

The Power of His Touch

Archangel: Book 2

Raphael

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Chapter One

Rafi's eyes narrowed suspiciously in the darkness. Something was waiting for him. His footsteps were as silent as the grave, but it would sense his presence. Rafi's hands and arms tingled like ants crawling up his sleeves. That alone was enough to warn him a powerful demon was near, but he knew her M.O. There was a baby in this room. He stepped deeper into the small bedroom. The dim glow of the city lights crept through the open window casting shadows across the nursery. He could see her slender form lying in the crib wrapped around the baby.

She wouldn't leave the room alive. But could the baby be saved?

"Come closer my tall, dark stranger." Her seductive whisper snaked into his ears.

"Lilith," Rafi whispered, "Come here and give me a kiss my lovely." His eyes lingered on her long shapely legs draped over the side of the crib.

Lilith's thin nightgown did little to conceal her full hips and narrow waist. Her pale green skin held a luminous glow in the darkness. A gentle shift of one shoulder and her plunging neckline moved to allow a naked breast to slip free of its binding. Rafi took a step closer.

"Oh Rafi, my love, you vex me with such empty temptations." She spoke in breath-filled tones. "Will you kiss me with all the empty passion of your noble heart as you slit my throat?"

Rafi's wicked grin flashed in the darkness. "Lilith you are as beautiful as the day you burst from your cocoon in hell. It's hard to believe you've given birth to millions of demons. Your waist is as small as a young maiden's. Your breasts are as firm as a new bride on her wedding night."

"I am the mother of all demons." She whispered softly and pursed her full pouty lips. "I am the mother of all lower demons. No other has come before me; none shall follow. I am as beautiful as an archangel and as deadly as an angry viper."

Holding her gaze, Rafi added, "If you release the baby, I promise I'll give your tiny ass a comforting squeeze as you take your last breath."

Lilith giggled and glanced down at the newborn infant in her arms. "He's such a beautiful boy, only three days old. You are so unfair Rafi. You wound me so with your perfect timing. If

you could have come just a few minutes later, I would not be forced to choose between the softness of your lips and the taste of his sweet breath.”

“You know how this is going to end” Rafi added softly, his eyes flashed a deadly warning.

“Oh, you are so irresistible Rafi.” She placed the baby on the mattress, then rose to stand in the crib. “Your hair is as black as demon blood. You have a Spaniard’s noble brow and dark skin. Your silver eyes sparkle like the coins placed on the eyes of the dead. Coins to pay the ferryman for their journey to hell.”

As she rose, her long flowing red hair began to writhe and sway with a life of its own. She swung one leg over the crib’s rail and straddled it. Her hips began to move in a slow, rhythmic motion. She ran her tongue across her lower lip seductively, circling her mouth.

Rafi reached slowly behind him to touch the handle of a large hunting knife sheathed on his belt. “The ferryman is an empty legend. He doesn’t exist.”

“Oh, my love, but he does.” She kicked her other leg over the rail and landed silently on the floor. “*You* are my ferryman; you have sent me across the river of death far too many times to count. It’s getting rather annoying.”

Rafi chuckled, “Perhaps you should consider that simple fact before you return again. Save yourself the agony of another death, another fall from your master’s grace.”

He’d genuinely forgotten how beautiful she was. Lilith’s high cheekbones, big blue eyes, and plump lips were the perfect compliment to her large round breasts. She reached out toward him with her long slender arms as Rafi gazed into her eyes. Her skin pulsed with an eerie pearly hue reminding him of why he’d come.

She cooed, “You realize each time you banish me back to hell I am forced to give birth to hordes of demons for a hundred years before I can return. Perhaps *you* should reconsider, save yourself some time and effort. As long as I am here on earth, no new demons are born. The same demons who seek to do mortals harm. Demons you will one day have to banish time and time again until the end of days. Wouldn’t it be easier if they had never been? Aren’t you overwhelmed by the constant wandering you are forced to endure? Never resting, never slowing, and always searching in your blood lust. Don’t you yearn for one moment of rest, one night of peace? I can make that happen, Rafi. Just for you. Isn’t that worth the lives of a few thousand

babies? Let me stay, and you may even have time to relax, take a lover. Relieve some of that nasty sexual tension that's building up inside your tall, muscular form." Lilith moved slowly toward him away from the baby. "Perhaps tonight you will finally let me ease your suffering, Rafi. I can suck all that stress and tension away if you would only allow me."

