished as a child was gratifying to the angel who had decided to hate her before even getting to know her.

Gabriel’s arm was around her waist. He lifted her just enough to keep her feet from completely touching the floor. The wooden spoon slammed down, catching the undercurve of her left buttock. The pain jolted her, and Casey realized she was still sore from the night before. She opened her mouth to tell him this, to make another plea for leniency, but only a scream came out when Gabriel began a rapid fire assault with the spoon. He was hitting her hard, and everywhere on her bottom. She could not escape the pain, could not process each blow of the heavy wooden spoon before another blow landed to ratchet up the agony. She kicked her legs, sought to put her hands back only to have them easily captured and held. Tears poured from her eyes, pooling on the counter beneath her face. Her sobs were unintelligible and yet Gabriel continued to spank. He’d never punished her this severely, and she knew it was both to teach her a lesson but also to appease Michael lest he think Gabriel too easy on her. Casey promised through her sobs to be good, to be respectful. Her cries sounded like a little girl’s, even to her.

“Please, please, please, please...I’ll be good! Please!” Gabriel’s heart wrenched to hear her cry out so, but he had to prove a point to her and to Michael. If the fellow archangel realized that he would make Cassandra accountable then he hoped it would dispel some of the suspicion and hostility he felt. If Casey were sufficiently humble and meek - as Michael thought all humans should be – then, while he would never like her, he might at least tolerate her.

He slowed down his punishment. Casey’s tight bottom was covered in angry reddish-purple ovals. She was shaking uncontrollably, both from the pain and emotional overload of the ordeal. She wanted to rail at Gabriel, to tell him the things Michael had said, but she sensed that her angelic lover was caught up in some politics that far surpassed her understanding.

Casey’s legs were shaky as she stood and she shuddered as Gabriel pulled her pants up and latched them. As he did, he looked into her eyes and he knew then that he

also noticed that she was a little thicker in the middle than she'd been. Regret flashed in his eyes and she knew that a part of him was sorry for being so hard on her, but the expression disappeared.

"You need to eat," he said. "Sit down."

"I can't," the words came out in a hyperventilating stutter.

"You can and you will," Gabriel said. He pushed her gently down in a chair at the table and she gave a fresh, sharp cry of pain and laid her head down on the table, sobbing now and not caring whether it pleased Michael or not. At that moment, she hated him as much as she was sure he hated her. He was as cruel to her as Lucifer had been. At least with Lucifer she knew what he was. She longed to tell both the archangels this, but instead concentrated on controlling her breathing.

The smell of food sickened her. She did not want to eat, even when Gabriel pushed the plate in front of her and handed her a napkin. Casey dried her eyes and blew her nose. Her heart felt heavy with sadness, her head raced with questions. Why did Gabriel not ask her for her side of the story? Even if he had allegiances to his own kind, he'd told her he loved her. Did not love count more than loyalty to his fellow angels, to Michael? She remembered a saying some of the street kids used to have: "Bros before hoes." She began to think that Gabriel's pillow talk was just that and that Lucifer had been right...

She put her hands over her ears.

"Casey?"

"I'm trying to drive the bad thoughts away," she said, looking up at him. "The ones that tell me you don't care."

Gabriel sighed. "Come on. You're having breakfast in your room."

"That's right, Gabriel," Michael said. "Coddle her. But don't say I didn't try to help."

"You've done enough for one day, Michael," Gabriel said, and led Casey out of the kitchen, ignoring the other angel. Upstairs he put the plate on a table by the window.

"Come on," he said. "You need your breakfast. Our baby needs his breakfast."

Casey sat down, wincing anew. It hurt worse than it had in the kitchen.

"You have to be careful, Cassandra," he said.

“I know I shouldn’t have hit him, Gabriel. But you didn’t hear the things he said to me. If you had...”

“I can only guess,” the angel replied. “But you need to remember that the only difference between good angels and bad angels is who they’re working for. Even good ones can get inside your head and hurt you, even if they think it is for all the right reasons.”

“Is that what Michael was trying to do?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Casey felt fresh tears well up. “If you know that, then why spank me?”

“Because Michael is right. You are not of our kind.”

“So that gives you permission to treat us any way you want?” She gave an ironic laugh. “Wait. Don’t answer that. I suppose my answer is the countless women walking around impregnated against their will, including me.”

Gabriel was quiet. “You don’t want the baby?”

“Did I say that?” she asked angrily. “Of course I want the baby. But I want love and respect, too. I’m not an animal, Gabriel. I’m not an animal, I’m not a pawn and I’m not a pet.”

“You have those things from me, Cassandra. But there is a hierarchy, and there is authority. I answer to it and so must you. You cannot strike one of my kind. Men have died for less, and with our God’s blessing. Do you understand?”

She looked away and nodded.

“Consequences could not be avoided. I did not want to spank you, but better for me to do it than Michael. You do not want to fall under his care. He is harsh and unyielding and brutal in his own way. When I punish you, I punish you in love. Do you understand?”

She sighed. “I do.”

“Good.”

“But can I tell you what he said? What he did? He came into my room last night...”

“You know this?” Gabriel interrupted.

“Who else would have?”

“You cannot make accusations without facts, Cassandra.”

“Why not? He can!”

Gabriel stood. “This conversation is over. Things are the way they are. Put what happened out of your mind and finish your breakfast. I have something in mind that will cheer you up.”

Casey shot him a skeptical look. “I doubt much can cheer me up today.”

“It’s something that will irritate Michael,” he said.

Casey could not help but smile. “Well, I could be wrong,” she said. “Tell me more.”

Chapter Three

Gabriel was right. Michael was not happy.

“Isn’t it enough that we have one of them here? Is it some sort of taunt towards me that you bring two?”

Sarah, the young woman in the corner of the room sat quietly in the chair, her eyes wide as she watched the two huge men argue. They reminded her of the man she’d met just four months earlier when she was bartending at Troy’s. He was tall, taller than any man she’d ever seen. He’d settled himself at the corner stool a little before nine on a warm Saturday night and had ordered whiskey and soda. Sarah went back to him periodically to ask if there was something wrong with it, because she noticed he’d not touched it. But he’d just shaken his head and said it was fine.

