

Prologue

In The Beginning

2007

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him (Revelation 12:7-9, ESV).

Thunder, lightning, and rain streaked across the hemisphere. Ominous swirls of rapier tails materialized, forked tongues snapped, and fangs gnashed in the darkness. A battle was raging. It was a war of infinite proportions. Brilliant light streaked across the dark where clashes of midnight scaly wings met their match as they engaged wings powered by truth and justice. Michael's angels were of superior supernatural strength. Lessons were being taught, mettle tested as Archangel Michael rose to the forefront wielding the sword of the Spirit. With one swinging arc of his arm, eerie cries and shrieks trailed behind fallen demons. There were no triumphant cries in response, just silent blinding light—then nothing.

One battle down.

Michael's legion of angels took flight to return home. Swiftly they flew through softly perfumed clouds that floated through the firmament. A collective sigh of satisfaction echoed in their wake. This was the first heaven. The battle took place directly below it, but there as no evidence or residue here of the skirmish. The foulness of demon debris was too close to the glory of God not to burn into nothingness. Expectant, the angels flew higher.

The second realm of heaven twinkled with stars, and a crescent moon glowed. On the other side, the sun shone, marking the way to paradise. Michael soared, stretching his torso to its full capacity; his wingspan filled the area around him. Elation filled his being, and it reverberated throughout his legion. They were almost there.

They burst into the last realm, freely gliding through the air, their wings humming in harmonic joy. No other place held the majesty of it. No human mind could imagine its splendor. The gates were made of one solid pearl, and its jewel-encrusted walls were so pure that they resembled the most delicate of hand-blown glass. Angels stood guard before the gates. This was the New Jerusalem scheduled to descend into the earth realm on the command of God Himself. Like a nuclear missile aimed for the devastation of mankind, the Holy City would descend for those who held out against the mark of the beast, but were graced for eternal peace.

Michael continued southward to meet his brother, Archangel Gabriel, the holy messenger. The two met. They were mission-bound, determined, and fierce. Gabriel's second in command was Zadkiel, a dominion-class angel. Zadkiel's assignment

was important to the greater good. Evil was creeping into an area where it was once defeated. It was their collective divine purpose to destroy its stronghold.

A short flutter of activity announced their guest's arrival. Dominion angel Zadkiel had reported to council. Zadkiel gestured to the guards at the gates. "The Seraphim's glow brings such warmth that each day, I am loath to leave." He spread his wings upward and tilted them to absorb the light force's maximum portion.

Attuned, Michael's wings spread wide before him, and the armor of his coat shined metallic in the jeweled wall's reflection. "But leave you must. It is a just cause. It's one that will help to prepare many of God's children for war. Without our help they will perish."

Zadkiel twirled up into the air, dipped, and sailed next to Gabriel, who shook his head at his antics and said, "This is serious business, and you play?"

Zadkiel's expression was patient. Michael almost smiled. Gabriel's fierce countenance looked alien on his face. It was Michael who was the warrior. Yet, Gabriel panted in exasperation at Zadkiel's antics.

Zadkiel moved forward. "I am not at play. The earth is filled with broken humans. It is necessary for me to fill my own cup to overflow, so that I may fill theirs, to do His will. The healed are overrun by the magnitude of facts committed by the misled. They are getting weary in well doing. As a dominion angel I am charged to cover the guardian angels on their assignments. Some hold earthly devotion for their charges and have become glorified babysitters. There is slack in their ranks. 'For whom He loves, He chastens.'"

Faster than mortal beings could measure, Michael faced Zadkiel. He leaned forward a hair's breadth away. His eyes glowed, fervent in his message. "There are many who were healed, but lost faith. As a result, they became entangled again. Evil is restless, and never slumbers. It stalks its prey, searching through the mirrors of the soul to see if the Holy Spirit dwells within. Man is confused. He turns away those with a tarnished history. But, it is those who have stumbled that God can use mightily for His Kingdom. They were bold, cunning, and confident creatures of the dark one. We need their kind to turn once again from their wicked ways and embrace holiness. Do not be afraid of the damaged. Once they are healed; they are our greatest warriors."

Gabriel nodded in agreement at his brother's wisdom. He then addressed Zadkiel. "Remember that love counters all. Agape love is the greatest, but there are other forms the Great I Am has created. Some run from it, ignore it, abuse it, and misuse it. No matter how they act, let love rule."

Zadkiel twirled one last time up into the heavens, sailing over the cherubim, whose four faces and four wings were filled with eyes glowing with wisdom and protecting God's glory. He was filling his cup, his chest glowed bright from the connection with their illumination.