Rafi smiled and whispered boldly. "Lilith, the last place I want to stick any part of my body, is inside you."

She reached up as if to kiss him. Her full lips parted, and she moaned with pleasure. Rafi slid the knife out of its sheath. Her hands eagerly explored his chest. She ripped his shirt open and kissed his neck. Her snakelike hair writhed in his face. Rafi's face filled with disgust as he was reminded that her beauty was in sheer contrast to her dark soul.

Suddenly, she turned her face up to him and hissed, baring her fangs. Springing from the floor, Lilith wrapped her legs around his waist and sunk her nails into his chest. Rafi's blade sprang to life. A white fire flowed across its edge. In one swift movement, he drove the knife into her back.

Lilith gasped and arched against him with the impact. The fire from the blade burst through her chest and spilled into the room around them. He pulled the blade free, and she collapsed into his arms.

"I hate being pregnant." She whispered with her last breath.

Rafi smiled sadly down at her and said, "I know."

He laid her gently on the floor and moved swiftly over to the crib. Placing his hand on the baby's head. The child was unharmed. He turned back toward Lilith then hesitated. Turning back to the infant, he placed his hand on the baby's chest. A heart murmur, the baby, had a small hole in his heart. Rafi allowed his hand to linger, gently closing the hole. Instantly the little heart began to beat stronger. Rafi smiled and gently rubbed the baby's tummy.

He glanced back at Lilith as her body turned to ash and spread across the floor as a warm summer breeze wafted through the window. Rafi walked to the window and climbed out onto the fire escape. Climbing to the roof, he turned and gazed at the busy urban landscape that surrounded the small neighborhood. A light rain began to fall. The skyscrapers glistened in the distance haloed in the darkness by raindrops.

New York City was not where he wanted to be. Big cities were full of crime. Crime caused a high concentration of negative emotions. Negative emotions made it difficult to locate the demons.

Mortal emotions such as anger, jealousy, or envy were like an aphrodisiac to demons. They would cling like leeches to anyone filled with vengeance or cruelty. New York, like Chicago, Munich, Paris and so many other cities around the world were urban playgrounds for lesser demons. Luckily, Rafi wasn't after the lesser demons that caused headaches and insomnia; he was after their masters.

Taking a deep breath, Rafi arched his back. A pair of silver wings ripped through his gray T-shirt and shimmered in the dim light. He pulled the shredded T-shirt off and tossed it on the roof. Moving to the edge of the building, he stepped off and glided down to the alley below.

He landed softly, and his wings disappeared back inside the bare skin of his back. He walked the short distance toward the subway entrance as the rain washed over him. Brownstones lined the street. Small trees circled with black rod iron fences ran along the sidewalk. He loved the musty smell of the rain. It signaled rebirth. He sighed a rush of relief into the night air. Thousands of infants could sleep safely for the next century now that Lilith had returned to hell. He stopped himself from wondering how many had fallen to her bloodlust before he could stop her.

A small brown car limped past him. Its tire rubbed and groaned on the pavement. It slowed and stopped in an open space a short distance in front of him. The driver's door opened, and a young woman with short brown hair and a shapely figure stepped out. She walked to the rear of the car and kicked the flat tire.

Rafi grinned at the expletives that flew through the air as the woman moved to open the trunk. He slowed his pace to watch as she struggled to pull out the small emergency tire. He smiled in appreciation as her skirt slid up slightly to reveal her shapely legs. Approaching slowly, Rafi stopped next to her car. She dropped the tire onto the road with a grunt.

Rafi offered, "Would you like some help?"

The woman jumped, startled by his voice. She spun to face him. Her eyes opened wide at the sight of his bare chest. He forced himself to look into her big, brown eyes despite the temptation

to allow them to linger on her full round breasts. She was strikingly pretty with high cheekbones, pouty lips and a small turned up nose. He spoke in a soothing voice to relax her, "I apologize for my appearance. I was helping a neighbor a few doors down with a project. I tore my shirt. It was easier to toss it than to try to wear it home. I'm pretty handy with a jack, if you'd like some help."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone, "Thank you, but I'm fine. I'll just call for a tow truck." Her eyes fell slightly to linger on his muscular chest and arms. Rafi suppressed a smile noting the admiration in her eyes.