She could feel his eyes on her all through the evening. Somehow, it made her feel safe, which was weird because strangers at Troy’s usually unnerved her. But on this night the regulars were far more unnerving. Most had already started drinking at Bubba Crowley’s hunting camp and were half-lit when they walked in the door of the bar.

“Hey, sweet cheeks!” Bubbay yelled. “It’s my birthday. Rounds on me!”

The regulars erupted in a cheer. The free round loosened wallets and inhibitions. As the night wore on Sarah was fielding orders and advances with diminishing patience. She felt a particular nervousness about one patron, Lester Cummings. He was a broad-shouldered mechanic and accomplished bow-hunter who bragged as loudly as he lived. And he had a thing for Sarah that was completely unreciprocated.

“When you gonna give in and marry me, pretty lady?” he asked as he slammed his glass on the bar and demanded a refill.

“I told you, Lester,” she said. “I’m not getting married. I’m in school, remember? Because I don’t want to bartend here the rest of my life? I’m out of this town after I get my associates. I’m transferring to the university.”

His expression had turned mean. “Too good for us, huh? Too good to spread your legs for us working folk? Holding out for some pencil-necked nerd with a tiny pecker and a Lexus?”

He downed his drink and swayed in his chair as he demanded another round.

“No, Lester,” Sarah said, taking his glass. “I’m cutting you off.”

“The fuck you are, bitch!” He reached for her but as soon as he did a large hand wrapped around Lester’s beefy forearm.

“She said no more,” the tall stranger said.

“Who the hell are you?” Lester slurred, and everyone in the bar turned to look.

“Someone you don’t want to mess with,” the stranger said.

Lester’s response was to ball up his fist and take a swing at the man, but the stranger was faster. He caught the approaching fist and landed two, three, four punches in rapid succession the redneck’s face. Lester crumpled and fell off his stool. The bar was silent for a moment and then a mob surrounded the stranger. Drunken men shouted insults while a couple helped their hefty, bleeding comrade to his feet. Glass began to break as some patrons lobbed their glasses at the stranger, who deflected them with what Sarah - the only sober one in the bar - realized was an unnatural speed.

“Come on. I’m getting you out of here,” he said.

She started to argue that her shift wasn’t over until two but then heard chairs breaking. Two men had turned on each other and were fighting, and suddenly there was a full scale melee taking place.

“Gladly,” she said, and allowed herself to be hustled out.

“I’ll take you home,” the stranger said.

“No, it’s all right,” Sarah replied. “I can walk.”

“No,” he said firmly. “It’s not safe. Not tonight. I insist.”

“Look,” she said. “These guys are all talk, but none of them are really...”

He shoved her in mid-sentence and as Sarah fell she saw the stranger turn in one fluid motion and catch the arrow hurtling towards him just before it hit his face. Lester Cummings was staring, his mouth open, a look of shock on his bleeding face. The two men who’d gathered to egg him on backed away, and none too soon. The stranger put up his hand and a surge of electricity - a ripple - flowed through the parking lot, hit his dually truck and toppled it on its side. Lester’s legs convulsed from underneath and then were still. The other men fled, screaming into the night.

Sarah was stunned into silence.

“What the fuck are you?” she asked.

“Come on,” he said. He pulled her to his car and she was too afraid to resist. Had she really seen what she’d seen? She sought to rationalize it but could not.

He was driving a black ford F10. He put her in the passenger's seat and was in the driver's seat before she could blink her eye.

"My address is 4117 Green Willow Drive," she said.

"I know," the stranger said.

Sarah's heart began to pound. What was happening? She spent the next ten minutes trying to decide what to do. Should she jump from the truck, run screaming for help? Outside her house the stranger was out his door and around to hers before she could formulate a plan. He walked her up to her front door and touched the knob. It sprung open, even though Sarah knew she'd locked it. Hers wasn't the best neighborhood; she was extra careful.

The stranger hustled her inside and began to walk around her house as if searching for something. He looked through the blinds of her window, his eyes scanning the back yard.

"Hey, Mister," she said nervously. "I appreciate the Captain American routine, but I'm fine now. And I can take care of myself. Really."

He turned back to her, drawing the blind. "Really? If I hadn't been there tonight those men would have done terrible things to you."

"Those guys?" She shook her head. "They're harmless. Well, except for Lester. He's mean..." She paused, remembering his legs twitching under the car. She felt ill. "He was mean."

The stranger walked over to her. He was so tall, so powerfully built.

"What are you?" she asked again.

"What do you think I am?" he asked.

She blinked her blue eyes, trying to discern if they were deceiving her. Was he glowing?

"You're an angel," she said.

He looked surprised. "You're smarter than most of your kind, Sarah Malone."

"How did you know my name?" she asked.

He didn't answer, just pulled her to him and kissed her. At first Sarah struggled, afraid. But he was not hurting her, she realized, just using enough force to keep her from moving away. And suddenly her body was on fire with want. She was returning his

kisses, reveling in the feel of his large hands on her body. His palms molded to her curves. He put his hands beneath her buttocks and picked her up until she was straddling his hips. Sarah was a small, lithe girl with a supple, hourglass body and long auburn hair. And she'd never been more excited than she was now.

The stranger carried her through the house to his bedroom, where he laid her back on the bed. She opened her legs to him, feeling the above the knee skirt she was wearing fall back to bunch up at her waist. The stranger's hands pulled on the panties she was wearing and ripped them off. She cried out in pleasure pain as he entered her. He slammed into her, harder and harder and harder. Sarah screamed her pleasure over and over, unable to control herself as an unthinkable orgasm rocked her to the core. Her throbbing pussy pulsed on the stranger's cock. He spewed his hot seed into her for what seemed like forever. Her body seemed to have a mind of its own, wanting it, absorbing it. Her hips rise to meet his thrusts.

When he collapsed she lay under him wondering what had just happened, and why it felt so all right. She was not a slut. She was a good girl. She's had three boyfriends in her twenty-seven years, all long term. She'd never had a one night stand.

Sarah gently pushed him up and looked into his eyes. The stranger was beautiful. She tried to think of something to say, but only one thing came to mind.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Philemon," he replied.