Michael's voice reverberated through his mind, and Gabriel's command resonated throughout his being, "Go, daybreak cometh."

They watched as Zadkiel descended swiftly. He passed angelic forces relieved of their nighttime duty, and upon return, were rising into their heavenly homes.

Simultaneously, legions of angels assigned to the daytime descended with Zadkiel for their assignments. Michael the warrior smiled as he shared the telepathic link of Zadkiel's final message to his commander in chief. "I shall not fail. Let love move every mountain."

Chapter One

It was dead cold. The air crackled with the sound of ice-covered tree branches crashing onto cement sidewalks; it was an unnatural arctic day, even for Harlem. There were motorists stranded on every major highway as an epic ice storm settled over the length of New York City. And while the air over those highways was filled with road rage, explicit language, and hunger pains, the contrasting hush of the opulent brownstones on 132nd Street was shattered by an eerie scream that filled the bitter air.

Monica Hawthorne, the ex-Mrs. Briggs Stokes, stood shaking uncontrollably. Her beloved, risked-everything she had to have him husband of one month, Randall, lay in a pool of blood on their imported Brazilian cherry kitchen floor. If Randall could, he would have stood up and told her for the tenth time that ten thousand dollars for a floor was too much, and just because she could buy it didn't mean she had to. But Randall couldn't utter a word. She watched horrified as his blood seeped into the natural grooves of the wood, giving credence to the fact that maybe the cost was too much.

Monica blinked, but he wasn't getting up or giving her advice about her newly acquired wealth, because standing over him was his newly divorced wife, the ex-Mrs. Meredith Hawthorne. This She-Spawn-from-the-Pits, with her six hundred-dollar hairdo mussed, her designer clothes askew, and her chest heaving in spastic breaths, clutched the knife that once protruded from Randall's chest. Words of explanation weren't necessary; the vivid picture painted its own morbid story.

Monica was spellbound. She was in her own home. The ordeal of leaving one husband to claim another's was behind her. The guilt had been laid aside. The shame stamped down, at least temporarily. It was Randall and her against the world. But it had all just changed drastically.

Snapping to, Monica shrieked, "Oh sweet Jesus! What have you done? You crazy—!"

Her cries were halted by the demented gleam in the ex-Mrs. Hawthorne's eyes. The maniac's focus switched from Randall to her, then back to Randall. Mrs. Hawthorne had gone mad, crazy, bonkers, craycray.

Monica's head hurt at the thought that she was still addressing this woman by what was rightfully her new name. It bore psychological study that she could only think of the witch as Mrs. Hawthorne. For over three years the woman had railed it at her, negating Monica's right to ever wear the title. She'd stood in haughty arrogance and promised in divorce court that she would never relinquish it. At the time, Monica didn't care; she felt Mrs. Hawthorne could keep the last name, as long as she had the man. Now she felt she had been

short-sighted. If in the middle of a bloody rampage, she thought of her that way, then who was she?

The murderous interloper looked on in glee as blood bubbled out of Randall's mouth. Monica observed her spiteful approval as Randall's hand feebly stretched over his wound, but failed in mustering the strength to staunch the flow of his river of life. His eyelids fluttered—pausing, fighting to focus as he scanned beyond Mrs. Hawthorne's face. His eyes settled on Monica's outstretched hands.

“Randall,” Monica whispered. She swayed in agony.

Time was grinding to a stop, like an old-fashioned watch discarded in a moth-eaten hope chest, it would soon end, and Randall would be done. She needed a way to get close to him, but Mrs. Hawthorne stood as she had for the last three years, directly in her path.

Always . . . in my way.

Rage bubbled into a go-for-broke moment. Monica launched forward and charged Mrs. Hawthorne with a Joan of Arc warrior's roar. The sound of the impact and responding grunt was dulled by the body that crumpled to the floor. Monica gambled . . . and lost. Her body fell inches from Randall's.

Her hands bloodied, Mrs. Hawthorne rocked in despair. She had meant to take her time with the slut, but her offensive attack had taken her by surprise.

Then . . . Monica moved. What she was witnessing had

Mrs. Hawthorne's keening wail ricochet throughout the spacious brownstone. She glowered in anguish, howling as Monica's fingers inched toward Randall's, and they entwined even in their near-death status.

She watched in ghoulish repulsion as the almost loving tableau played out before her. Her eyebrows arched as she made out Monica's pleading words, “Jesus, help us.”

A rattle of air descended from Randall . . . and then stillness.