He offered lightly, "A tow truck will take hours at this time of the night, and they'll charge you an outrageous fee for a simple flat tire. Why don't you go stand on one of the covered stoops while I change the tire? It won't take me long, then you can be on your way, and we can both get out of the rain."

She glanced up and down the quiet street then back at Rafi. "I suppose you're right." She stepped back to allow him access to the trunk.

He reached into the trunk and pulled out the jack and tire iron. "My name is Raphael; my friends call my Rafi."

"I'm Sophia Cassani," She answered, smiling for the first time.

Rafi was pleased she was finally relaxing. Her light brown hair held a touch of blonde, streaked from the sun. It was growing damp in the light rain. He glanced around and found a covered stoop across the street. Turning to meet her gaze, he was surprised at the dark blue color of her eyes. He said, "The stoop across the street is out of the rain if you want to stay dry?"

"Does your friend own a big dog?" She asked gazing at the fresh scratch marks on his chest.

Rafi glanced down; he'd forgotten about them. He flashed a dazzling smile and explained, "Her name is Lilith; she's too friendly for her own good. I'm afraid I wasn't ready for her to pounce on me the way she did."

Sophia's eyes narrowed, and she stepped closer. "Dog's nails carry a multitude of bacteria. I'm a doctor with a specialty in biochemistry, I know germs. Those scratches are swollen, that means infection. If you like, I could clean that up for you in exchange for your kindness."

Leaving the question unanswered, Rafi knelt down to examine the tire. He could feel her eyes on him as he worked. It didn't take long to change the tire. As he tightened the lug nuts, Sophia opened the rear door and ruffled through a large briefcase. Rafi rose and rolled the flat tire to the rear of her car. Placing it inside with her tools, he shut the trunk as she approached.

"Do you live far from here?" She smiled, "I could give you a ride home?"

Rafi returned her smile and said, "I live on Long Island. I'll take the train, but thanks for the offer."

She gazed at him. He watched as she allowed her eyes fell to his chest and down to his six-pack abs. "I'm afraid I left my medical bag at home. I suppose it would be easier to clean those scratches at my place. It's only a few minutes from here by car."

She was true to her word. Her brownstone was less than a mile down the same narrow street. Rafi waited in the entryway as she fetched him a towel from the bathroom. When he'd toweled off and kicked off his wet shoes, she led him into a small kitchen with white cabinets and a white tile floor instructing him, "Have a seat at the table, I'll fetch my bag and get you patched up in a jiffy."

She returned quickly and set a tan leather medical bag on the table, "Would you like a drink? A glass of wine? It might warm you up a bit."

She opened the cabinet next to the sink and pulled out two wine glasses. Then opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of wine. "I'm a Pinot Grigio fan; I hope that's not too sweet for you?"

"Sounds perfect," Rafi rose and took the bottle from her.

She pulled a corkscrew from a drawer and waited as he opened and poured the wine. He could feel her eyes on him as he lifted the glasses. Their eyes met when he turned and handed her the wine. He watched mesmerized as her full pouty lips touched the glass and took a sip.

She set the glass on the table then dug into her bag. "Now this won't hurt too much," She ordered in a soft, sultry tone.

The anticipation of her touch nearly undid him. Rafi took a deep breath and chastised himself. *Get a grip; she's a mortal, hands off. She's just another pretty face.*

She ripped open a small square pouch and pulled out an antiseptic wipe. “I don’t usually do triage on strangers in the middle of the night, but I make exceptions for knights in shining armor. You saved me a long walk in high heels. My feet are grateful.”

Rafi chuckled as she quickly wiped off the dried blood and cleaned the scratches and added, “Oh these aren’t bad. I guess the dim light played a trick on me. They don’t look infected. So you’ll be fine; but the next time you consider experiencing another animal encounter, I’d take a little more time to get to know her first. Women who like to dig into a guy’s flesh tend to be control freaks.” She glanced up at him, her eyes sparkled with mischief, “And they tend to be biters, unless you’re into that type of thing.”

Rafi leaned forward slightly and gazed down at her, “You can tell all that from a couple of scratches?”

Sophia laughed and added, “All five nail marks are as clear as day. Either she’s incredibly sadistic, or she was kind of upset.”

He chuckled, she had him dead to rights, “She was both, and it ended badly.”

Her smile vanished, “I’m sorry.” She taped gauze over the scratches and added, “I don’t usually offer advice, but don’t take her back. She’s trouble.”