Now, as she sat in the chair in a huge stone mansion her eyes darted from face to face of the men arguing across the room.

"No, you're lying! You're lying!" the larger one said. "He never would have done this! Never. We talked about it! He was opposed to the plan. He never would have taken a human!"

"Are you sure it wasn't you just doing the talking, and because Philemon is quiet you just assumed that he agreed with you?" Gabriel said. The day before he'd found a note addressed to him tucked into his battle trunk. It was from Philemon, who asked him on the unlikely event of his death to find Sarah Malone and keep her and his child safe.

"She didn't ask for this," he said. "I was selfish. I was curious. I acted without thinking of the repercussions to her or my child. I cannot make it right if I am gone. But I can ask you to, my friend."

"Look," Gabriel said, showing Michael the note, but the larger angel would not even glance at it.

“Fine, keep her here. But keep her and the other one out of my sight. Do you understand?”

“I can’t keep them out of your sight, Michael,” Gabriel said. “We are all here, all on the same side. Or have you forgotten that?” He paused. “Besides, there’s something else you need to know. I’ve hesitated sharing it with you because I wasn’t sure how you’d take it. Philemon left you something as well, but he only wanted you to have it after I found Sarah.”

He handed Michael a scroll.

Michael opened it and watched the letters come to life as they’d come to life on Gabriel’s note. He could not doubt that it was Philemon’s hand. Few angels could write in such a fashion.

He read the note, glancing from time to time at Sarah as he did.

“Philemon was no friend to ask this of me,” he said quietly.

“It is because Philemon is your friend that he trusts you with her,” Gabriel said, nodding towards Sarah.

“I don’t want that trust.”

“You can’t refuse it.” Gabriel’s voice was firm and, while Michael was the more dominant of the two angels, he knew, in this instant, that Gabriel was on the side of right.

“I will not let her be willful or arrogant. I will discipline her without hurting Philemon’s child. She should know this.”

“I’ll have Cassandra speak with her so she’ll know what to expect,” Gabriel said.

Michael glanced at Sarah, nodded at Gabriel and was gone.

Sarah stood. “Would you please tell me what’s going on? One minute I’m starving to death in a FEMA shelter and the next minute I’m abducted and whisked away in broad daylight.” She backed away, pointing at Gabriel. “I know who you are, though. You’re an angel, aren’t you?”

Gabriel nodded.

“Then you know Philemon!” she said, visibly brightening. He...he made love to me four months ago. I’m pregnant. And yes it’s his because...

“I know it’s his,” Gabriel said. “That’s why you’re here, Sarah Malone. We’re going to keep you safe. But first, there’s something you should know.” He sighed. “Philemon is dead.”

“Oh....” The word was small and sad. Sarah felt a lump swell in her throat. She’d not even known him but wished she could have.

“I thought angels couldn’t die,” she said.

“Not under usual circumstances, but there is a war going on and you are involved in a complex and dangerous plot not of your making. Philemon left orders that if anything should happen to you that you be placed under the guardianship of Michael.”

She looked down the hallway where Michael had just exited. “You mean that big guy who just left?”

Gabriel nodded. “Yes, him.

Sarah began to cry. “I don’t know. He scares me.”

Gabriel gave her a reassuring smile. “Michael scares everybody. It will help if you get settled in. You’re not the only one in your situation, you know...”

She looked up at him, eyes wide. “I’m not?” Her tone was excitable.

“No, there are other women. Many others. In fact, I have a child that will be born a month after yours. The mother is here. Her name is Cassandra. Would you like to meet her?”

Sarah suddenly felt overcome with emotion. She nodded vigorously and Gabriel took her elbow and led her gently up the stairs.

Casey was in the room, sitting in the dormer seat and looking out the window. She’d seen Michael storm out earlier and was wondering what had put him in such a state, not that it mattered. Gabriel had still not told her what the surprise was and she’d been practicing the art of Patience all day. Now she turned and when she saw the pregnant woman across the room she gasped.

“Cassandra,” Gabriel said. “I’d like you to meet Sarah Malone.”

Casey stood and walked slowly towards the other woman. It had been forever since she had female company and she could tell just by looking at Sarah that she was bright. Sarah looked directly at her and offered a small, shy smile.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” she said.

Gabriel took each woman's hand and placed them together. "Cassandra," he said quietly. "Sarah is carrying Philemon's baby."

"Oh..." Casey's hand flew to her mouth and she tried to strangle the cry that threatened to erupt.

"Oh god," she said, looking at Gabriel. "Does she..."

"...know that he's dead? Yeah," Sarah said. "I only knew him for one night, but he was...remarkable."

"Philemon died defending Cassandra," Gabriel said. "We owe the father of your baby a great debt."

Sarah felt her heart swell with pride. She could see Philemon doing something like that.

"Our babies will be close," Casey said. "They'll grow up together."

"And they'll do great things," Gabriel replied.

"But why? Why is this happening?" Sarah asked. "You said there were other women. So that means more than just me and her, right?"

Gabriel nodded. "There are thousands and thousands of women pregnant with Nephilim."

Sarah put her hand on her belly. "Nephi-what?"

"Nephilim," Casey replied. "Half angel, half human.." She looked at Gabriel. "Let me tell her, please. Can I?"

"Of course you can," he said.

"I can't promise I'll understand," Sarah said. "I mean, there could be some mistake. I'm not religious. I'm not even a Christian."

Casey laughed. "I'm not either!"

"Oh..."

"I'll leave you two alone," Gabriel said, and turned to walk away. "We've gotten some priests from the monastery in the valley to come cook and keep house. They're an obscure order and very trustworthy. I don't want either of you to worry about making your own meals or doing anything else other than taking care of yourselves."

The women nodded and Gabriel was gone. For a moment they stood there, facing each other.

And Sarah began to cry.

“Do you know what’s happening out there?” she asked.

“A little,” Casey said. “I’ve heard bits and pieces on the radio. Gabriel doesn’t want me to worry because of the baby. But you’ve lived it, and you’re further along than I am. Come.”

Her legs were beginning to shake and she led Sarah over to some chairs so they could sit down. She was curious, but she wasn’t sure if she wanted to know. But Sarah needed someone to listen, and Casey felt like this was something she could finally do to help someone else.