In slow motion, Mrs. Hawthorne turned in robotic movements away from the scene. Her steps faltered when she heard Monica's fading voice, “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?”

The prophetic words washed over her as she stood in cold resolution. Shaking it off, she strutted away from the two people who had humiliated her in public and had caused her heart to bleed dry for three unbearable years.

Randall had won his freedom, imprisoning her in her own madness in the process.

She had sworn to Randall's dying mother, there would be no divorce. Tears gathered at the end of her hawkish nose, dribbling onto her twice-a-week, spa-waxed upper lip, then streamed down her cosmetic-tightened neck.

She was Mrs. Meredith Hawthorne, of the Hawthornes, and failure was foreign to her. In agony, she backtracked, and stumbled, tumbling over the bodies. Blindly, Meredith wiped her eyes, reared back, and spit in Monica's face. Still feeling empty and unfulfilled, she stared, craving the ability to wake Monica and kill her again.

Rising, she noted Randall's discarded, prized Civil War-era, matching pearl- and jewel-handled knives. She blew a kiss at him, and left the knives there. It was only fitting Randall have ownership of what he demanded in the divorce decree. What better way to deliver his bounty, then to use it as the method of obliteration for both head and his tramp?

Mrs. Hawthorne reached into her purse and pulled out her derringer. Acting as a lover whose desire is close to fulfillment, she caressed it. Her insides churning, she panted, taking one last glance at the co-conspirators to her destruction. She could answer Monica's final question. God had forsaken Monica because she was a Delilah home wrecker. What Mrs. Hawthorne wanted to know, was why He had forsaken her.

She lay the letters for her children—who never called—on the solid mahogany credenza, then her purse. All she'd had was the facade of a happy life. She'd paid for it in an avalanche of tears as she played dumb blonde to Randall's neglect and numerous indiscretions over the years, anything to keep him home. And how had he repaid her? By falling for a nasty, ashy-prone, ghetto rat. The slut's resulting pregnancy, and his request for a divorce, "so he could be happy" was the Joker's wild card. How many wrongs was she expected to endure?

She looked around and hiccupped laughter—a great-granddaughter of the confederacy ending up in a brownstone in Harlem? *Well, rise up every long-buried plantation owner and move over. I'm coming in, and from this gaudy, overpriced slum.*

In the middle of her cynical chuckle, she bit her lip. She was stalling and knew it. The gun shook in her hands as she placed the barrel to her temple; lips pressed together, she focused on the brightness of the moon, brilliant against the frigid dark sky. The trigger was pulled, and the gun clattered to the ground. Once again blood seeped into the Brazilian cherry hardwood floor.

It should now have been quiet in the apartment. Instead, after the booming sound of the gunshot, you could hear through the intercom three things: the startled cries of a newborn, a phone ringing, and a feeble whimper.

The air was clear and sweet with the aroma of citrus floral and the essence of myrrh. Large winged inhabitants fluttered about on missions of supreme purpose. Above, two hovered in midflight, one apparently holding the other from takeoff.

"Why do you hold me, Zadkiel? I must go. Did you not hear Monica scream? I am hers, and she is mine. Monica thinks that God has forsaken her. I am here," he bemoaned. What the guardian saw split him in two. He could not linger.

Zadkiel pulled the guardian angel back, his wings clutched, and held him firm through the struggle. "Stand down. She cries out in fear, not faith. We are not charged to react to

tears, but we are rewarders of faith. What is occurring is heartbreaking, but you have not been given leave to interfere.”

The guardian wanted to push at Zadkiel’s wings, but that would have been disrespectful. “Oh, why do the humans act this way? Must they torment and cause such pain to each other? They have left a child and though Monica has not been innocent for many years, her screams of pain bring too many hurtful emotions to the forefront. How can you float above it all?”

“I am not above anything, but we must be obedient to our Lord of Hosts. He has not given us permission to intervene; a greater good must be coming.” Zadkiel then telepathically shared with him how he kept the sounds of Randall’s and Monica’s pain in the background of his thoughts. “I am empathetic to your feelings. I have learned that our God knows all and His will is the only way. He did not create this mess, but He will make away out for the innocent babe. Go sing a song of praise. It will ease your soul.”

Large expansive wings flapped in decisive strokes as a voice of power and beauty soared over majestic heads. As other voices joined in song, the angelic choir trumpeted the holiness and sovereignty of God. Contrary to the chaos, He continued to reign.

In another realm, the gates of hell rattled in anticipation of the eventual capture and consumption of the new souls. It was a two-course meal: adulterer and murderer, their favorites.