He handed her the towel he was still holding. Their fingers touched as she accepted it and she glanced up to meet his gaze. Rafi’s answered in a quiet voice, “There’s no chance of that. She left the city. I don’t expect to see her again for a long time.”

Her smile, “Then I prescribe a full glass of wine before you head home.”

She grabbed her glass of wine then took his hand and led him into the living room. A white couch covered with a burgundy throw sat next to a small end table facing a white stone fireplace. Rafi sat down next to her and asked, “So where does a doctor who specializes in biochemistry work?”

She smiled and said, “I’m the head of a research team at Columbia University that studies highly contagious antigens from all over the world. We catalog and classify possible biological threats. If we find cause for concern, we set to work on a vaccine and compile a pandemic prevention and treatment strategy portfolio for each antigen.”

Rafi stared at her, “You use the word antigen instead of bacteria or virus. Does that mean you investigate chemicals as well?”

“So you know something about medicine?” She smiled, “Yes, chemical contamination is something no one wants to discuss, but we need be prepared to address it.” Her smile vanished, and she added, “I hope I’m not boring you. Most men outside of my colleagues aren’t usually interested in my work. It can be intimidating.”

Rafi leaned closer to her. The temptation to kiss her was overwhelming. “I work in a related field.”

She stared at him as one eyebrow raised, “Animal research?”

He laughed and leaned back against the sofa, “It feels like it at times, but no.”

“Good,” Sophia relaxed beside him sinking into the sofa, “I hate animal research. My next thesis is centered around cloning animal tissue as opposed to using live animals for chemical research. I do agree there are times when a chemical has an unexpected reaction that can only be discovered when tested on live tissue. But we have the ability now to keep small samples of tissue alive long enough to run basic tests that would illuminate the need for animal testing on a global scale.”

“Even the animals that dig their nails into men’s chests?” Rafi teased.

She turned and looked at him, “No, those animals need a different type of test.”

“Rabies,” He suggested innocently gazing back at her.

She studied his face, “You aren’t upset about the scratches?”

“It was my mistake,” He explained softly, “I allowed the encounter to go further than it should.”

“Did you learn your lesson?” She added turning her body to face him.

“In my experience, spontaneous encounters never end well.” He whispered as she turned to gaze into his eyes.

“Are we a spontaneous encounter?” Sophia whispered.

“Perhaps,” Rafi’s desire burned in his eyes like an open flame.

Sophia blushed and glanced at her wine glass. "I have an early meeting in the morning." She stammered shifting uncomfortably in her seat.

He suppressed a grin recognizing the blush of an innocent. He drained his glass and rose from his seat saying, "I should be going. It's a long ride home."

She rose, and he followed her to the door. Opening the door, she stepped aside to allow him to leave saying, "Thank you so much for changing my tire. In my experience, there aren't many true gentlemen left in the world."

He smiled, cupped her chin and gazed into her eyes wondering how she managed to reach her mid-twenties with her virginity intact. "You're a rare gem, Sophia."

Suddenly his lips were on hers. He wasn't sure who made the move, and he didn't care. Rafi wrapped his arms around her and reveled in the surprising fire of her kiss. It flowed through him like a hot, tropical, breeze. When they parted, she inhaled deeply and whispered, "Goodbye," Then closed the door.

Rafi grinned and glanced up at the cloudy sky above, "What was that? Are you tempting me or trying to teach me a lesson?"

Indiana was a twelve-hour drive from New York, but a plane was not an option these days. Moving his weapons through security was too much of a hassle. Rafi wasn't about to risk checking his sword in with the baggage. Divine gifts should never be trusted to airport handlers.

The hot summer sun stung Rafi's face despite the rush of the morning air through his rusty '57 Chevy convertible. Even angels were not immune to a sunburn or windburn. Rafi smiled as his mind went back to the cute number he almost had an encounter with the night before. Encounters were frowned upon where he came from, but this one was almost too good to resist. Sophia was slender, petite and with curves in all the right places. Her sun-streaked hair said that she was one biochemist that wasn't afraid to play outside in the hot summer sun. Boy, would he like to play with her. It was a good thing their paths weren't likely to cross again.

Rafi turned on the radio as he cleared the city and let the music roar. The miles flew by Pennsylvania, Ohio; he hit the Indiana state border and kept going. He had a couple more hours to go. He should make it just before dark.