“The things I’ve seen,” Sarah said, her expression pained. “And I’m not even in one of the hardest hit areas. People are dying in the street. Animals are scavenging the bodies. People are eating their pets and....worse.” She shuddered. “There’s some sort of illness; they’re saying it’s a plague. People break out in boils. So many people have gotten it, but not some of the pregnant women...”

“The one’s carrying the Nephilim,” Casey said.

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Sarah said. “We’re immune. And I’ve seen and heard of certain pregnant women being the only survivors following disaster. There was an earthquake in Texas - yes, Texas. A building collapsed. The only survivors were three pregnant women. Before everything completely fell apart, doctors were wanting to test pregnant women to figure out why they were immune to the plague. She sighed. Now there are no doctors, no police. It’s anarchy. My house was destroyed by a flood. I was staying at a FEMA shelter. There were five rapes there. But when one of the men tried messing with me he fell ill with sudden intense stomach pain.

“The Lord will provide...” Casey said.

“All he seems to be providing is headaches,” Sarah fumed. “This turmoil...does it have anything to do with women like us.”

“It has everything to do with women like us,” Casey said. “Get ready to hear something that’s hard to believe...”

Chapter Four

The two women bonded as best friends that night. The next day, when Gabriel told Casey of Philemon's last request, she became indignant.

"No!" she said, speaking quietly so as not to wake her friend in the next room. "Not Michael, Gabriel. Anyone but Michael! Philemon must not have known how Michael felt about the Nephilim! If he did he would have never..."

"I think that's exactly why he asked Michael to care for her. I think he wanted his friend to see humans as he saw you. As God sees you..." Gabriel put an arm around her. "It was his request."

Casey threw his arm off her shoulder. "And what of Sarah's wishes, Gabriel? Do you think she'll want to be in Michael's care once she knows of his true nature?"

Gabriel stepped closer to her and looked down. His face grew stern. "And who would apprise him of that, hmm? If you're thinking of filling her head..."

"The only thing I'd fill her head with is the truth, Gabriel! Michael is cold and cruel and unforgiving. You said so yourself! And he hates Nephilim. Do you know what he said when he held me up near the ceiling? Do you? He said that he should drop me so I could lose the bastard I was carrying!"

"He was just venting, Cassandra. He would not have defied God in such a manner."

"Well it's easy for you to say. You didn't have to look into his eyes. I don't trust him, Gabriel. And I'm not going to stand by and let..."

Gabriel took ahold of her arm and squeezed Casey so hard she cried out.

"You forget yourself, little one," Gabriel said, pulling her to the bed. He bent Casey over and she began to cry as he pulled up her skirt and lowered her panties to her knees. He spanked her with stinging slaps of his hand, a punishment that would not have been so bad had not continued until the pain from these slaps built to the point that Casey was sobbing into the bedclothes and wagging her fire engine red bum back in forth an effort to avoid the discipline he was administering. But the angel was far from done. He moved down her legs, peppering the tops of her thighs with stinging smacks that left her bawling and pleading in gibberish. When he was finished, he pulled her to standing and put her in a corner.

"I've heard this works well for errant human children," he said. "Let's see how it works for slightly older ones. Keep your nose in that corner and your bum on display until I tell you otherwise. Move a muscle and I'll be back with a birch switch."

Understand? And later, when you see Casey you will make no mention of Michael. I will not have your experience with him influence her impressions, understand?"

She nodded through her tears and stood there, too afraid and sore to protest. Casey felt helpless and frustrated as she stood there. It was unfair to bring someone into her life she could care about and then announce he was handing her over to a monster like Michael. It was doubly unfair to dismiss her concerns and forbid her from even warning Sarah.

Gabriel returned and gave Casey some time to refresh herself before breakfast. Casey checked her reflection and told the angel that she was ready after satisfying herself that her red-rimmed eyes could be explained away by allergies.

Breakfast was incredible. Father Quinn and Father Roman had prepared a feast of fruit-studded oatmeal, ham, scones with marmalade jam and fresh squeezed orange juice. Casey was relieved to see that Michael was nowhere around, but became nervous when Gabriel mentioned taking her to the library later.

"You won't mind sparing your friend for a few hours, will you?" he asked.

Sarah shook her head and smiled.

"I don't really want to go to the library," she said.

Gabriel scowled. "You love the library. You've asked me to take you."

"I changed my mind," she said quickly.

"Then we can go up to the room and work on your attitude," he said.

Casey felt her stomach roll in fear. "That's all right," she said. "I'll go to the library."

"At least let me go to the restroom first," she sulked and Gabriel nodded. Casey prayed that Sarah would seek her out and was relieved when she did.

"What was all that about?" she asked. "You seemed really nervous in there, Casey. Is everything OK?"

Casey pulled Sarah aside, looking around the corner to make sure that Gabriel hadn't followed.

"I have to talk fast," she said. "It's about Michael. I know you've been put in his care by Philemon, but Michael is....he's really mean. He threatened me, Sarah. He threatened me and he threatened my baby. Gabriel blew me off when I told him about it, but Michael hates this idea to breed an army of Nephilim...."

She looked around the corner, still fearful of being heard.

“Gabriel said he thinks Philemon left you in Michael’s care because he thought if he got to know you it would win him over to humans and to the idea of Nephilim. But it won’t, Sarah. He’s opposed and what’s more he’ll be so strict...”

“Casey??” Gabriel’s voice came from down the hall.

“Oh no. Gabriel’s coming. He told me not to warn you, but I had to. Quick, back in the bathroom...” She all but shoved her friend back in and hurried down the hall.

“Right here,” she said.

“What took you so long?” he asked.

“You don’t eat. You don’t have to go to the bathroom either, Gabriel. Some mysteries you’ll have to figure out without my help.”

They headed to the library and Sarah stayed behind, her mind reeling with fear of the unknown. She remembered Philemon, how protective and kind he’d been. He had been everything she’d imagined an angel would be - beautiful, warm, caring. He’d obviously had feelings for her, and that made her feel better. For so many weeks after he left she had wondered about him, had searched the crowds of her local town. She’d not gone back to the bar; she was afraid of what Lester’s friends would do. The police came by to question her about Lester’s death. She told them she wasn’t sure what had happened, that she thought perhaps there had been an explosion while the men were fighting. She did not tell them how Philemon had caught the arrow in mid air, thwarting Lester’s attempt to kill him.

When her period didn’t come and she realized that her one night with the enigmatic stranger had resulted in a pregnancy, she wasn’t sure what to do. She decided she needed time away and went to Austin. The next day things started happening. Bad things. She was grateful when Gabriel showed up and spirited her away. She’d known right away that he was an angel, and that she would be safe. Or she’d thought that. Now as she stood in the bathroom trying not to panic she realized that not all angels were kind. They were just like people, and some of them were mean.

“I’ll go back to my room,” she said. “I’ll go back to my room and lock the door. I won’t answer if he comes; he’ll think I’m asleep. It seemed like a good plan. She made for the direction of the stairs, trying to remember her way back to her quarters. The mansion was huge; the kind of place she always marveled at in books but never thought she’d see.

She was rounding a corner when she bumped into him. Sarah would have staggered back had not Gabriel caught her arm.

“I thought you were with Casey,” she said, relieved.

“I was,” he said. “But I left her in the library. She’d like to show it to you.”

“Now?” Sarah asked, relieved.

“No. Not now. Later.”

“Why not now?” she asked.

“Because Michael is looking for you,” Gabriel extended his hand but Sarah crossed her arms and backed away.

“I don’t want to see him.”

Gabriel’s face grew somber. “Why not?”

“No particular reason,” Casey lied. “I just don’t. I don’t need anyone to take care of me.”

“You don’t have a choice,” Gabriel said.

“Yes I do,” Sarah said defensively. “I’ve read the Bible. Man has free choice. Lots of it.”

“That was before.” Michael stepped from around the corner, looking hard at Sarah. “Things are different now, Sarah. Everything is different.”

She looked from angel to angel, her sense of nervousness increasing.

“No,” she said. “You can’t make me go with him. I won’t. I’ll leave first. I didn’t ask to come here.”

“No, you didn’t,” Michael said, “but Philemon asked me to care for you. He asked me to help you raise his son, to teach him. And so I will.”

“No you won’t,” she said. “Casey told me...”

Her voice trailed off and she looked at Gabriel, hoping he had not heard, but he had.

“Sarah,” Michael said. “Did Casey tell you what happens to disobedient women under our guard?”

Sarah felt her heart begin to thud. “No,” she said. “She didn’t.”

“They are punished,” he said. “They are punished until they renounce their bad behavior and promise to obey. Had you asked me, I would have freely admitted being against the plan for Nephilim. Were I in our God’s position, I would do things differently. But I am a warrior; I am not the king and so I must obey. Philemon’s request has forced me to at least try to understand, which means I have a responsibility now, for you and to you. And the first step in that responsibility is to correct you for trying to refuse me.”

Sarah moved to sprint past him, afraid now. But Michael was lightning fast and she found herself cradled in his arms before she could make another protest.

“I believe,” Michael said, “that Sarah’s friend should witness her punishment so she can fully understand what her disobedience to you has wrought.

Gabriel nodded. Normally he thought Michael too harsh, but not now. The archangel was right; Casey had defied him and she was responsible for what was about to happen to her friend.

Casey seemed genuinely surprised to see them walk in together, and her surprise turned to fear when she saw Sarah’s frightened expression.

“What have you done to her?” she asked, moving towards Michael, but Gabriel halted her.

“Nothing yet,” he said. “And it would have been nothing had you not stoked her fears to the point that she defied Michael.”

“No human defies me,” Michael said. “Sarah is to be punished, and for your part in inciting her you are going to watch.”

“NO!” Casey moved to help her friend, trying to pull away from her guardian. But Gabriel’s grip was like steel. He would not let her go and she began to cry in fear along with Sarah when Michael sat down on the long leather couch and pulled Sarah across his lap. He pushed her forward, so her thighs were on his and her small bump was cushioned by the sofa. He raised the skirt and pulled down her panties, baring her bottom, as he held her still with a hand to the small of her back. When he began to spank her it was neither slow nor gentle but with real disciplinary force.

Sarah had never been spanked. She cried out in pain and struggled, but she was no match for the huge angel. His large hand covered the surface of her bottom and soon the skin had gone from beige to a blistering red. She cried out, pleading for mercy and Casey wrung her hands and tried to look away, only to receive a hard swat on the thigh for the attempt to evade the scene unfolding before her.

Sarah’s cries filled the room. Casey sobbed softly as her small friend rocked back and forth to try and relieve the pain in her bottom. Having thoroughly spanked her,

Michael dropped a large hand onto her tortured bum and rubbed gently. She was completely limp over his lap, the fight out of her. He pulled her panties up and lowered her skirt before taking her into his arms as he'd seen Gabriel do with Casey. It did not come naturally to him, comforting a human. She trembled in his grasp and sobbed into his neck, her breath coming in warm, not unpleasant gasps against his skin. Tears ran down her face and soaked his shoulder. He rubbed her back.

"There now," he said. "It's over. You're going to obey me now. Do as your told and you'll be protected and you will not have to feel this pain again."

She nodded, afraid to do anything else.

"I'm taking her to her quarters," Michael said, picking her up.

Casey was left there with Gabriel.

"I was just trying to help," she said.

"I think you know what's going to happen now," he said, pointing to the desk. Beside it, an umbrella rack held a cane. Casey tried not to look at it as she walked to the desk and bent over at the waist. Part of her felt like she deserved what was about to happen.

But that didn't stop the ball of dread from growing in her stomach as Gabriel picked up the cane.

"Not that!" she whimpered as he tested it by slicing through the air. The cane was limber, and made a whistling sound.

Gabriel reached for the hem of Casey's skirt and for the first time she fought him. This was dealt with harshly. One long arm went around her waist and in a second later her bottom was bare and being thrashed with his large hand. Gabriel only stopped when she was crying in earnest.

"Back over," he said, and this time she obeyed, spreading her shaking legs at his direction. Casey had never felt more vulnerable or exposed. Gabriel had seen and touched everything between her legs, but even so having herself spread to his view in this matter made her feel more defenseless than she could have ever imagined.