Rolling quietly into Cora's farm Rafi climbed out of the car and glanced at the large red barn. It looked good for a hundred and ten-year-old relic. The two-story, white farmhouse, on the other hand, was peeling and needed a new roof. When he left Gabe and Alyssa last winter, the kitchen floor was slanting so badly you could roll a ball all the way across the floor. Not to mention the chicken coop's leaky and rotten roof.

He enjoyed spending the fall as Cora's handyman. Rafi's eyes narrowed in the darkness. He gazed past the garage toward the coop. Maybe he should take a quick look at it.

The front door of the house flew open, and a blonde seven-year-old girl came bounding down the stairs toward him. "Rafi!" Samantha yelled as she ran.

A dark shadow darted out of the barn as she jumped into his arms. It was her younger brother, Cody charging toward them. Rafi spun and caught the five-year-old with one arm as he sprang through the air.

"All trespassers will be shot!" A gruff voice called from the barn as Gabe appeared in the doorway. "Cody get my gun!"

Rafi kissed Samantha on the top of the head and released her. He tossed Cody over his shoulder and headed toward Gabe. Family life hadn't changed Gabe a bit, except his once ivory skin that was now a dark bronze shade. His light brown hair was now streaked with blonde, both a result of the time he spent working outside on the farm. They embraced as Samantha danced around them.

She giggled and pulled at Rafi's t-shirt, "Come inside and see mommy! She's going to be so surprised to see you! I knew you'd come back; wait till you see, wait till you see!"

Rafi glanced at Gabe as Samantha pulled him toward the house, "See what? Is Cora okay?"

"Grandma's fine; she helped mommy get the baby born," Samantha explained as they reached the steps.

Rafi stopped. His face turned to stone. He sat Cody on his feet and turned to look at Gabe, "Baby?"

Gabe shrugged his shoulders and offered with a smile, "I got busy."

Rafi was stunned. Gabe knew better. A baby was beyond anything Rafi expected. “Is that why you called me? Is the baby okay?”

“She’s fine.” Gabe wrapped his arm around Rafi’s shoulder, and they walked up the steps.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rafi asked quietly as the children ran into the house.

Gabe locked eyes with Rafi, “This is the first child born of an archangel since the Great War. I thought it was best to keep it quiet.” When Rafi didn’t respond, he added, “I’m sorry, but you were too far away and too busy. I knew you’d want to be here when Alyssa gave birth. It would have been a dangerous distraction for you.”

“You’re right,” Rafi admitted as they walked through the door. He suppressed the urge to lecture Gabe on the carelessness of allowing his mortal wife to become pregnant. The repercussions were staggering.

Alyssa rushed down the stairs and hugged Rafi. He kissed her cheek amazed at how thin she looked. Her golden hair was pulled back into a high ponytail giving her the youthful look of a teenager. He was pleased to see a healthy glow on her face. Her large blue eyes sparkled at him with delight. He grinned, “How old is the baby? You look fantastic!”

“Two weeks,” Alyssa smiled, “We’ve missed you, Rafi. You’ve stayed away too long.” She pulled him into the living room where her grandmother Cora waited.

Cora’s silver hair was tied back into a neat bun; she wore the same pink paisley dress and white apron as always. She sat in her favorite wooden rocking chair holding the baby. Rafi’s heart warmed at the sight of Cora’s smile. She was a strong woman. She’d lost two sons to the war, a daughter to a demonic cult and her husband to a heart attack, all in the last decade. It would have sent a lesser woman to her maker, but Cora was a strong, farm bred, woman.

Rafi kissed her cheek and gazed down at the baby. Cora opened the pink blanket so he could see her better. Gabe came up beside him as Rafi lifted the baby in his arms.

“Her name is Vada, after Alyssa’s mom,” Gabe said stepping aside so Samantha and Cody could see them.

Rafi moved to the sofa still covered in the same patchwork quilt as always and sat down. He laid Vada in his lap and placed his hand gently on her little head. Vada had a head full of blonde

hair and big blue eyes like her mother. She was small, but plump. He glanced up at Alyssa, who gazed anxiously down at him, waiting.

“Her heart is healthy, and her lungs are clear. She’s healthy and beautiful.” Rafi smiled up at her.

Samantha stepped forward and said, “Mommy’s a good baby cooker.”

Rafi chuckled as Samantha sat down beside him, “Yes, she is.”

He glanced up at Gabe, and they locked eyes for only an instant before Gabe looked away. They needed to talk.

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