The cane was touching her bottom now, the flexible rod laid against the throbbing soreness left by the spanking. From the corner of her eye she saw his arm go back and then there was a white-hot flash of pain that bit deep into the skin of her buttocks. Casey sank to the floor and hunkered there, looking up at the angel with terrified, pleading eyes.

"You made a choice to disobey," he said, raising the shaking woman to her feet and guiding her back into position.

“You will count the blows, Casey. There will be ten.”

Ten? She could not handle ten. Was he mad? She asked him this and his response was to lash the back of her thighs with the cane. Casey thought she would die from the searing pain and wondered how something so thin could hurt so badly.

“You’ve had one,” he said. “Now you will count the rest. Break position and we start over.”

She steeled herself for the blow, telling herself she could handle it. “ONE!” she cried when the searing line of pain bloomed across her bottom. She could feel the welt forming immediately.

Gabriel’s arm when back. This blow criss-crossed the other two, taking Casey’s breath away.

“No!” she cried.

“Cassandra?”

“I mean, THREEEEEEE!”

“Good girl,” he said.

Another blow fell. Casey sank down to her knees and would have hit the floor had Gabriel not guided her back up. He gave her the next three in rapid succession; it was an act of mercy, really; she was not going to be able to handle the anticipation of seven more delivered in so deliberate a fashion.

Casey sobbed the numbers, her voice barely intelligible through the gasping sobs.

The seventh, eighth and ninth fell in the same pattern. Casey counted, her knees shaking with the effort to hold her body upright. Her body was covered in sweat. She’d never experienced such pain.

“One more,” he said. She whimpered. The cane fell.

“TEN!” she bawled and stood, her hands instinctively moving to cover her bottom.

“No,” he said. “Only do that if you want more.”

“No, no, no!” she cried, burying her face in his shirt and shaking her head frantically. Gabriel pulled her panties up and lifted Casey into his arms. He carried the sobbing woman from the library and up the stairs.

“It hurts!” she kept saying.

“And it’s just what you can expect any time you disobey me,” he said. “You’d be wise to remember that, little one.”

He laid her on the bed. She tried to roll over, but he ordered her to sit upright. “So you can think on what you’ve done,” he said.

Casey took a handkerchief he handed her and mopped up the tears from her face. Her bottom burned like fire. The pain seemed to be getting worse. She surreptitiously moved a hand beneath her and felt the puffy welts. It made her want to cry harder. Gabriel came back with a wet towel and gently smoothed it over her face. Casey’s cries finally slowed to pitiful little hiccoughs.

“You humans are a stubborn lot,” he said. “Especially the females.”

“I was just worried for Sarah,” Casey said miserably. “I didn’t mean to make things worse.”

“You have to understand that you do not have the power to do as you want here,” Gabriel said. “Michael is right. Everything has changed.”

A fresh tear slipped from Casey’s eye. “I know,” she said. “I just wonder sometimes if I’m in the right place. I struggle so much. I wish there was some way of know if this is right or...”

She stopped and a quizzical look came over her face, followed by an instant look of happiness. She began to laugh.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The baby,” she said. “I felt him move! I felt him move, Gabriel. I thought I felt fluttering the other day, and I thought it was gas...”

“Gas?” Gabriel began, but she brushed him aside.

“Forget it; it’s something people get. But this is different. This is stronger. It’s the baby!” she said.

“Can I feel?” He placed his hand just above her pelvis.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It’s too early. I don’t think you can feel it yet.”

He smiled. “Let me try.”

She laid back and he put his hand on her belly, just above her mons. He waited and suddenly he smiled just as Casey felt another flutter.

“It’s the baby!” he said. “I can feel it!”

He looked in her eyes and Casey saw love and in that instant she forgot the spanking, the tears, everything.

“May I sing to our son?” he asked.

“Yes,” she whispered, and Gabriel laid his head in her lap and began to sing. It was like nothing she had ever heard and she lay there watching the shadows lengthen over the mountain as her angelic lover sang the history of his father’s kind to their son.

Chapter Five

The next month passed quickly. Casey and Sarah took comfort in one another's company, but the joy of having someone around who understood their circumstances was overshadowed by the increased chaos around them. Gabriel and Michael tried to keep the information from them, but the women risked punishment to eavesdrop on the monks as they listened to the radio in the basement.

Scientists had stopped seeking explanations for the loud booms and flashing lights in the heavens. At this point, it became clear to even the most hardened atheistic scientist that something supernatural was occurring. More and more people were catching glimpses of angels. Certain people were prophesying, although it was often false because they were under demonic possession. As God girded his angels for a centuries-long war, Lucifer recruited humans to his cause. Demons form-shifted into beautiful men and women and seduced all but the truly righteous to their side.

And through all the chaos, the dark host continued to search for the woman who would give birth to the archangel Gabriel's child. Since the brush at the manor, Gabriel had been intent on hiding Casey. But the Dark Legions were out in full force, scouring every house for sign of where she may be.

Casey began to notice huge sentries standing in the woods around the mansion; this was her first hint that Gabriel was worried. She asked him one night how long it would be before they were found.

"It's not something for you to worry about," he said.

Casey had sighed in frustration. "How can you say that?" she asked. "I told you what happened to me last time, Gabriel. I was almost Lucifer's plaything. He was going to kill our baby. I can't sit here and pretend he's not out there, angrier than ever."

Gabriel had his wings out more and more these days, ready to take flight. So did Michael; the first time he'd exposed his wings to Sarah, she'd fainted dead away. It was one thing, she later told Casey, to know your man's an angel. It was quite something else to see him as an angel.

Now Gabriel raise his wings and draped them over his woman.

"You're right," he said. "It just makes me sad to see you afraid, hence my tendency to hide things in an effort to protect you."

"I don't always want to be protected," she said. "I want to know if there's danger on the horizon. I can handle it better if I know."

He smiled. "That's my girl," he said.

Gabriel was cleaning his sword as they talked. Casey was watching.

“Can’t you and Michael teach me and Sarah how to defend ourselves?”

“Why?” he asked. “You have a whole platoon of angels here.”

“I had you guys defending me at the manor, but that didn’t stop them from getting to me,” she replied. Casey reached out and touched the hilt of the sword. “It could come in handy if we learned how to use a weapon.”

“Cassandra, this sword weighs more than you,” he scoffed. “And besides, you’re pregnant.”

Casey sat back and smoothed the fabric of her shirt over her growing belly.

“Pregnant women had to defend their homes in war time America,” she said.

“This is different.” He shot her a look that indicated the line of questioning was now over. Casey announced that she was going to the kitchen for a glass of milk. She found Sarah already there, enjoying hers with leftover mincemeat pie.

Sarah noticed Casey’s dark expression right away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I suggested to Gabriel that we should be taught self-defense and he basically said I was ridiculous. Do you think it’s ridiculous?”

Sarah put down her fork. “No,” she said. “I’ve thought the same thing. But I wouldn’t even suggest it to Michael. I think he’d take a bigger affront to the suggestion than Gabriel did. And I’m not eager to cross him.”

Unlike Casey, Sarah had not had a repeat of the spanking she’d received in the library. One had been enough for her. She obeyed Gabriel without question, only daring to vent to Sarah when he was too rigid in his rules. Casey could not blame her. The idea of being over Michael’s lap made her shudder with fear.

“Philemon taught me a little when he was here. Did you know that?” Casey was surprised that she was just now remembering her lessons in the library. Her friend’s eyes grew wide as she recounted the flaming script in the old books, the angelic tongue, the incantations for self-defense.

“Do you think you could teach me?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Casey said skeptically. “Philemon did something to me to help me understand. It was part of his power, I guess. He was a teacher.”

Sarah managed a pained smile. “Yeah, Michael’s told me all about him.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Casey spoke up. “You want to go to the library?”

Sarah nodded. “I’d love to.”

The women usually asked permission, but because they had never been denied they didn’t ask either of their angel’s leave to go. It was quiet in the library; the room was far larger than the one at the manor. Light from two huge floor-to-ceiling windows slanted across the long oak tables. The women stopped to marvel at the moving model of the universe Philemon had first showed Casey before moving on to the books.

“It has to be here somewhere,” Casey said, her eyes scanning the tables. She moved to the shelves. There were thousands of volumes. Finally she spotted the one she was looking for. It was covered in lighter leather - at least it looked like leather - than the other books. She had to climb a ladder to get to it.

“Wait until you see this,” she said to Sarah. “You won’t be able to understand any of the words, but I’ll read it to you. It’s filled with incantations you can use in case you’re under psychic attack by the Dark Host.”

The women sat down at the table and Casey opened the book. The script came to life on the page, dancing and burning without destroying the paper.

Casey pointed at a passage. “This incantation is for...”

But Sarah was gripping her arm. “Elohim bartruche sanctorum!” She looked at Casey in wonder. “I can read this, Casey! She began to laugh. I don’t know how, but I can read this! In our tongue it says, ‘Let me see only that which has been sanctified by the angels!’”

“Oh my god,” Casey said. “But how...? Then they both realized it at the same time. “The baby,” they said together.

“It would make sense,” Casey said. “Of course! Your baby is part of Philemon so naturally he might have some of that knowledge and has passed it on to you!”

Then Casey grew quiet. “Is it wrong for me to be a little jealous? I don’t feel any special powers from my baby.”

Sarah considered this. “Could it be because my baby’s father is gone? Maybe Philemon had a premonition or something and planned this, too.”

Casey didn't know, but she didn't dwell either. During an afternoon she'd planned to read to Sarah, they ended up reading together. Near where the book of protective incantations sat was another book called simply 'Warfare.' It took both of the women to remove it from the shelf.

"This is some heavy stuff," Sarah said as she examined the pages. "For calling legions of angels to your side. To summon ministering angels." She and Casey recited each one as they read it, and Casey was surprised to see that whatever powers Philemon had given her and Sarah, part of it included locking the complex spells into their memory along with their meaning.

They turned the page. On this one was an elaborate drawing of a throne so beautiful that neither woman could stop looking at it. They didn't have to read the caption to know it was the Throne of God.

"Use only in dire need, or perish for foolishness," Sarah read. "An incantation to bear a message before the throne of God."

"Gabriel was a messenger before he was a warrior," Casey confided. "I wonder if he's used this incant?"

"You should ask him," Sarah said, but Casey suddenly felt uneasy. "I don't know. Maybe we should just put the book back."

"All right." The women were lifting the book back on the shelf when Gabriel came in. He immediately walked over and took the book, looking at it.

"Did either of you get permission to look at this?" he asked quietly.

They shook their heads.

"We thought..." Casey began.

"Ask before you assume," he said, sliding it back. "So, what incantations were you looking at?" He asked the question casually, almost too casually. It made Casey nervous. She didn't want to lie, even though she was tempted.

"There were just some general ones on warfare..."

"Casey," he said. "You asked me downstairs about teaching you and I told you no. So you come up here to study alone in defiance of me?"

Sarah stepped forward. "It wasn't like that. I promise. We were just bored and she was going to show me the books. She was going to show me what Philemon taught her,

but Gabriel, I can read, too! I know the script! We think it has something to do with the baby.”

He nodded and smiled. “It would make sense. Some powers of an angelic father will be gifted to the mother so she can guide and protect him...”

Casey put her hand on her belly. “What powers will I have?”

Gabriel smiled and touched her cheek. “In time you will know. For now, you need to leave the library before I decide to spank you for disobeying.”

Casey did not need to be told twice. She and Sarah left the room but as they entered the hallway, Gabriel took hold of her arm and told Sarah to move ahead, because he needed a word with Casey.

When he was sure Sarah was around the corner, he turned to her. “Have you seen Michael?”

Casey shook her head. “Not since yesterday. He came in and asked Sarah how she was and left. Why?”

“He’s not here. He left without leaving word. We never leave without telling the other where we’re going.”

“Where do you think he went?” It made Casey nervous to see Gabriel nervous. The angel shook his head. “I wish I knew...”

He’d not finished the sentence before a deep boom jolted the house. Casey screamed and clung to Gabriel from fear.

“Sarah,” she said as a second boom sounded. “I must find Sarah!”

She ran through the house, nearly falling on the stairs as a third and loud boom sounded, shattering the glass of the huge windows by the staircase. Casey ducked and covered her head as showers of fine glass flew past her.

“Sarah!”

“Casey!”

She heard her friend call to her. Upstairs she found Sarah on the bed, crying.

“It’s OK. We’re going downstairs. Gabriel will protect us.”

Another boom sounded. Casey clung to the bedpost to keep from falling. Her eyes were closed tight. But when she opened them she gasped. The wall was gone and there

before her was an image, playing out before her like it was on a crystal-clear screen. It was the Throne of God and before it were several huge sentries restraining a broken and kneeling angel. The angel turned his head and Casey gasped. It was Michael.

The voice of his God was deep.

“I have resisted meddling in the affairs of angels, of listening to your conversations as I have listened to the humans. But as we enter a war I must have absolute loyalty, Michael. You oppose my plan for the Nephilim. You question me, my judgement...”

Casey cried out. The voice seemed to be coming from inside her head. From somewhere far away she heard her friend call to her. “Casey, are you OK?” She could not answer.

“I have changed, my King,” Michael was saying. “The woman who is to give birth to Philemon’s child...”

“It is irrelevant!” His god thundered the words. “My angels cannot doubt, must not doubt. If you doubt me once you will doubt me again.”

The figure on the phone was shining and now turned a deep, angry red. “I cannot abide you. I cannot release you. I cannot risk your becoming a mercenary for the other side..”

“I would never do that!” Michael’s voice was anguished.

“You will be cast into darkness and fire,” his God was saying. “The war is escalating. The child of Gabriel has been located.”

And then the image disappeared. Casey sunk to the floor, unable to move.

“Get Gabriel,” she said. “Get him quickly.”

Casey wanted to go with her friend but could not move. All the emotions - the anger of God, the fear and despair of Gabriel, had been felt by her as if she were in their bodies. She could hear Gabriel thundering up the stairs. When he arrived he knelt down as another boom shook the house.

“We’ve been spotted by the host,” he said.

“I know,” Casey replied. “I had a vision. And you need to know something. Those sentries sent to help protect us? They were spies, Gabriel. Spies for God. They were listening to us. They have Michael.” She began to cry. “God knows he opposed the plan. He’s going to cast him into outer darkness for disloyalty!”

Sarah began to cry along with Casey.

“How can this happen?” Casey asked. “How? He’s supposed to be a loving and gentle god. You said there was no hell!”

“Not for humans,” Gabriel said. “For angels? There is a special one....”

“He needs to be made to understand,” Casey said. “He needs to know..”

She stood and backed away from the two of them. “He needs a message...”

“Casey, NO!” Gabriel said. But she was already reciting the incantation. In a split second, she felt as if she were being sucked into a vortex. She spun, twisted, hurled and then suddenly she was before the throne of God. Gabriel was still kneeling, crying for mercy.

“Don’t!” she cried as the sentries moved to lift him to his feet. “Don’t do this!”

God’s countenance was beautiful and horrible. He stared at her, and Casey realized that if she died now she would have died knowing she’d done something very rare: She’d surprised Jehovah.

“You have to stop this!” she said. “You have to.”

“You have no place here,” God said. “And if you were not carrying the prophesied child I would strike you dead here. Your life is worth nothing to me..”

“I know,” Casey said, realizing that she’d rather die defying this god than live serving him. “And since my life is worth so little to you it’s worth even less to me. Cast Michael into darkness and I’ll take my own life. If I’m damned, so be it. I’d rather be damned than live eternally in the presence of a god who punished a devoted warrior for having doubts.”

God glowed an angrier red.

“He does not have that luxury!” God boomed.

“Why not?” A voice came from the right of the throne. A soft light pulsed. “I doubted, Father. Remember? In the garden? I asked you to take this cup from me....”

“You were a man,” God said.

“I was also a God,” Christ replied.

“Please,” Casey said. “If you love us, make this stop! It doesn’t mean giving up. I know there will be a battle one day. I know my son will fight. But now, and to have it

drag on for hundreds of years? People are suffering? Why create us at all if you're going to destroy us?"

"You've been a disappointment..." God said.

"So have you," Casey replied. "How many people are let down when a loved one dies even though they prayed for you to save them? How many mothers huddle with their children praying for wars or famine to end but it goes on? We were made in your image. That means we have the same need to be loved, the same fears of being rejected as you do! And Michael..."

She looked over at the kneeling angel, who was staring at her with wonder and admiration.

"...all he's ever cared about is serving you. He's loyal to a fault. If he was opposed to the plan, it was only because he feared it would fail. All he wants is victory. Can't you see that? All he wants is to serve you..."

God's red glow softened. Casey could make out a form of a huge, bearded figure. He looked like the mythical kings of old. Beside him, the soft glow of his son also diminished enough that she could make out a kind, princely figure. He was smiling at her.

"I will not be seen as weak," he said. "You and others carrying the Nephilim will still be guarded. And you will bear children who will serve. You will teach them to be loyal."

"I will teach them to be loyal to a loving God who cares for his creation," Casey said.

God leaned over and whispered something to his son. Jesus smiled again and moved away.

"You are a lot like your ancestor Mary was when I went into her. She had questions, too. I kept much of her spirit and personality out of the final account when I wrote it. She could be disobedient, strong-willed. But she was just the kind of human strong enough to deal with birth and loss..."

He sighed. "The war will end. For now." He looked at the sentries. "Release him. This human had pleaded for Michael most eloquently. He is restored to full rank and function as my top warrior."

The sentries couldn't undo his restraints fast enough. Michael stood and walked over to Casey.

"I was wrong about you," he said.

“You never got to know me,” she replied.

He smiled. It was the first time he’d smiled at her. “I was wrong about humanity, I think. And about the Nephilim. I look forward to seeing this child of yours when he comes into the world.”

“Home, both of you,” God said. He raised a hand and Casey was back in the vortex and then back in the room of the mansion. The windows were still broken but all was quiet. Gabriel grabbed her as soon as she appeared.

“I thought you’d never return!” he said. “Everything has stopped.”

Michael put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “It was because of her, Gabriel. It was Casey who saved us all. Let me tell you what she did.”

THE END

(Look for “Book 2: The Rise of the Nephilim” coming soon)